



Winter
at Wishes
Roseford Reloved

FAY KEENAN

**WINTER WISHES AT ROSEFORD
RELOVED**

FAY KEENAN

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Boldwød

For Gareth Southgate, who made me fall in love with the beautiful game.

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Polly Parrott dug out yet another bucket from the stack she had in a cupboard in the back office of Roseford Reloved, the vintage and second-hand clothes shop she ran on Roseford's main street, and tried not to add to the damp by crying. That really wouldn't do any good. Between the leaky roof and the mortgage payments, which were due to increase next month, she and Roseford Reloved were hanging on by a thread. Ironic, considering that 'threads' were what she dealt in. Or, at least, that's what her darling grandmother would have called the selection of carefully chosen and curated clothing Polly stocked in the shop.

Polly specialised in finding the right pieces for customers who were more interested in quirky, individual designs than something mass produced, and spent her days scouring the internet or following leads to get them. She'd then repair them, if necessary, clean them and sell them in the shop and online, to a growing number of happy customers. But even she had to concede, as she shoved a bucket under the steady drip that was making its way through the front portion of the shop's ceiling, that there were easier, more profitable ways to make a living. Especially on a dull, late November day when most of the tourists who visited Roseford had gone and the rain poured persistently down onto, and through, the badly leaking roof.

'Well, Oscar,' she said, turning to the large, fluffy black-and-white cat who looked disdainfully at her from the cosy armchair in one corner of the shop, 'at least you're keeping dry, I suppose.'

Oscar, who bore a striking resemblance to the regal Fat Louie from Polly's childhood favourite film *The Princess Diaries*, merely glanced at her

and yawned. It wasn't yet time for lunch, and the shop was quiet enough that he hadn't been scared away or irritated by customers. *More's the pity*, Polly thought. She could really do with a little more footfall, and while the online side of the business was steady, it still wasn't enough to allow her to rest easy at night.

She cast a critical eye down the shop, taking in the stands and rails that were all carefully positioned in the small space. She had been mindful not to overcrowd the shop floor, as it was important not to make potential customers feel overwhelmed. Instead, the racks were arranged by the dominant colour of the clothing, and everything hung from elegant, sustainably sourced wooden hangers. A few items were on mannequins, and the small front window held a winter-themed display. At the centre of the window was a hot cerise cashmere and wool blend coat. It was a statement piece, for sure, but Polly was confident the right owner would come to purchase it before the season was out.

'Morning!'

The cheerful voice drifted over from the front door, and Polly glanced in that direction to see Lucy Cameron, the owner of Roseford Café, pushing it open, and then closing it hurriedly against the driving rain. 'God, this weather's awful.'

'Isn't it,' Polly agreed as Lucy moved through the shop towards her. Lucy didn't glance at the rails, but that wasn't why she was visiting Roseford Reloved, after all. 'How's business over the road?'

'Quiet, but steady,' Lucy replied. 'The weather's driven people out of Roseford Hall's gardens and into the café for a cuppa, thankfully.'

'Can you send a few over my way?' Polly asked lightly, but Lucy smiled sympathetically. Small businesses could struggle in the off season – especially quirkier ones like Polly's.

'Have you got some flyers going spare?' Lucy asked. 'I'll pop some on the café tables if you want.'

'Thanks, that would be great,' Polly replied. She hurried to the counter at the back of the shop and dug out the leaflets. Beautifully designed, they showcased the shop's logo, a carefully hand drawn and colourful parrot, and offered a 10 per cent discount on purchases over fifty pounds. She hoped that they might help to propel a little more business her way. Every little helped, after all.

'So, are we still OK to do the fitting?' Lucy asked as Polly put the leaflets

down on the counter. Polly couldn't help but notice Lucy's look of concern at the sight of all the buckets that were gradually filling with water from the leaking roof.

'Absolutely,' Polly replied. 'Don't worry,' she reassured Lucy quickly, 'I've been keeping it in my flat, so the damp won't get to it.' She grinned. 'I wouldn't want *Hello* magazine to be concerned about the state of your wedding dress!'

Lucy laughed. 'I can assure you, there are absolutely no magazine deals for the photos from this wedding! Finn, thank goodness, put a veto on it, no matter how lucrative it might have been. It's just going to be the local wedding photographer, and hopefully things done our way.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Polly replied. 'All the same, we'd better not risk doing the fitting in the shop. Can I pop over at the end of the day and do it at your place? Might be a bit safer, in case the roof really does give up the ghost.'

'Sure,' Lucy said, picking up the flyers. 'Finn's not back from filming until the day after tomorrow, so the coast should be clear. I'm not picking up the kids until five-thirty, so can we meet at mine at about half past four? Will that be enough time?'

'Should be,' Polly said. 'There are only a couple of tweaks to make, so it shouldn't take long.'

'Great! I'll see you later.' Lucy picked up the leaflets. She paused. 'Is everything going to be OK here, Polly? I can't help noticing the leaks seem to have got a whole lot worse.'

Polly grimaced. 'I've been meaning to get the roof fixed for a while, but money's so tight right now, it'll have to be buckets and dehumidifiers for a little bit longer!'

Lucy looked around the shop dubiously. 'Could be worth trying to do it sooner rather than later. You've got a lot of stock in here that could be damaged if it really does cave in.'

'I know.' Polly knew Lucy meant well, but the thought of borrowing more money caused her heart to speed up a little more. 'It's just a scary thought, you know, putting myself into more debt when I'm barely breaking even as it is.'

'Well, I'll do my best to send some customers your way.' Lucy smiled. 'And a couple of the wedding guests on Finn's side probably still haven't found the perfect outfits yet – would you like me to give them a name drop?'

At that, Polly really did laugh. ‘As if Finn’s showbiz mates would waste any time on a second-hand shop in a village in the middle of nowhere!’

‘You never know,’ Lucy replied. ‘You’ve got some beautiful things here, and you really shouldn’t sell yourself short.’

Polly flushed with pleasure at the compliment. She knew she had a good eye for style, but it was always nice when other people noticed and complimented her on it. ‘Thanks, Lucy. You’re a mate.’

‘Well, I’ll see you a bit later,’ Lucy said. ‘I’ll save you some cake. I shouldn’t have any, of course, if I’m going to fit into this dress, but you’re welcome to as much as you like.’

As Lucy left, Polly ruminated that, at this rate, free cake from Lucy was going to be the only way she could afford to eat. Especially if the roof really was on the way out.

Leaks contained as best as she could, Polly was just thinking about grabbing the sandwich she'd stashed in the small fridge in the back room and settling down for that and a well-earned cuppa, when the shop door opened and in walked two young women. Putting thoughts of lunch aside, she plastered on a smile and called out a greeting.

'Hi,' the younger of the two called back, before turning to her companion and saying, 'You go left, I'll go right. Hopefully we'll find something that'll do.'

'Can I help with anything?' Polly asked, as the two began rifling briskly through the rails, looking, to all intents and purposes, as if they were on some kind of mission.

'We're good, thanks,' the older girl called back absently, before muttering, 'As if we're going to find anything here, anyway.'

Polly wasn't offended. She was used to differing attitudes to her stock from visitors to the shop. Often, they ended up pleasantly surprised when they saw the kind of things she had on the rails. A one-off piece was too much of a draw for them to hold that prejudice for long. Thrift was a way of life, a passion for her; for others, the thought of wearing second-hand clothing, even if they dressed it up as 'vintage', was still anathema. Judging from the way these two girls presented themselves, clad in expensive designer jeans and thick puffy jackets, zipped up against the cold and rain, they appreciated quality, but also had more of an eye for the new.

Polly let them browse for a few minutes and turned her attention back to the app on her phone where she also sold some of her pieces. She was

pleased to see that she'd made a couple of sales. As December approached, people were on the lookout for party dresses, and three of her newly listed ones had been snapped up, one by a regular online client. She decided to grab them from the rails now, before she forgot.

'Excuse me?' the younger woman called out as Polly rounded the counter. 'Can I try this one on, please?'

Polly's heart sank. 'I'm so sorry,' she said, giving the customer an apologetic smile. 'That one's just sold on the LoveClothes app, so I can't sell it to you.'

'Then what was it doing out on the rail?' The older girl strode up to Polly. 'If it's there, haven't you got to sell it to us?'

'It's all right, Hattie,' the other girl replied, giving Polly an apologetic smile. 'I'm sure I can find something else.'

'You shouldn't have to.' Hattie glared at Polly, who held her gaze. She'd been in retail for most of her working life; she was used to difficult customers. The timing of the sale of the dress was bad, to be fair, but it couldn't be helped.

'I'm sorry.' She turned back to the other young woman. 'Perhaps there's something else you'd like? I've got another rack of dresses out the back I haven't managed to put out yet. I'm sure there's one in a similar style and colour if you'd like to take a look?'

'Thank you.' The girl smiled, obviously trying to defuse the tension that her companion's reaction had created. 'I'd love to see them, please.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' Hattie huffed. 'Maeve, if it's on the rail, she *has* to sell it to you.' She glanced around the shop, a disdainful expression on her face. 'If Dad had done what he was supposed to and taken us to London with him, we wouldn't even be in this place.'

Polly prickled with irritation. Obviously, her assumptions about the kind of establishments where these young women usually did their shopping had been spot on. Hattie, in particular, clearly felt she was slumming it by entering Roseford Reloved.

'Oh, leave it, Hattie,' Maeve sighed. 'It was a mistake. It's not the end of the world, is it? And if we don't find anything, we've still got time to order online anyway.' She turned back to Polly. 'Can you show me the other rail, please?'

Polly gave her a smile. 'Of course. Come this way.' She led Maeve behind the curved counter and out into the small stock room just off to the

right of the back of the shop.

‘Sorry about my sister,’ Maeve whispered. ‘She’s been in a mood ever since we moved here.’

‘You’re new to the village, then?’ Polly asked as she pointed out the long rail of dresses that was pushed up against the side of one wall.

Maeve nodded. ‘Yeah. Dad bought a place just on the outskirts, Parson’s Grange. Do you know it?’

Polly took a moment to consider her response. Parson’s Grange had been the subject of much local controversy recently. Rumours of outrageous planning demands, including for a covered, heated swimming pool as well as a request to cut down an avenue of hundred-year-old horse chestnut trees to make way for a long driveway had scandalised the parish council and led to a number of, eventually fruitless, objections. Although she’d heard stories about who’d bought the property, the whole build had been shrouded in secrecy, including the identity of the owner, even though the more salacious details of the proposed development had found their way into the public domain.

‘Yes, I know it,’ Polly replied, smiling in recognition. ‘Are you settling in OK?’

Maeve had crossed the room and was looking quickly through the rail of dresses, pulling out the odd one and holding it in front of her to the light, before putting them back again.

‘Not bad, thanks,’ Maeve replied. ‘It’s a bit dead around here, compared to where we lived in London, but I’m sure we’ll get used to it.’

‘You might,’ Hattie snorted as she appeared in the stock room. ‘There’s nothing around here to do.’

Polly thought about defending her small, picturesque hometown, but, mindful that Maeve might end up buying something and aware that, after London, Roseford must seem deader than the names on the village war memorial, she kept quiet. If the girls didn’t like it here, there wasn’t much she could say to change their minds.

‘Well, at least we’ve got the Roseford Hall Yuletide Ball to dress up for,’ Maeve said.

‘Great,’ Hattie sneered, ‘a party full of strangers in a crusty old stately home. What a fabulous night *that’s* going to be.’

‘Well, you don’t have to go,’ Maeve shot back. She held up a beautiful one-shouldered Grecian-style dress in a deep, luscious shade of purple. ‘Can I

try this one on, please?’

Ignoring Hattie’s bad-tempered jibes, Polly smiled at Maeve. ‘Of course. The fitting room’s just off the main shop if you want to come back through.’

A short time later, Maeve pulled back the curtain on the fitting room and Polly smiled. The dress fitted beautifully, except for being slightly too long.

‘It looks great,’ Polly said.

‘It’ll drag on the floor,’ Hattie muttered.

‘I can take it up a few inches, if you like,’ Polly replied. ‘I offer a free alteration service for minor repairs, and I can have it back to you in a day or two.’

Maeve smiled at her. ‘That would be great, and it’ll be lovely to be the only person at the party in a dress like this.’

‘Yeah, right.’ Hattie scowled. ‘Something no one else wanted, you mean.’

Maeve looked hurt and Polly, tired of holding her tongue, couldn’t help but retort.

‘Although most of what I sell has been pre-loved, it doesn’t mean it wasn’t wanted at the time,’ she said quickly. ‘And often people just need a little extra wardrobe space. I know the person who donated this dress wore it to a reception with the Prince and Princess of Wales, and so it’s got quite a good pedigree.’

If this was intended to change Hattie’s opinion, it didn’t. ‘Dad’s met them a lot,’ she said, then added, ‘if that was meant to impress us.’

‘Not at all,’ Polly replied. ‘But I do know the provenance of everything I sell. That’s what makes this place unique.’ Irritated by Hattie’s constant negative responses, Polly grabbed her tape measure from a shelf in the stock room and took a few measurements to ensure she got things right for Maeve.

Hattie, clearly impatient to get going, barely waited for Polly to finish before replying. ‘Come on, Maeve, if you’re going to pay for that dress, get on with it. I’ll find something online, I’m sure.’

As Maeve scurried back into the changing room, Polly busied herself with finding the other items she needed to remove from the rails to post out to her LoveClothes app customers. Then, taking the dress from Maeve, she carefully hung it up behind the counter.

‘I’ll have it ready by mid-morning tomorrow,’ she said as Maeve came back out to the shop floor. ‘Pop in any time after ten thirty.’

‘Thank you so much,’ Maeve replied. Then, she frowned as she looked at her phone. ‘I’m so sorry. My Apple Pay doesn’t seem to be working. I

promise I'll be back in tomorrow to buy the dress. Are you still all right to alter it for me?'

Polly hesitated for a moment. She wouldn't normally agree to an alteration without payment for the item first, but she felt as though she could trust Maeve. And, after all, she knew now that she was a local. 'Of course,' she said, smiling. 'See you tomorrow.'

As the two young women left, Polly's stomach rumbled. It was time for lunch. Getting her sandwich from the fridge, she wondered why Hattie had been so openly hostile. There was more to it than just not wanting to shop in the pre-loved market, she was sure. Maeve had made up for her sister's rudeness, but Polly had come close to getting riled with the older girl. All the same, she thought, a sale was a sale, and at least she now knew who was living at Parson's Grange. She wondered who 'Dad' was, and what line of business he was in to have met royalty so many times that Hattie was blasé about it. She was sure, now they'd moved into Roseford, however, that his identity wouldn't be a secret for long.

Will Sutherland was used to tough days. As a former football player, and most recently the very successful manager of one of England's junior men's teams, he'd had his fair share. But there was something uniquely difficult about moving into a house he'd thought he'd be sharing with his wife, in a place where he'd believed he was going to begin the next phase of his management career.

Sadly, both of those things were now no longer true.

Staring around the sleek, modern, spotless kitchen that spread the width of the brand-new house that his ex-wife had almost single-handedly designed, Will wondered if it was too early for a drink. He glanced at the clock on the wall. It was lunchtime, but he'd decided for the sake of his own physical and mental health some years ago that he wouldn't crack open his first alcoholic drink until 6 p.m. Too many lost afternoons that had led to questionable decisions had taught him that this was the safest option all round. What you could get away with in your late teens and early twenties as a player would no longer be permissible as a forty-something manager. And he knew he shouldn't drink alone.

Not that he had the chance of much company these days. Gone were the evenings when he and Sam would share a bottle of red and a helping of pasta after they'd put their two daughters to bed. She was off in pastures new, with people new, one person in particular (he shuddered), and the girls were more interested in their own friends and their own lives to hang out with their old dad. Time had passed, and he regretted the many evenings he'd spent away from home, from his wife and family, when the children had been young. His

father had warned him that he'd miss that time when it was gone, but he'd laughed it off. Now he knew how right he'd been.

Will looked at the clock again. The removal company had been excellent, but there were still boxes to unpack, and things to put into place, despite the fact that he and the girls had moved in two weeks ago. He really ought to get on with arranging his study, especially if he was going to get down to the very real problem of what he was going to do for work for the rest of his life. The 'golden goodbye' from his last post had been enough to finish off this damned house, and some wise investments had given him more than enough to live on for the next twelve months at least, but after that... who knew?

There, on the countertop nearest the cooker, which was still, as yet, unused, was a bottle of Smith and Evans 2015 vintage sparkling wine, sent as a gift from the Somerset-based removal company he'd hired to move them. It had been the biggest contract they'd received in years. Perhaps his daughters would have a glass with him later on, if they didn't have other plans. None of them had lived here long enough to make any friends yet, and with a bit of luck he could persuade Hattie to start talking to him again if he offered her a glass. Like her mother, he knew she was partial to a drop of good fizz. At least Maeve, his youngest, seemed to have got over the relocation to the West Country, but then she'd always been the more easy-going of the two girls.

In frustration, he tore his eyes away from the bottle, and couldn't help glancing at the clock again. A whole three minutes had passed. He really should get something done.

The silence in the house, apart from the loud tick of the clock, was taking him a while to get used to. They'd lived in Central London ever since the girls had been born, and although Will's work had taken him all over the world, he'd grown accustomed to the noise and the buzz of city life. Moving to Somerset had been intended as a fresh start for them, for *all* of them. In the end, Sam had made her own choice, and he and his daughters now occupied this pristine new-build in five acres of parkland. He could feel himself beginning to rattle in the house already.

It was all supposed to have been so different. This move, a downshift in his career that would see him out until retirement, he hoped, would provide for them all, but would mean spending more time in the UK, and more time with his family. Sam, initially, had been keen, designing the house and getting carried away with the novelty that rural life would bring. She'd pictured it as like Cheshire, a county well known for its population of

footballers and their swanky, often newly built residences, but in the south. It had been much later when she'd realised that a regional, county league team didn't quite have as much clout as Manchester United or Liverpool, and her enthusiasm had cooled a little. By the time the house had been finished, Sam had made her decision and walked away with Ben bloody Sanderson. In the end, Will had also refused the job he'd been offered,

Will sighed. He knew it would have been easier just to sell the house, but something, perhaps some forlorn hope that Sam might change her mind and come back had stayed his hand. In the end, the thought of remaining in their London house alone, when the girls went to spend time with Sam and Ben in their new place, had driven him to up sticks and try to live in the new house. It didn't make the place feel any more like home, though.

'Dad! Are you here?' The voice of his younger daughter, Maeve, echoed through the hallway as the front door slammed.

'In the kitchen,' Will called back. Straightening his back, he pasted on a smile and went to greet his daughters, who'd been out for an hour or so in the village. He hadn't had the chance to explore much of the area around their new home yet, as he'd been preoccupied with the move, and, shy at the best of times, he didn't quite feel up to the inevitable conversations that would happen once people realised who'd moved into Parson's Grange. He was savvy enough to know that the development hadn't exactly gone down well with some of the locals, and with the added context of his marriage break-up, he didn't feel up to arguing it out with any of them.

But those thoughts were for later, in the wee hours when he couldn't sleep. They weren't for when his daughters were around. Even though Hattie was nineteen and Maeve was eighteen, and they were old enough to know just how badly he'd taken the break-up of their parents' marriage, that didn't mean he wanted to make it even more obvious when they were with him.

'Hey,' he said brightly as Maeve barrelled in through the kitchen door, headed straight for the fridge and pulled out a can of Diet Coke. 'How was the village?'

'Lovely,' Maeve replied. 'Quite, um, historic, y'know? Like we'd stepped into some sort of TV drama.'

'Any decent shops?'

Hattie, who'd slunk in behind Maeve, gave a grunt of derision. 'You're joking, right?'

Maeve rolled her eyes at her sister. 'Ignore her. She's just in a piss

because I got a dress for the Yuletide Ball and she didn't.'

'What, from that skanky second-hand place? I wouldn't be seen dead in *anything* from there. I mean, did you see the buckets on the floor? Talk about rank,' Hattie replied dismissively. She stalked past her sister and grabbed her own can from the fridge.

Will saw the flash of hurt in Maeve's eyes. 'So, what's your dress like then? Can I see it?'

Maeve turned to look at him. 'I'm picking it up tomorrow. Polly, who owns the shop, is going to alter it for me as it's a bit long.'

'Yeah, 'cos you couldn't choose something that actually fitted properly.' Hattie's words sounded teasing, but they had an edge.

Will, sensing the atmosphere was about more than the dress, knew he should intercede, but he lacked the vocabulary to do so. Ever since Sam had left, he'd struggled to make sense of the ever-shifting dynamic between his daughters, and this was no exception.

'Well, I'm looking forward to seeing it,' he said finally. 'I'm sure it'll look great.' And then, to Hattie, 'And have you decided what you're wearing to the ball yet?'

'I'm not sure if I'm even going,' Hattie snapped. 'I mean, what's the bloody point? We don't know anyone here.' Necking back a few gulps of Coke, she threw the still half-full can towards the bin, and missed. A trail of sticky brown liquid snaked its way down the side.

'Clear that up,' Will, losing patience, snapped.

'Clear it up yourself!' Hattie bit back. She picked up the can, threw it into the bin and then stormed out of the kitchen, leaving the mess behind.

Will drew a deep breath. He knew he should be patient. Despite Hattie's age, she'd taken her parents' break-up badly. She was hitting out because she was sad, frightened, and angry that he'd still decided to go through with the move to the new house. The events leading up to his and Sam's split, and the traumatic time she'd had when her best friend, the young footballer Marius Stone, relocated to a club far away, had taken their toll. And he couldn't blame her. This was supposed to have been a new start for them all, and now they were doing it without Sam, and he hadn't even accepted the job he'd uprooted his family for in the first place. But it was so difficult to be calm when she seemed so angry all the time, and especially when the target of that anger ended up being Maeve.

'Don't worry about her, Dad.' Maeve, ever the calm sister, gave him an

encouraging smile. 'She'll get over it. And you know she wouldn't miss the ball.' Maeve put her Coke can down on the kitchen counter and moved to give Will a hug. As she slid her arms around him, he took comfort from the gesture. He knew that he should be the one comforting her, but it felt good to be on the receiving end for a change. He *would* make a go of this place, he vowed, for his own sake and for his daughters'.

‘Oh, Lucy, it looks absolutely gorgeous!’ Polly couldn’t help a sudden intake of breath as she stepped back to get a good look at the wedding dress. ‘And there’s barely anything that needs altering now.’

‘That’s a relief!’ Lucy replied, beaming. ‘After Robin was born, I didn’t think I’d ever get back into normal clothes.’ Lucy had given birth to her son at the start of the year, and the adorable little boy had immediately captured the hearts of everyone he met.

‘Well, you look fabulous,’ Polly said firmly. ‘And apart from a little tuck at the base of your back, I’d say there’s nothing left to do. So long as you don’t go on a crash diet between now and the wedding, that is!’ Polly grabbed a couple of pins from her sewing basket and swiftly popped them in. ‘Just hold still and I’ll get it done now. Promise not to lose any more weight?’

‘No chance of that, with all the comfort eating to keep out the cold!’ Lucy replied, grinning. She turned to look into the mirror in her bedroom and drew a breath herself. The gorgeous, vintage wedding dress in cream silk with lace sleeves was flattering and elegant, with a high neckline and a V-shaped back. Practical enough to move in, yet beautiful too, it suited Lucy down to the ground.

‘I still can’t believe you found this for me,’ Lucy replied. ‘I can’t imagine anyone wanting to let this dress go.’

‘It came from someone who loved it, but just didn’t have the room to store it once they’d downsized,’ Polly said. She never divulged the personal details of the people who passed on their clothes to be sold, but she did like,

occasionally, to give the buyers a broad provenance when it seemed appropriate. 'She just wanted to know it was going to a good home.'

'Well, I'll certainly take care of it.' Lucy paused, and Polly saw her eyes shining with tears. 'I'm sorry,' she continued. 'I guess it's just starting to hit me that I'm actually getting married next month. Stupid, isn't it? I mean, Finn and I have been together for three years... you'd think I'd have got my head around it by now.'

As if on cue, there was the sound of the front door to Lucy's cottage opening and a familiar voice with a Canadian accent called up the stairs.

'Lucy? Are you home? Surprise!'

Lucy's face turned to delighted panic. 'Er... I'm upstairs, Finn. Can you give me a minute?'

Glancing back at Polly, who was hastily finishing the stitching on the back of the dress, she hissed, 'He wasn't supposed to be back until the day after tomorrow! Can you help me get this off?'

Polly grinned. 'Sure.' She snipped off the thread, and then carefully undid the zip on the side panel of the dress. Lucy stepped out of it, scrabbling back into her jeans and T-shirt.

'You're earlier than you thought,' Lucy called as she frantically brushed her hair back into a ponytail.

'Yeah,' Finn's voice drifted up from the bottom of the stairs. 'We finished ahead of schedule, so I thought I'd get an earlier flight.'

Polly smiled as she heard Finn greeting Megan, Lucy's daughter, who had been watching TV downstairs since she'd come home from school.

'That's great!' Lucy called back. 'You can pick Robin up from nursery.'

The sound of Finn's hefty tread on the stairs drew closer.

'Don't come in the bedroom!' Lucy squeaked as he got to the top.

'Why?' Finn teased. 'Is there someone in there with you?'

Polly, having swiftly zipped the wedding dress into its protective bag, opened the bedroom door. 'Only me.'

Finn's face lit up with recognition. 'Oh, hey Polly.' He regarded the ivory-coloured dress carrier. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'Yup.' Polly smiled up at Finn, who, at six-foot-four, towered over most people. 'Just a few final tweaks to make before the big day, and we're good to go.'

'I can't wait to see it,' Finn replied. Then, as Lucy came out of the bedroom door, his expression grew softer. 'Hey,' he said as he moved across

the landing and embraced her. 'I've missed you!'

As they held one another close, Polly felt a twinge of envy. They were so lovely together, and their romance had been the stuff of fairytales, having begun when Finn had starred in a Christmas-themed movie that had been shot in Roseford several years ago. Their wedding, which was going to take place on 23 December, would be the perfect ending to the story. Polly, who hadn't had a serious relationship for the past few years, suddenly had a yearning to feel someone's arms around her. Someone who would look at her the way Finn and Lucy looked at each other.

But, she thought ruefully as Lucy and Finn parted and she headed back down the stairs, there was very little chance of that in sleepy old Roseford. A holiday romance with a good-looking tourist might be her best bet for a bit of short-term fun, although there were very few of them in the winter season. And as far as anything more serious was concerned... chance would be a fine thing.

'Shall I keep hold of the dress until before the wedding, or do you want to take it now and I can do a final check the day before?' Polly asked as they paused in the downstairs hall. Immediately, she clocked Lucy's look of concern, and she knew she was worrying about the conditions in the shop.

'I can put it in the hall cupboard, here,' Lucy said quickly. 'If you think it'll be safe enough?' She pulled open the double doors of the tall, built-in cupboard just to the left of them.

'That looks fine.' Polly smiled. 'And it means I won't be worrying about it, if the damp gets any worse!'

'Thank you so much for everything you've done, Polly,' Lucy said, taking the dress carrier and hanging it up in the cupboard. 'I can't wait to show it off to everyone in a few weeks' time.'

'You're welcome,' Polly replied. 'And if you do know of anyone else who needs a last-minute outfit, send them my way!'

'I will!' Lucy said. 'Your place is such a treasure trove, I'm sure you'd be able to find the perfect dress for any customer.'

Polly thought back to the two young women who'd come in earlier that day. She'd been delighted to find a dress for Maeve, the younger one, but she wasn't sure anything she could ever suggest would have been good enough for Hattie, her sister. But she mustn't dwell on that. Sales were tough enough this time of year without worrying about the ones that got away.

'See you soon,' she said as Lucy let her out of the cottage. As she crossed

the street and headed back to the shop, she glanced back to see Finn and Lucy standing in their living room window, and once again wished that someone would make her winter days a little warmer.

The next morning, Polly opened the shop and, as was becoming her regular irritating duty, emptied the buckets of rainwater that had accumulated overnight. The rain had been pretty much constant for days now and showed very little sign of letting up. There was no other way around it: if she was going to save her shop, she'd have to bite the bullet and talk to her bank about getting a further advance on the mortgage to fix the roof. She only hoped they'd still see the shop as a decent investment for their cash. Takings had been up and down since she'd opened nearly two years ago, but she was optimistic that, with the addition of the online business, things would steadily improve. With a bit of luck, the bank would be prepared to see it that way, or things were just going to get wetter.

Mid-morning, Polly popped out to the post office to send off the latest batch of parcels to customers who'd purchased items on the website. She wouldn't usually shut up shop during the day to do it, as she'd generally nip out at lunchtime, but she'd seen two customers since she'd opened the doors at 9 a.m., and the rain was still lashing steadily down, splashing into puddles and drumming on the roof of the shop. She prided herself on sending items promptly, and on the quality of her wrapping. Inside the boxes or envelopes that she sent, each item was individually parcelled with tissue paper and branded stickers with the Roseford Reloved logo on. She firmly believed that buying something beautiful should also include a beautiful unwrapping experience and wanted to give that to each and every customer.

Feeling slightly more optimistic once she'd dropped off the parcels, she pulled up the hood of her bright yellow raincoat and hurried back towards the

shop. Roseford's main street was virtually deserted, so she was confident she hadn't missed any trade. However, when she was within twenty or so feet of the shop, she heard the throaty rumble of a vehicle approaching from behind her. Stepping further inwards to avoid getting splashed by the rivulets of water that were running down the main street as the vehicle, a black BMW 4x4, came closer, she just about escaped a soaking. As it passed her, she saw that it was driving very close to the pavement, left wheels trailing in the gutter, and bouncing over the raised drains. The dirty water was siphoned up and splashed over the toes of Polly's brown leather knee high boots as it passed, and Polly grimaced. The main street was narrow, but there really wasn't any need to be quite so far over. *Bloody tourists*, she thought.

The BMW pulled in outside her shop, and Polly watched as Maeve, the girl from yesterday, hopped down from the driver's side and slammed the door behind her. She hurried around the back of the car to the pavement, and by the time she had, the passenger door had also opened.

'What do you think, Dad?' Maeve asked as the man unfolded himself from the passenger seat and hastily buttoned up the long, cashmere coat he was wearing over what looked like an expensive suit. Polly took a few seconds to appreciate the cut of it before she realised they were waiting to get into Roseford Reloved.

'I think you need a bit more practice before I'll let you loose on the main roads!' The man, turning to Maeve, smiled down at her gently. 'Now we'd better hurry. I've got to be in Bristol by two o'clock and it's half past eleven already.'

'It won't take long,' Maeve replied. 'I'll be super quick trying it on, and then we can get going.'

'All right,' the man replied. He tried the front door of the shop, and his face registered irritation when he found it was locked.

Polly, who'd been approaching quickly enough to hear this exchange, stepped forwards with the key and an apology.

'So sorry,' she said hurriedly. 'I popped out to the post office since it was so quiet this morning.' She smiled at Maeve and the man. Maeve smiled back; the man didn't.

Pushing open the shop door, she continued to talk as they all got out of the driving rain.

'I've got your dress out the back, Maeve. I'll just go and get it so you can try it on.'

‘Thanks so much,’ the girl replied. ‘I can’t wait to see how it looks.’

Polly scooted out the back of the shop to her small work area, which housed a haberdashery table and her sewing machine. She grabbed the dress off the clothing rail where she’d hung it up after she’d altered it and steamed it to freshen it up, and then made her way back to the shop floor. God, the rain really was getting worse, she thought, as the sound of it lashing against the windows of the shop got louder. The splashing of the drops into the three buckets in the shop got more regular as well.

‘Terrible day,’ she said brightly, trying to counterbalance the grimness of the weather. She held the dress up so that Maeve could see it before she tried it on. ‘I’ve taken it up about three inches, so it shouldn’t drag on the floor and get grubby now, especially if you’ve got some killer heels to go with it.’

‘That’s why I’m off to Bristol this afternoon with Dad.’ Maeve grinned. ‘I’m hoping Cabot Circus Shopping Centre might be the place to go.’

‘Oh, definitely,’ Polly replied. ‘I hope you find something you like.’

The man, now identified as Maeve’s dad, glanced not too subtly at his watch.

‘OK, OK.’ Maeve rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll be really quick.’ Still smiling at Polly, she took the dress and darted into the little curtained-off changing room at the back of the shop.

‘It’s a lovely dress on her,’ Polly said, trying to break the awkward silence that had descended as Maeve had disappeared behind the curtain. ‘She’s going to look great.’

The man nodded, glanced towards the changing room and then checked his watch again.

Polly noted the barely suppressed impatience, but, ever the customer service enthusiast, she tried again. ‘Maeve says you’re new to Roseford. How are you settling in?’

‘Fine, thank you.’ The response was brief and curt. As it came out of his mouth, he looked slightly contrite and added, ‘I could do without this weather though.’

‘Welcome to the West Country!’ Polly, despite his terse demeanour, gave him a smile. ‘Second only to Ireland in terms of the rainfall, or so I’m told.’

Was she imagining it, or did the corners of the man’s mouth give a fraction of a twitch upwards at that response? ‘I worked in Ireland once,’ he said. ‘I think this place has the edge.’

At that moment, the curtain was drawn back from the changing room and

Maeve reappeared, wearing the newly altered dress.

‘What do you think, Dad?’ she asked hopefully.

Polly glanced from Maeve to her father and saw a moving canvas of expressions crossing his features before he responded. ‘It’s lovely,’ he said gruffly. ‘You look great.’ He turned back to Polly, and her heart sped up a little at his softened expression. ‘You’d never know the dress had to be altered. It looks like it was made for her. Thank you for doing it at such short notice.’

‘Y–you’re welcome,’ Polly replied. She surprised herself by stammering as she spoke. There was something about the way his almond shaped, heavy-lidded eyes had fixed on her as he’d said it that set her slightly off balance. ‘Free alterations with a purchase are all part of the Roseford Reloved service.’

‘Well, I appreciate your time,’ the man replied. ‘What do we owe you?’

‘Just the price of the dress,’ Polly replied. ‘As I said, alterations are complimentary.’

The man turned back to his daughter. ‘Come on then. Best get changed. I won’t have time to drop you off before this meeting otherwise.’

Maeve grinned and disappeared back into the changing room. Polly smiled briefly and headed back behind the counter, fiddling about with a couple of garments she was intending to alter before she hung them out for sale. They both were due a small repair. She also felt as though she was at the limit of the polite conversation she could rustle up between herself and this rather dour, taciturn man.

‘Nearly ready, Dad!’ Maeve called.

‘OK,’ the man replied. From the corner of her eye, Polly saw him take a phone out of the inside pocket of his coat and start to scroll while he waited. Her gaze lingered for a little longer than it should. The quality of that coat, and the suit underneath, which had been revealed when he’d undone the buttons of the coat to retrieve his phone, had caught her eye. It was superbly tailored in a deep, navy blue, single-breasted with a waistcoat to match. A shirt in a lighter blue, and a tie with maroon, dark blue and white stripes, neatly tied in an Oxford knot completed what was a very stylish look for a man in his mid-forties. That he was wealthy wasn’t in doubt; Polly already knew that because he’d moved into Parson’s Grange, but that level of grooming suggested a brush, at some point, with a stylist. Rather high maintenance for her liking, she thought, although the suit was the perfect

match for his long, lean, honed figure.

The rustle of the curtain drew Polly's attention away from the man, and Maeve hurried over to the counter.

'Can you put this in a bag for me please? I don't want to risk it getting soaked when we get outside.'

'Of course.' Polly smiled at the girl. 'I was going to suggest that.' She took the dress from Maeve and, mindful that her father was in a rush, she quickly wrapped the dress in tissue paper and slid it into a gift bag, with the shop's name and logo printed on the front. 'Here you go.'

Maeve got her bank card out from her phone case and as she hovered it over Polly's contactless card machine, Polly noticed her surname – Sutherland. Glancing back at the man who was now just short of tapping his foot with impatience, she thought she recognised him from somewhere. The name, combined with the expensive suit and the authoritative bearing, were forming puzzle pieces in her mind, and she struggled to put them together while the payment went through.

The pause became longer as the card machine resolutely refused to recognise Maeve's card.

'Sorry,' Polly said, picking up the machine again. 'The Wi-Fi can be a bit temperamental. Let me reset it.'

Just as she was about to pass Maeve the machine once more, there was an almighty swoosh and the ceiling above where the man was standing finally gave up the struggle against the week-long downpour of rain. Before Polly could shout a warning, litres of water crashed down, drenching the man and his very expensive clothes, right through.

‘Christ!’ Will spluttered as the deluge from the ceiling finally eased. ‘What the fuck was that?’ As he furiously wiped his eyes and brushed the hair that had been slicked down by the water away from his forehead, Maeve and the woman who owned the shop came blearily back into view.

‘Oh my God!’ The owner dashed towards him, almost tripping over one of the clothing rails in her haste. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course I’m not all right!’ Will snapped. ‘Your fucking ceiling has just come down on my head.’

The woman took a step back, obviously intimidated by the ferocity of his response. ‘I’m so, so sorry. Are you hurt?’

Will took a moment to mentally assess himself. The plaster from the ceiling had been sodden, and so soft that, even with the force of the water, it hadn’t injured him as it had fallen. The freezing water had chilled him to the bone, though, and as his clothes clung to him, he began to shiver. Apart from that, there didn’t seem to be any physical harm done. That didn’t stop him from being angry. He was late enough already for the meeting in Bristol, and now he was soaked. His anger made him go on the attack.

‘How can you run a business in a place like this?’ he yelled. ‘If that ceiling had collapsed on a kid, it might have killed them.’

The woman hung her head, but not before Will saw the tears in her eyes. ‘I know. And I’m so, so sorry. I’ve been having trouble with leaks for ages but I had no idea the water was collecting up there.’ She blinked furiously and looked back up at him. ‘Let me grab you some towels. I’ve got loads out the back. And I’m happy to pay for your clothes to be dry-cleaned.’

‘I could sue you into the next county for this,’ Will snapped, still furious. ‘And you think that offering to pick up my dry-cleaning bill is enough? I’ll be lucky if the suit’s not ruined.’

‘No, of course not,’ the woman stammered. ‘I’m so sorry. Look. Let me grab the towels. I won’t be a minute.’

‘Don’t bother,’ Will snapped. ‘Come on, Maeve. I’ll have to go home and change now. And I’d better ring City and tell them I’m going to be even bloody later!’

Maeve, obviously torn between sympathy for the shop owner and concern for her father, hurried from the shop, leaving the dress she’d hoped to buy on the counter. Will didn’t bother to remind her to pick it up. She’d have to find something else to wear. As Will turned and stormed out of the shop, he slammed the door behind him, rattling the panes of glass. This was absolutely the last thing he needed, on today of all days.

‘Are you OK, Dad?’ Maeve asked timidly as they hurried back into the car. ‘You weren’t hurt, were you?’

Will sighed. ‘No, I wasn’t hurt. And I’ll be OK if we shoot back home and I can get out of these wet clothes.’ He paused before he started the car. ‘But that shop is a death trap. I don’t want you going in there again. Having the building in that state is just pure negligence, and that woman should know better.’

‘I’m sure she didn’t realise it was that bad,’ Maeve replied. ‘But I’m glad you’re OK.’ She paused. ‘You were quite angry with her, though, Dad.’

Will gritted his teeth. ‘I got brained by what felt like Niagara Falls in her shop, Maeve. I think I’ve earned the right to be a little bit more than cross.’

Maeve grinned. ‘True. But it was quite funny, like something out of that *Jackass* show you hated us watching when we were kids. And the look on your face!’ She gave a giggle.

Will, who could never stay angry for long when Maeve was around, felt his face threaten to break into a smile. ‘It’s still not funny. This suit’s probably ruined, and I really like the coat.’

They shared a smile, until Will realised he was shivering like a whippet on a windy walk. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s get home so I can change.’

‘Oh!’ Maeve’s face fell. ‘I’ve left the dress on the counter. Can I go back in and get it?’

‘Not right now,’ Will replied, briskly pulling away from the kerb and reversing the car back in the direction of Parson’s Grange. He didn’t want to

go back to the scene of the crime. He knew he'd probably blow his top even more if he did. 'I'm sure you can find something in Bristol that you can wear. If we ever get there.' He sped back down the main street and turned briskly onto the road that led to Parson's Grange.

'But Polly altered it especially,' Maeve protested. 'It's not fair not to buy it when she did it so well.'

'And she nearly drowned me in that death trap shop of hers!' Will countered. 'I don't think we owe her anything.'

'But it was the only dress I've found that I like!' Maeve sounded more upset than she should have done over a frock, and as Will glanced at her where she was sitting in the passenger seat, he saw her brush away an impatient tear.

'We'll find something,' Will repeated. 'And I'll add my credit card to your Apple Pay wallet if you want... You can really go to town.'

'You don't get it,' Maeve replied quietly. 'You might be able to buy Hattie off, but that dress was literally the first thing I've found that I liked, and that suits me.'

They were approaching Parson's Grange up the long, freshly laid driveway. Either side of the Tarmac, at regular intervals, young chestnut tree saplings in protective cages, planted to replace the older trees that had been removed to build the swimming pool and multi-gym on the other side of the grounds, struggled to stay upright in the lashing rain and rising wind. It was a vile day, and it wasn't getting any better.

Will stopped the car and before he could exchange another word with Maeve, she'd sprung out and hurried to the front door. By the time he'd struggled out, still shivering from the cold, which wasn't helped by the blast of wind that buffeted him as he slammed his own car door, she'd raced through the hallway and up the stairs, disappearing into the depths of the house. He stood in the hallway, suit and coat dripping onto the tiled floor, and cursed as his knees, ever an issue when he'd been playing professionally as a Premier League footballer, gave an alarming twinge.

To add insult to injuries, both old and new, Hattie was slumped on the sofa in the living room, and she called out to him as he passed the doorframe.

'What have you done to Maeve? She looked well gutted when she came in.'

'Nothing I can't fix,' Will replied, trying to make his tone as even as he could when he was chilled to the bone. 'Where did she go?'

‘To her room, of course.’ Hattie rolled her eyes and turned to face him. ‘What the hell happened to you?’ He saw her suppress a smirk as she took in his sopping wet clothes. ‘Been swimming?’

‘Long story, and I don’t have time to tell it,’ Will said. ‘I’ll talk to you when I get back from Bristol.’

‘OK. Later.’

Dismissed by his daughter, Will hurried upstairs to change. Thankfully, his phone had been in a waterproof case, so he was able to call through to Bristol and reschedule the meeting for later in the afternoon. Giving himself a little leeway seemed like a good idea, and as he stood under the double shower unit in the ensuite bathroom adjacent to the master bedroom, he turned the hot water right up. Gazing down at himself as the water cascaded down his body, gradually warming his bones, he felt the cold begin to dissipate. As a football coach and manager, he’d kept himself in good shape since he’d retired as a player, and his still-firm abs tapered into long, lean but muscular legs, honed by years of playing and training. Even though his knees weren’t what they used to be, his body was still strong, and fit, and he knew that to maintain that, he’d have to either find another job where he kept up the physical side of training, or he’d have to hit the gym a few times a week. Sam had always loved his body, and the frisson between them had been strong, even after two kids and twenty-five years of togetherness. Now she was gone, the temptation had been immense to let himself go, but he was too disciplined for that. He wasn’t going to give her, and that bastard she left him for, the satisfaction of seeing him go to seed.

Stepping out of the shower ten minutes later, foregoing, for obvious reasons, the rejuvenating blast of icy water he usually endured at the end, he hurried to his wardrobe, a towel slung low on his hips and another one drying off his thick, dark hair.

Thankfully, he had an almost identical suit that he could slip on, as two had been made for him as a perk of his last job. Just as well, he thought, since the other one was probably unsalvageable. Pulling on underwear, shirt, trousers and then fastening his tie, he slicked back his still-damp hair and rubbed some oil into the closely cropped, greying beard. There. You’d never be able to tell he’d had an unscheduled drenching. Will slipped on the waistcoat and the suit jacket and, deciding on the three-quarter length coat in his wardrobe, he quickly found another pair of shoes.

When he was satisfied with his appearance, he hurried down the thickly

carpeted landing in the direction of Maeve's room. The door was firmly shut, as he knew it would be. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

'I'm off now, Maeve,' he called through the door. 'Are you coming with me?'

Silence.

'I'd like your company on the drive,' Will persisted. 'And if you want, you can drive some of the way home.'

Still nothing. If not even the prospect of getting some practice behind the wheel was a draw, Maeve must be really pissed off.

'Well, I'll see you later, then.' He stepped back from the door. Maeve's reaction seemed completely out of proportion. It was only a dress, for goodness' sake! He'd hoped, as his daughters had grown older, that he'd have more of a clue about how to handle them, but, if anything, things seemed even more complicated now than when they'd been little kids. Not for the first time, he wished that Sam was still around. He was buggered if he was going to seek her advice now, though. They largely communicated through their kids these days.

'I'll be back this evening,' he called to Hattie as he passed the living room again. She was still sprawled out on the sofa, some American drama blaring out of the sixty-inch television on the other side of the room.

'OK,' she said, not removing her eyes from the screen. 'See you later.'

Feeling grateful, for once, that Hattie's indifference was at least consistent, Will turned his mind to the imminent meeting in Bristol. He didn't quite know why he was going; he wasn't sure he really wanted the job anyway, but it felt important to show willing. A new beginning needed financing, after all, he thought.

As he passed Roseford Reloved on his way out of the village, he could see the owner dispiritedly trying to clear up the sodden plaster from her shop.

Polly emptied the dustpan into the umpteenth plastic bin bag she'd filled since the ceiling had collapsed and then straightened up. Her back was killing her, and the chilly draught from the hole in the ceiling slid uncomfortably around the back of her neck. She'd locked the front door as soon as Maeve and her father had left, and set to work shifting as much stock as she could. The damage had overwhelmed her for a good hour after it had happened, and she hadn't been able to help the tears that had slid down her cheeks in utter despair. Now, she could barely move in her flat for piles and piles of clothes. The naked rails and stands on the shop floor looked like metal skeletons, the chrome making the room feel even colder. Her once-cosy little store had been decimated by the deluge.

Running an impatient hand over her face, she glanced across to the front door as an urgent knock on one of the panes of glass drew her attention. Smiling in recognition, she saw it was Lizzie Warner, owner of Roseford Blooms. She hurried over to the door and unlocked it, letting Lizzie in out of the relentlessly pouring rain.

'What the hell happened?' Lizzie asked. 'It looks like the end of the world in here.'

'You're not far off,' Polly said gloomily. 'Somerset monsoon season got the better of my ceiling.' She gestured to the massive hole, although it was obvious enough. 'And even worse,' she added, 'someone was standing underneath it at the time, so I'm probably going to end up in court.'

Polly saw Lizzie trying to suppress a look that was torn between horror and hysterical laughter. 'Oh my goodness,' she said. 'Were they hurt?'

‘Nope, thankfully, just dreadfully cold when the rainwater landed on them.’

‘Who was it?’

Polly paused. ‘The father of a customer who’d come to pick up a dress I’d altered for her. They live up at Parson’s Grange, from what I picked up yesterday when she and her sister came in.’

Lizzie’s jaw dropped. ‘Are you serious?’

‘Yeah. At least, I think that’s what she said. Why?’

Lizzie began to pick up some of the bigger pieces of plaster that were still littering the floor, and shove them into a half-filled black plastic sack. When she straightened up again, she spoke.

‘Well, I can think of subtler ways to get an introduction to him, that’s all.’

‘Introduction to who? What are you talking about, Lizzie?’

Lizzie grinned. ‘Have you been living in a cave for the past couple of years, Pol? Our new resident of Parson’s Grange, who has spent most of last year sending the local planning committee into a tailspin over the size of his swimming pool, is none other than former England Under-19s football manager, Will Sutherland. Darling of the FA, winner of International Manager of the Year two years running, and all-round sporting hottie. And you’re telling me you dumped your ceiling on him? Good going, Pol!’

Will Sutherland.

Will ‘the thinking woman’s football crumpet’ Sutherland.

Former international midfielder, Premier League stalwart, one-time pundit and highly regarded manager. Yes. *That* Will Sutherland.

Polly had a fair knowledge of football, thanks to a grandfather who liked to take her to home games of the local second division club back when she was a kid, but in recent years she’d lost track of the game and its rising stars. A vague interest in the antics of the England men’s and women’s teams still persisted, though, and she wondered how she hadn’t realised who the guy was before Lizzie had brought his identity to her attention.

‘I thought he looked familiar,’ Polly replied, before the hot, red shade of mortification spread through her body. ‘Oh my God. This is so much worse than I thought. There’s no way he’s going to let it lie, is there? I might as well sell up now and leave the country. He’s going to sue me into the next century.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Lizzie said, although Polly could hear the doubt in her voice. ‘It was an accident, after all, and even for Somerset the rains have been

pretty dramatic this autumn. He might let you off.'

'Yeah, right,' Polly muttered. This was the last thing she needed. She wasn't being melodramatic when she'd said this might finish off Roseford Reloved.

'But in the meantime, what can I do to help?' Lizzie asked, her voice pulling Polly away from her gloomy ruminations.

'Well, I've moved all the stock, which was my main worry. Now I just need to get hold of another dehumidifier until the insurance company can get some industrial ones sorted. I don't suppose you know anyone who's got one?'

'I'll text Simon,' Lizzie replied. 'There are bound to be loads at Roseford Hall – the damp is a permanent fixture in the house and outbuildings. I'm sure he can cajole the British Heritage Fund into lending you a couple until the insurance company can ship some in for you.'

Lizzie's partner Simon was the tenth Lord of Roseford, and while Roseford Hall had been handed over to the British Heritage Fund some years ago, he still lived in part of the house, and had oversight of the comings and goings on the estate. He'd recently developed and hosted the inaugural Roseford arts festival, RoseFest for short, and liked to keep his finger on the pulse of developments for what was once his family home.

'That would be great – thank you so much,' Polly said. 'I'll ring the insurers this afternoon and see what they say.' She didn't add that she was concerned they wouldn't pay out, since the roof of the shop was in quite poor repair, but she could only try.

'And as for the other thing,' Lizzie added. 'I'm sure your public liability insurance will cover it if Will Sutherland decides to sue. Although...' She paused mischievously. 'You could always try working your charms on him to persuade him not to!'

Polly really did laugh, then. 'As if Will Sutherland would be interested in me. I'm sure he's got bigger fish to fry. Besides, isn't he married?'

'Not any more,' Lizzie replied. 'An old mate of mine handled the PR for his ex-wife's clothing line, and she got the inside track on why the marriage went up the spout. Very nasty, apparently, and she took up with someone a bit too close to home. I'll fill you in sometime over a drink, if you fancy it.'

'Only out of idle curiosity,' Polly said. 'I doubt I'll even see him again after what happened here today. Unless it's in court, of course.'

'Think positive,' Lizzie replied, grinning. 'He might sleep on it and see

the funny side.'

'From the way he took me apart after the ceiling fell on his head, I doubt that very much,' Polly said. She picked up the dustpan and brush again. 'I'd better get back to it or I'll be here all night.'

'Give it to me,' Lizzie instructed. 'I'll do a bit while you ring the insurance company. The sooner you tell them what's happened, the sooner they can send someone out to get you back up and running again.'

'Thanks, Lizzie, you're a mate,' Polly said, handing over the dustpan and brush. As she retreated to the back office to make the call, she prayed with every fibre of her being that the insurers would pay the claim. If they didn't, she knew that it would be the end of Roseford Reloved, and the end of her dream.

The rain lashed on the windscreen as Will pulled off the main road and onto the smaller one that would lead him back to Roseford. It had been a long day and he would be grateful to get back to Parson's Grange and his daughters. Even if one wasn't talking to him and the other was largely indifferent to his presence.

He couldn't blame them, he thought for the umpteenth time. There had been a lot of upheavals lately. Sure, the house was everything they could have wanted, even if it had largely been planned to Sam's taste, and it was good to be away from the bustle and pressure of London life, but there was still a gaping hole in their existence since Sam had made her choice and left. In hindsight, with Maeve off to university in less than a year, and Hattie already there, the move seemed rash and counterintuitive. He should have just stayed put in London. And, perhaps, if things had been different, if he'd made a couple of better calls, he would have. But poor decisions, two in particular, had ruled that out. And left him with a whole lorryload of guilt and shame that he still found hard to acknowledge, let alone move past. If only he'd done things differently. If only he'd...

He was so lost in thought, he nearly overshot the bend that led onto Roseford's main street. Slowing down until his head was back in the car, eyes on the road, he noticed that the lights were still on in that dress shop. As he passed, he observed the owner wearily clearing up the mess, soaking up as much water as she could. Despite everything, he felt a pang of sympathy for her. She obviously ran the place single handed, and running any business in this current economic climate wasn't easy.

The long drive back from Bristol had given him ample time to cool down and think things over, both about what he was going to say to Maeve when he got home and also whether he'd overreacted to what was clearly an accident in the shop. OK, the owner should have had the roof fixed, but he could understand why she might not have been able to find the money. Perhaps threatening to sue her wasn't the greatest of looks, especially for someone who'd already had some run-ins with the parish council over planning regulations for his own home. No, he thought, it was worse than that. It had been a real 'dick move' as some of his younger players might have put it. And that just wasn't him.

By the time he'd made his way up the long driveway to Parson's Grange, he'd resolved to pop into the shop tomorrow, and, at the very least, retrieve Maeve's dress for her. He wasn't a vindictive man, and he realised that the proprietor of Roseford Reloved probably had enough on her plate sorting out the ceiling collapse without him adding to that, so it would be a good idea to take the threat of litigation off the table.

Maybe it was because the meeting in Bristol had gone rather well, and had been a bit of an ego boost, but he was feeling a whole lot more chipper as he pushed open the front door. Mooching through the hallway, he passed the living room and saw that Maeve had joined Hattie on the sofa. They were tucking into a family sized bowl of popcorn and had the latest Marvel film on the television.

'Hey girls,' he said, pausing in the doorway.

'Oh, hey Dad.' Maeve looked round and smiled at him. 'How was it?'

'Not bad.' Will loosened his tie, put his jacket on the back of the other sofa and flopped down onto it, thrusting his long legs out in front of him. 'They offered me the job, if I want it.'

'And do you?' Hattie asked, raising an eyebrow.

Will shook his head. 'Don't know. I'm used to autonomy, to calling the shots. Not sure how I feel about being in the assistant coach position after all these years. And it would mean we're committed to staying here for at least two years, too.'

'Isn't that what you wanted?' Hattie asked. 'After all, you did drag us all the way down here. Don't tell me you're having second thoughts now?' Her tone was direct, but it had none of the anger that Will had been accustomed to over the past few months.

Will reached over and grabbed a handful of the popcorn from Maeve's

bowl. Back on decent terms with both daughters, he suddenly felt ravenous. The sweet-salty snack was moreish, and as he finished, he reached over again. But before he could pinch more, Maeve had pulled the bowl away. Playfully, Will made a dive for it, and ended up scattering a good proportion of the popped kernels onto the brand-new sofa.

Giggling as Will tried to wrestle the bowl from her, Maeve scooted to the other end of the sofa, holding the bowl above her head. As Will made another grab for it, she tipped it, and a cascade of corn peppered the carpet.

‘Mum’ll go ballistic!’ Maeve exclaimed. As soon as the words were out, her face dropped.

Reality asserted itself with a thump.

‘Sorry, Dad,’ Maeve muttered. ‘Sometimes I forget... you know.’

Will gave her a gentle, sad smile. ‘It’s all right. Sometimes I do, too.’ He sat back on the sofa and cleared his throat. ‘So, have you two eaten dinner or do you want me to whip something up?’

He didn’t miss the look his two daughters exchanged. His cooking wasn’t great at the best of times, and the supermarket delivery wasn’t arriving until tomorrow.

‘There’s a pizza in the freezer,’ Hattie said. ‘Should be big enough for the three of us.’ She jumped up from the sofa, but Will motioned for her to sit down again.

‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘I’ll do it. You two carry on with the film.’

Exiting the living room, he suddenly felt in need of a glass of something to ward off the emotions that Maeve’s slip up had threatened to raise. A long marriage couldn’t be forgotten overnight, and even though the ink was dry on the divorce papers, old habits were hard to break. Grabbing a bottle of red wine from the rack next to the fridge, he twisted off the cap and poured himself a glass. One step at a time, he told himself.

At the shrill sound of her phone's alarm, Polly opened her eyes groggily. She'd meant to turn it off since she'd been mopping up the shop until late into the previous night, and the place was obviously in no state to reopen. As the beeping cut into her consciousness, she rolled over and thought about just pulling the covers back over her head and blotting out the world.

It wasn't to be. Even if the shop wasn't trading, she still had a last-minute flurry of online orders to fulfil, not to mention a large dehumidifier to empty and a claims assessor to wait for. Having bought the building when she'd started the business two years ago, there was no landlord to complain to. The buck for repairs really did stop at her.

After a quick shower and an even quicker breakfast, Polly got to work packing up the items that had sold from the website. People looking for Christmas party dresses had created a little backlog of orders, and while she felt like King Canute holding back the tide, she was grateful for the business. She noticed, as she glanced at her database of customers, that quite a few were repeat ones, too. She decided to send out her newsletter a little earlier, to encourage some more pre-Christmas trade.

The cold light of day filtering through the shop's windows sent Polly's mood plummeting again. The floor, thankfully, was stone, so there hadn't been a carpet to ruin, but the sight of the bare space, devoid of everything that was the essence of Roseford Reloved, made her eyes fill with tears once more. Furiously, she batted them away from her cheeks. It was damp enough in here already, she told herself in irritation; she didn't need to add to it.

It was no good, she thought. She was going to have to call Grandpa and

tell him what had happened. She'd been hoping to avoid it, but she felt an overwhelming urge to offload on someone about her concerns, and he was always there with a cup of tea and a sympathetic ear. She'd ring him and see if he was up for a visit. He lived half an hour away in a retirement village on the outskirts of Yeovil, and she hoped he'd be pleased to see her. It was too early yet, though; he was fond of repeating that he 'just wasn't himself until at least ten o'clock.'

The shop, unsurprisingly, had a claggy, damp aroma, but she was pleased to see that the dehumidifier that had been running overnight had taken out a good quantity of water. True to her word, Lizzie had asked her partner Simon Treloar if he could source a decent sized one from Roseford Hall, and it had been dropped off last night. Hopefully, with that and any additional units the insurance company would provide, the shop would be dry sooner rather than later.

But there was still the inconvenience of being closed while the work took place. Polly really couldn't afford to lose what little business the winter gave her, and the thought of being unable to open during the run up to Christmas, which would normally have boosted her takings, filled her with dread. Things were tight as it was; this could be a disaster...

Lost in these gloomy thoughts, Polly failed to notice the first tap on the front door of the shop. When the second came, louder and more insistent this time, she jerked her head up irritably. She was just finishing off the last parcel to post.

'We're closed,' she called, not looking in the direction of the door.

Yet another knock.

'Isn't it bleeding obvious?' Polly muttered. The empty rails and the hole in the ceiling surely should have been all the clues the insistent would-be customer needed. This time, though, she looked up. Polly thought her spirits couldn't get any lower; she was wrong.

Oh, fuck.

There, on the other side of the glass, was the bloke who'd had such a drenching yesterday. He must be here to tell her he was starting legal proceedings. Negligence, was that it? Sadly, Polly's legal knowledge extended about as far as the courtroom dramas she'd spent so long watching with Grandpa when she'd stayed with him as a kid. She was sure, in the real world, it must be called something else. But whatever it was, it wasn't going to be good news.

He was standing outside the shop, and clearly wasn't going to go away. Drawing a deep breath, Polly stopped wrapping the parcel, straightened her back and walked towards the door. She might as well get this over with. If this was to be the final nail in the coffin of Roseford Reloved, then better to know now, than keep struggling.

Pulling open the front door, she pasted on her best smile.

'Hi,' she said. 'How are you?' Please God, he had no ill effects from yesterday's impromptu soaking.

The man looked at her for a long moment. His serious hazel gaze met hers, unblinking, and she noticed, now he was closer, the slightly crooked, once-broken nose and the clearly defined jaw line, upon which a closely cropped beard rested. He had a serious, no-nonsense look about him, which, under the circumstances, wasn't surprising, but when he spoke, his tone was polite and measured, with a soft North London accent that seemed very at odds with the shouting he'd done yesterday.

'I'm sorry to bother you,' he began. 'You've clearly got a lot to sort out in here. I was just wondering if you still had that dress that my daughter bought? She's been giving me a hard time about leaving it in the shop yesterday and I thought I'd come back this morning and collect it for her.'

Polly felt a slight cloud of worry lifting from above her head. The dress? She racked her brains. Where had it ended up yesterday? She had the feeling she'd shoved the bag hastily somewhere in the flat, but she wasn't quite sure.

'Of course,' she said quickly, realising this man was waiting for an answer. 'Um... would you like to come in? It looks as though it's about to rain again.'

'If you can promise I'm not likely to get wetter in here than out there,' the man quipped gently, as he glanced at the hole in the ceiling.

Polly blushed. 'One of the workmen from Roseford Hall has tarped the roof to temporarily keep out the water. You should be safe enough.'

'In that case...'

He stepped over the threshold and looked around the shop. Polly saw his eyes widen as he took in the empty space.

'You cleared all of this out yourself?' he asked.

'Yup,' Polly replied. She gave a brief grin. 'It's amazing what panic can do for your productivity!'

'And you run this place single handed?' His tone was gentle, and he sounded genuinely interested. Polly found herself wanting to listen a little more to that voice. It was so at odds with the tirade he'd previously launched

at her.

‘Yup,’ Polly said again, kicking herself mentally for such brevity. She continued. ‘My grandpa lent me the money to start up the business, but it’s essentially a one-woman operation.’ She wondered why he was asking her – was he trying to suss out whether or not it was still worth taking her to court? She walked towards the back of the shop. ‘I think I put the dress out the back, with the rest of the stock I could salvage. I won’t be a minute.’

‘No rush,’ the man replied, then paused. ‘I’m Will, by the way.’ He looked slightly awkward. ‘It felt weird to be having this conversation without having introduced myself first.’

‘Polly,’ she replied. ‘Polly Parrott.’

Polly saw Will’s face twitch as she told him her name, but she was well used to that. Smiling back at him, she added, ‘And yes... I often wonder what my parents were thinking, too!’

Will laughed. ‘It explains the decor and the logo of the shop; that wallpaper is great, by the way.’ He gestured to the feature wall behind the shop’s counter, which was covered with a riot of tropical forest print, with several varieties of parrots strategically placed among the branches of the trees.

‘Thanks,’ Polly replied. ‘I’m hoping I’ve managed to get the dehumidifier working in time to save it. It would be awful if that had to come down along with the ceiling.’ Aware that she was making small talk to fill silences, she added, ‘I’ll just pop through and get the dress.’

She hurried out the back to where the piles and piles of clothing, rescued from the shop, were still stacked on almost every available surface, with even more over door frames and hooked onto bookshelves. Where had she put that carrier bag with Maeve’s dress in? Looking around hurriedly, she hoicked some dresses off the back of the sofa, but still couldn’t find it.

‘Everything OK?’ Will’s voice drifted through from the shop. ‘Can I help?’

‘Just having a spot of bother remembering where I put it,’ Polly called back. *Great, she thought. Not only is he going to think my shop’s a danger zone, but also that I’m even more disorganised than I am!*

Thankfully, just as she was going to head back out to the shop and apologise to Will for being unable to locate Maeve’s purchase, she caught sight of the bag she’d put it in, the rainforest printed tissue paper in which she’d parcelled it poking out of the top. Grabbing it in relief, she checked that

it was undamaged, and hurried back to the shop.

Will was waiting by the counter, and Polly paused to look at him before she went through the archway that separated out her home and the shop. She noticed the expensive, well-fitting blue jeans, and the stylish fleece jacket, several shades darker than the jeans he was wearing. She could tell immediately that this was a man who took care of his appearance and still kept himself in decent physical condition.

‘Here you go,’ she said as she reached the counter. ‘It didn’t get caught by the flood in the shop, thank goodness.’

Will raised an eyebrow, and Polly felt herself blushing. To her mind, there was still a huge elephant in the room that they hadn’t addressed yet. ‘Er, about that...’

‘Yes?’ Will stared thoughtfully at her, and Polly shifted under that intense, rather unsettling gaze.

‘Well, what you said yesterday... and you’d be well within your rights, of course, but I’d really like to know if... well, if you’re intending to...’ She trailed off as she felt her throat constricting again, the panic and fear that this man was going to put the final nail in the coffin of her business bubbling up inside her again. She dropped her gaze, trying to get a grip before she spoke again.

‘I guess what I’m saying is, are you intending to take me to court?’

When Polly raised her eyes again, she was stunned to see the gentleness in Will’s own gaze. Those rich, hazel-coloured eyes were regarding her with concern. He gave the quietest rumble of a laugh.

‘If you’d asked me that yesterday afternoon, I’d have said it wasn’t just my suit that would be taken to the cleaners,’ he began. ‘But Maeve was so upset when I told her she couldn’t have this dress, and that isn’t like her, that I had a change of heart overnight.’ He paused briefly, and Polly felt her hopes lifting a fraction.

‘The ceiling was a poorly timed accident, and while you should really have had the roof fixed long before this, I do realise how difficult finances can be when you’re starting out in business. I used to work weekends in my uncle’s butcher’s shop when I was a teenager, so I saw some of the struggles he had.’

Polly breathed out a little further. Was he saying what she thought he was? ‘So?’ she questioned, needing absolute clarity. ‘You won’t be taking me to court?’

Will smiled grimly. 'I've seen enough of solicitors over the past couple of years not to want to get caught up in yet another legal battle. And frankly, I don't have the time. So no. I won't be taking you to court.'

Exhaling in a rush, Polly felt the weight lifting from her shoulders. 'Thank you,' she said with relief. 'And I did mean it about dry cleaning your suit and coat.'

'Don't worry about it,' Will replied. 'I had spares. Now, how much do I owe you for the dress?'

'Have it on me.' Polly waved away the credit card that Will held towards her. 'It's the least I can do, under the circumstances.'

'No wonder you're panicking about the roof if that's your approach to a paying customer!' Will's tone was teasing, and Polly found herself smiling in response. He waved the card again. 'I insist.'

Polly thought about protesting, but he seemed dead set on paying for the dress, so in the end, she rang up the purchase. As she held the card reader out so that Will could tap his card, she spotted his full name printed on the front and a final shock of recognition made her draw in a hasty breath. So, Lizzie had been right. It was him.

'Sutherland?' she said, confirming it to herself. 'Will Sutherland?'

'Yes,' Will replied. 'Guilty as charged.'

Polly's hand started to shake as she hastily put the card reader down on the counter. 'I thought you looked familiar,' she said as, looking for something to do with her hands, she passed Will the bag with Maeve's dress. 'What brings you to the West Country?'

'A change of pace,' Will replied. 'A new start, hopefully.'

'Well, welcome to Roseford,' Polly stammered. Suddenly, the nerves she'd felt when she'd seen Will outside her shop had been reignited, but for a completely different reason. 'I hope, ceilings notwithstanding, that you're settling in OK.'

'Not too badly,' Will said. 'Getting this for my daughter will make things a bit easier at home, at least!'

'Thank you for the business,' Polly replied. 'I hope to see you again soon.'

'Thank you, Polly,' Will replied. 'It was, er, nice to meet you. And staying dry this time.' Will's eyes twinkled. 'And I'm sorry I went off a bit hard about the ceiling. It was just bad timing.' Before Polly could respond, he added, 'See you soon.'

Polly leaned on the counter as she watched Will go. Her knees had suddenly started to shake. It had been a few years since she'd been a serious follower of national or international football. The last time she'd even thought about Will Sutherland, he'd been playing for the England national football team and a Premier League top five club. She had a vague recollection that Will had moved into management, after a brief flirtation with television punditry, but that was where her knowledge of his more recent career had ended. And now, it seemed, Lizzie was right. Will was the one who'd bought the much-contested Parson's Grange, right here in Roseford. There was no doubt about it, she'd have a hell of a story to tell her grandfather.

Shortly after Will left, Polly rang her grandfather to see if he was up for a visit. There seemed little point in hanging around the shop in its current state, and she felt depressed every time she caught sight of the gaping hole in the ceiling. The claims assessor was coming out that afternoon, so she had a couple of hours free.

Knowing how much her grandfather had loved the garden of his former home, a rambling Victorian house in a village a few miles from the retirement place where he now lived, Polly decided that she'd take him a bunch of flowers from Roseford Blooms as a treat. While he had a small garden in his new home, it was nothing compared to the mature, well planted place he'd left behind, and there was little colour in it during the winter. Polly locked the front door and headed down to Roseford Blooms to see what Lizzie had in stock that would bring a smile to the old man's face.

There was finally a longed-for break in the incessant rain of the past few weeks, and as Polly walked the short distance to the flower shop, the brilliant winter sun shone in a, for once, cloudless blue sky. There were still huge puddles in the dips in the road, and a steady stream of water ran down the gullies beside the pavements. It would take a while before things dried up again, that was for sure. Shivering slightly, Polly huddled into the coat she'd thrown on as she went out of the door. A vibrant, red Helly Hansen anorak, it appealed to her love of colour while still being practical for the winter.

'Hey!' Lizzie called as Polly entered the small florist that was just a few doors down from her own shop. Roseford Blooms had formerly belonged to Lizzie's Aunt Bee, who'd owned and managed the business for nearly thirty

years by the time she'd offered it to her niece to buy. Lizzie, a former marketing executive, who'd sold her company a few years back, had taken to floristry with enthusiasm and had adjusted well to the slower pace of living and working in Roseford. It had helped, of course, that she'd also fallen in love with Simon Treloar, the Lord of Roseford Hall.

'Hiya,' Polly responded. All her attention being focussed on Lizzie, it took her a few seconds to realise that Roseford Blooms had another customer. From her recent interactions with him, even with his back turned, Polly immediately recognised Will Sutherland, who was perusing the bouquets in buckets on the stepped shelves inside the shop. Those long legs encased in jeans were pretty unmissable.

Polly tore her gaze away from Will's back view and met Lizzie's amused gaze. Shaking her head, not wishing to be mortified with embarrassment again in front of the guy, Polly hurried to the counter.

'I'm going to see my grandpa in a minute,' she said quickly, trying to remember why she was in the florist. 'I thought he might like something to cheer up that little old living room of his. Have you got any recommendations?'

Lizzie cocked her head to one side. 'He's quite fond of roses, isn't he? I've got a few in from one of our Spanish suppliers. Nothing British at this time of year, I'm afraid, but I can embed them in a cushion of more English blooms, if you'd like?'

'That sounds great,' Polly replied. 'It's amazing how you remember who likes what. I don't know how you do it!'

Lizzie laughed. 'My Aunt Bee once said flowers were like people – you just have to know how to handle them. I tend to agree.' She glanced at Will, who was still perusing the bouquets. 'And what can I get for you, sir? Would you like any help?'

Will, who appeared to have been miles away as he looked at the flowers, turned quickly to the counter. 'There's no rush,' he said quickly. 'Serve this lady first.' Then he noticed it was Polly standing by the counter. 'Oh, hi again.'

'Hi,' Polly replied quickly. The shock of recognition had worn off slightly, but she still found it slightly weird to see such a renowned sports star standing a few metres away.

Lizzie, who'd busied herself selecting the sprigs and flowers she'd needed, began to put the bouquet together. 'So is the shop looking any

better?’ she asked as she sliced the stems.

Polly shook her head. ‘It’s a bit drier, thanks to that dehumidifier, but it’s going to need a lot of work.’

‘I’m so sorry this has happened, Pol,’ Lizzie replied, looking up from the flowers with sympathy in her eyes. ‘It’s such bad luck. Hopefully the insurance company will sort it out for you soon. But what are you going to do in the meantime?’

‘Concentrate on the online side of the business, I suppose,’ Polly replied. ‘It’s picking up, and I can do some more paid Facebook and Instagram advertising, see if that helps.’

‘Well, if you need any tips, give me a shout.’ Lizzie paused and looked at the bouquet, frowning. ‘It’s not quite right,’ she said thoughtfully. She gestured to the bucket of orange flowers on the shelf behind Polly. ‘Can you grab me a couple of those?’

‘Sure,’ Polly replied. ‘What are they?’

‘Tiger lilies.’ Lizzie grinned. ‘I think they look a bit more your grandpa’s cup of tea than anything else, don’t you think?’

Polly burst out laughing. ‘I think you’re right!’

As Lizzie wrapped and tied the bouquet, she spoke again. ‘I mean it, Pol – I used to do PR and marketing for a living. If you need any advice about how to become more visible, let me know. All on the house for a friend in need.’

‘Thanks, hon.’ Polly smiled. ‘I might just take you up on that.’

She took the bouquet and tapped her card on the reader on the counter. ‘And I’ll let you know what Grandpa thinks of the tiger lilies.’

‘Do,’ Lizzie replied, smiling.

Polly turned and was jolted to see that Will had decided which bunch flowers he was going to buy and was now standing behind her. ‘They look lovely,’ she said as her eyes fell on the dusky pink and cream-coloured arrangement.

‘I think so,’ Will said lightly, but his gaze lingered on Polly. Polly’s eyes met Will’s, and she felt her pulse quicken a little.

Lizzie’s discreet cough brought them both back to the present.

‘That’ll be £12.50, please sir,’ she said briskly.

Polly hurried out of the shop, clutching her own beautifully arranged flowers like a lifeline. She wondered who Will was buying flowers for and felt the faintest pinprick of envy. It had been a while since anyone had bought

her a bouquet, and Will was a very attractive guy. Trying to put those thoughts out of her mind, she hurried back to get her things before she headed off to see her grandfather.

Drawing up in a space in the car park that ran like a row of teeth in front of the charming, modern terraces of the retirement village, Polly grabbed the bouquet and a diabetic fruit cake she'd picked up in the local convenience store and exited the car.

Grandpa's garden was looking tidy; the lawn hadn't grown much in the colder months, and although the borders were sparse, they were tidy and weed-free. The path to the sky-blue painted front door was clean and tidy, and she smiled when she saw two empty glass milk bottles in a stand on the step. Even though her grandfather got a regular delivery from the local supermarket – having recently become a whizz with an iPad – he still liked the clink of the milk bottles being delivered.

Before Polly could ring the bell, the front door was flung open and a short, white-haired man dressed in a lively but smart Hawaiian shirt, short sleeved despite the weather, and a pair of cream-coloured tailored chinos stepped out.

'Come in out of this cold, Polly,' he called as she reached him. 'It's enough to freeze the knackers off the Trafalgar Square lions!'

Polly laughed. Her grandfather hated the cold and made it his priority to escape to sunnier climes as often as he could when the British weather turned chillier. He was only at home at the moment because he was recovering from a recent heart procedure and hadn't yet been medically cleared to travel. Usually, at this time of year, Polly would be receiving regular postcards from southern Spain or Gran Canaria, where the climate suited him better.

As her grandfather led her through to the living room, she handed over the flowers and the cake. 'Something to brighten up your side table,' she added.

'Thanks, love,' he replied. 'Tell your friend Lizzie she did well.'

'I will.' Polly settled back against the cushions of the high-backed sofa and waited for her grandfather to bring in two mugs of tea. She knew not to interfere and offer to make them; he liked to show her that he was still functioning on all cylinders, despite the recent heart issues. She glanced around the room and noted, with a smile, a couple more framed pictures on the sideboard: one from his most recent Caribbean cruise and another of herself, standing proudly outside Roseford Reloved. She felt a pang of guilt

about having to update him on what had been happening with the shop.

Five minutes later, the jovial expression on the old man's face had turned far more serious. He sipped his tea as Polly recounted the ceiling disaster.

'So what's the next step?' he asked as she drew to a close.

'Claims assessor, and hopefully a speedy repair before Christmas shopping kicks off in mid-December,' Polly replied. 'The assessor's coming this afternoon, so that should get the ball rolling.' She hadn't yet told him about the encounter with Will Sutherland, even though Will had reassured her that he wasn't going to take her to court over his soaking.

Her grandfather regarded her curiously. 'There's something you're not telling me, Polly. What's on your mind?'

'You mean besides the ceiling and the loss of trade while it's fixed?' Polly gave a short laugh and then sipped her tea. 'Isn't that enough to worry about?'

The old man shook his head. 'I know you. You're keeping something back. What is it?'

Polly sighed. She could never keep anything from Grandpa. As his only grandchild, they'd always been close, especially after Polly's mother had died ten years ago. Grandpa had been there to listen, and he'd generously given her the deposit to buy the building where Roseford Reloved now resided, as well as giving her enough money to buy the first round of stock and other setup costs. She felt hugely ashamed that she'd dropped the ball and not realised how bad the fabric of the place was getting and was now faced with more expenditure. Even with the hoped-for insurance payout, costs would inevitably rise.

'I just don't know if I've done the right thing, Grandpa,' she said finally. 'I mean, you put so much faith in me when I started this business, not to mention the money, and it feels as though it's all slipping away.' She looked down into her mug, trying to stave off the wave of despondency.

'I will always believe in you, Polly,' the old man replied. 'After all, who else is going to source my wardrobe so I can wow the ladies at the social nights here and on the cruises?' He gestured to the shirt he was wearing, which was a bold canary yellow and festooned with a jazzy print of pineapples and pina colodas.

'I'd do that for you anyway!' Polly smiled. 'Is it working?'

'Oh yes.' Grandpa wiggled his eyebrows. 'The number of dates I've had since I moved here! And your wardrobe choices definitely have a lot to do

with that. Your grandmother, God rest her, would be happily surprised.' He'd been widowed five years ago, and, while Polly knew he still missed his wife, he'd recently embraced his single status with enthusiasm, and taken the opportunity to travel and make new friends.

'And what about you?' he continued. 'Any sweethearts on the horizon to sweep you off your feet?'

Polly's mind immediately shifted back to the conversation with Will Sutherland earlier that morning. Despite their inauspicious first encounter, their second one had been much nicer, and she had to admit she thought he was a bit of a hottie. But it wasn't as if they'd been on a date, was it? After the briefest of pauses, she shook her head.

'No such luck, unless you count the guy who the ceiling fell in on.'

Grandpa's eyebrows jerked skywards again. 'You didn't tell me that part of the story.'

'It was a bit traumatic, for me as well as him!' Polly recounted what had happened, only revealing at the end of the story just who it was who'd been standing under the deluge.

'You're joking!' Grandpa's mouth dropped open. 'What the heck was Will Sutherland doing in Roseford?'

'He lives there now, in some brand-new house he had built.'

Grandpa's face assumed a thoughtful expression. 'I'd read somewhere that he was moving out of international management. Never figured he'd end up in this neck of the woods, though. Getting drenched in your shop was one hell of a welcome to his new home!' He laughed that powerful, rumbling laugh that seemed so at odds with his demeanour, and Polly couldn't resist joining in.

'I'm just glad he's not going to sue,' she said. 'That'd be the last thing I need right now.'

'You'll find a way through,' the old man said. 'I have every faith in you, Polly. And who knows, perhaps Will Sutherland, with his high-powered connections, might just be the one who can help. Does he have any friends he can refer your way for a bargain or two?'

Polly began to laugh again. 'Even if he did, I doubt he'd be inclined to send them over after what happened, but it's a nice thought.'

Her grandfather looked thoughtful. 'If I remember correctly, he left his job under something of a cloud. I'd be intrigued to know more, if you do get chatting again.'

‘That’s unlikely,’ Polly said. ‘He popped into the shop this morning to see how things were, and, unexpectedly, to apologise for being so shirty with me, but I doubt our paths will cross again socially.’

‘You never know,’ her grandfather said, that twinkle that Polly loved so much back in his eye. ‘Stranger things have happened. Speaking of which...’ He glanced at the clock above the fireplace.

‘Am I holding you up?’ Polly asked.

Her grandfather looked mischievous. ‘I’ve got a lunch date with Susan from number sixteen,’ he replied. ‘Had long-range designs on her since she moved in a few months back. We’ve been on a few dates so far, and all signs are encouraging.’ He waggled his eyebrows and gave Polly a grin.

‘Grandpa, you’re incorrigible!’ Polly giggled. ‘What happened to Pam from number three?’

Her grandfather sighed in mock-disappointment. ‘She far preferred the company of Nigel from one of the flats across the way. Not even my *Saturday Night Fever* impressions could convince her.’

‘All’s fair in love and disco dancing, I suppose.’ Polly kept smiling. She felt much happier now she’d spent some time here. Her grandfather always managed to cheer her up, even when things were looking bleak. ‘It explains why you didn’t touch that fruit cake I brought you.’

‘I’d much rather have a half portion of the real stuff, than a double portion of a diabetic one,’ her grandfather replied. ‘But thanks for the thought.’

As Polly kissed her grandfather goodbye, she ruminated on what he’d said, and found her mind drifting back to Will. She wondered what it was that had caused him to leave his former job, if indeed Grandpa was right. Whatever it was, she couldn’t help hoping she’d see him again.

Maeve's delighted squeal when Will handed over the rescued dress was enough to make him glad he'd made the effort. She grabbed the bag off him and was just about to disappear back to her room to try it on (and, doubtless, post selfies to all her social media channels, Will thought), when she stopped and turned back towards him.

'Did you apologise to Polly?' she asked, eyeing him with that direct stare that always felt as though he'd never be able to lie to her.

'Er, for letting her ceiling fall on my head?' Will replied.

'For being such an incredible shit to her when it did,' Maeve countered. 'It wasn't her fault.'

'Well, technically she should have had the roof fixed,' Will reminded her.

Maeve rolled her eyes. 'All the same, you went off on her when she already had that to deal with.'

Will shook his head, slightly self-conscious under his daughter's blue-eyed scrutiny.

'I did suggest to her, when I picked up your dress, that I might have gone in a bit hard, but it was a shock,' Will said. 'That ice bucket challenge I got nominated to do by the whole squad a few years ago at least didn't have soggy plaster attached.'

'Well, I hope you did it properly,' Maeve said. 'Or I'll take you back in there and make you apologise harder. Don't you know anything about women, Dad?' Her gaze fell on the flowers Will had put on the kitchen counter when he'd got in. 'Those are nice. Who are they for? Got a date?'

Will shook his head. 'Can't a man buy flowers for himself these days? I

thought your generation was all about equality.’

‘They’re pretty,’ Maeve replied. A strange expression, as if she’d had an idea, drifted across her pretty features before she added, ‘It’s nice to see some flowers again.’

‘Well, I hope you enjoy them while they last,’ Will replied. He looked at his watch. ‘I’ve got a Zoom meeting with City at 3 p.m. Have you got any plans for the afternoon?’

‘Not that I can think of,’ Maeve replied. ‘It’s not as if I’ve got tonnes of mates around here that I can hang out with.’ She obviously saw the look on Will’s face as she said that, and added, ‘But it’s fine. I’m going to go and see Lauren and Tilly next weekend, so I’ll be all right just slobbing around for now.’ She paused before adding, ‘But now I’ve got the dress, I could do with getting some shoes to go with it.’ Like a cat, she slunk up to her father and put an arm around him. ‘You know what you said about putting your credit card on my Apple Pay...?’

Will laughed. ‘You don’t forget a lot, do you?’ He pulled out his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans. ‘Don’t bankrupt me,’ he said firmly. Maeve grabbed her phone, and the card was soon installed on it.

‘I won’t, I promise. Thanks, Dad!’

‘I mean it.’ Will raised an eyebrow. ‘I don’t want a coronary when the bill comes in.’

Maeve rolled her eyes. ‘I’ll be sensible.’

‘Why don’t you see if your sister wants to go out tonight?’ he suggested, as Maeve went to leave the kitchen. ‘We could go to the pub for dinner or something, or into Taunton to see a film. My treat.’

‘Sounds good,’ Maeve replied. ‘I’ll see what she says. She’s been working on uni stuff all day, so perhaps she’ll fancy a break.’ Turning again, she called over her shoulder, ‘And thanks again for getting the dress for me.’

‘No problem.’ Will smiled. He was glad that Maeve had inherited his – mostly – placid nature. It took a lot to get her riled and she barely ever held a grudge. Hattie was much more like her mother, and had taken her parents’ divorce so much harder. He knew she was bearing a lot of resentment still, and although there were occasional wins, slight rays of sunshine in the heavy clouds of her emotions about that and the move to Somerset, he still had to tread carefully.

But now wasn’t the time to be looking back. He had the future to think about, and with a brand-new house and two daughters living with him, he’d

need to get work sorted out sharpish. They weren't in financial trouble but at forty-five years old, he was too young to retire, and life would need paying for.

So, the question was, should he take the assistant coach job he'd been offered yesterday? He'd told the club, who were ripe for promotion to the Premier League next season, that he needed some time to think about it, but he was still no closer to deciding. Working for a football club was a different beast to managing a national team, and he wasn't sure if he was ready to change focus to the week-in, week-out commitment to regular games.

Knowing that City would need a decision by the new year didn't help when really, he felt as though he needed more time to assess how things panned out. Maybe he would take six months and then see what his options were. The football season was in full swing now, anyway; taking on a job at this point would mean hitting the ground running. And the commute to Bristol, and then to games all around the country, would put added strain on him and his family relationships. Hattie would be back at university in January, but Maeve had taken a gap year; if she chose to get a job close to their new home, could he really let her come home to an empty house on a regular basis? She might be eighteen, but that didn't mean he wanted her isolated and alone in this rural pile night after night.

If Sam was still here, he thought, it would have been so different. But, he reminded himself, she wasn't. Unfortunately, that still didn't help him to make any decisions.

Polly drove back into Roseford just before the claims assessor was due to visit. Elevenses with Grandpa had cheered her up, as it always did, and she was, as ever, grateful that they'd remained so close. His amorous adventures never ceased to amuse her. *At least he's putting himself out there*, she thought with a smile. That was more than she was doing. It wasn't like Prince – or even Princess – Charming was going to walk in through the door of her shop. Especially not now, with the state it was in.

Her mind wandered to Will. But, she mused, what could they possibly have in common? Their life experiences were just so different. And yet, she'd felt a spark of attraction, that fizzy, unidentifiable *something* when they'd talked this morning. Unless, of course, she was just so grateful he wasn't going to sue her that she was merely projecting.

She parked her car around the back of the building and hurried into her flat. She was digging out the paperwork that the assessor had requested when she saw a car drawing up outside. She hoped this would go well and that work could get started immediately.

Greeting the assessor, a man in his early thirties, she gestured rather nervously to the damage. 'I think you can see what the issue is.'

The assessor smiled. 'Yes. Looks dramatic, but often these things can be sorted fairly quickly. If you can get some quotes for the work, we can get things in motion.' He glanced upwards. 'Looks like it might have been brewing for a while, though. When was the last time you had the roof checked?'

Polly was dreading this question, although she knew it would come. 'Not

since the survey was done when I bought the building. It, er, threw up a couple of issues.' That was putting it mildly, she thought. The beams and arcs were at least a hundred years old, some of them even older, and the slate tiles were mostly original, apart from a couple of obvious patch-up jobs.

'Well, I suggest you get some quotes from a roofer, too.' The assessor frowned. 'I'm not sure that'll be covered under the policy if it's not been maintained. I'll have to get back to you.'

Polly's heart started to sink. What was the point in having the ceiling repaired if the wider problem that caused it in the first place couldn't be fixed? And where was she going to find the money to repair it if the insurance wouldn't pay?

Polly made it through the rest of the claims assessor's questions on autopilot, and as she bade him goodbye, she mooched disconsolately back into the flat, looking around in complete despair at the crowded living space. It was compact under normal circumstances, but now, with the stock from the shop hanging everywhere and piles stacked on every conceivable surface, it was difficult to navigate. Squeezing past one of the portable rails she'd placed in her living room, she went to put the paperwork back, but before she could open the relevant box file, she felt the tears starting to fall again.

This was it. This was what she'd tried so hard to avoid since she'd realised her dream and opened Roseford Reloved. She'd bought the building because she wanted the security of owning the place: bricks, mortar and concept; but now that seemed to be coming back to bite her on the arse. At this stage, she felt like locking the doors and never reopening.

But that wasn't what she'd learned from Grandpa. Tenacity and determination, and a relentlessly cheerful outlook against the odds, were his key character traits, as well as his generosity, of course, and she liked to think that, most of the time, she shared those. She knew he'd want to know what the claims assessor had said, and she'd ring him later to talk things through, but she just couldn't face it right now. He was probably still at lunch with Susan from number sixteen, anyway, she thought, with the ghost of a smile.

A rap at the door of the shop brought her back to earth. 'Can't people work out that we're closed?' she muttered darkly. She just wanted to hide away and brood until she worked out what she could do.

The rap came again, more insistent this time.

'OK, OK,' Polly said, putting down the documents and walking back into the shop.

She was surprised to see Lizzie standing on the other side of the door.

‘Hey,’ she said, trying to sound brighter than she felt. ‘What brings you here? And who are those for?’ She gestured to the huge bunch of pale pink roses that Lizzie was holding onto.

‘You, actually,’ Lizzie replied. ‘That’s why I thought I’d deliver them. Seemed silly to put them in a flowers-by-post box when you’re only a couple of doors down!’

Polly’s look of surprise made Lizzie laugh. ‘What, no one’s ever sent you flowers before?’

‘Not for a while,’ Polly admitted, as Lizzie stepped over the threshold and into the shop. She took the bouquet from Lizzie and popped them carefully down on the counter. The attached card in its envelope intrigued her. Then she reasoned it was probably just Grandpa sending them to her to cheer her up. She wouldn’t have put it past him to get straight on the phone to Roseford Blooms the second she’d left, arranging something like this to make her smile.

Lizzie was looking expectantly at her. ‘Well? Aren’t you going to look at the card?’

Polly gave a shaky laugh. ‘You already know who they’re from. Why are you so determined to see me open it?’

Lizzie kept smiling. ‘You’ll see.’

Feeling curious, and also a little excited, Polly detached the small, white envelope from the paper and cellophane wrapped roses and slid her fingertip under the flap. Inside, she recognised Lizzie’s handwriting, but the words knocked her for six. A flush suffused her features as she read the brief message, and she couldn’t help the bright smile that tugged at the corners of her mouth when she digested its meaning.

Dear Polly,

Even though it was your ceiling that fell in on me, please accept my apologies for reacting so angrily. I hope that your shop is back up and running soon.

Fond regards,

Will Sutherland.

PS. Maeve loves the dress.

‘Crikey,’ Polly breathed. ‘I wasn’t expecting that. He was perfectly within his rights to be cross about it. I wonder what on earth possessed him to send these?’

‘The order came in about an hour ago, via the website,’ Lizzie replied. ‘I thought you’d be pleasantly surprised.’ She raised an eyebrow at Polly. ‘Especially after the way you were checking him out in the shop earlier.’

‘I was not!’ Polly’s flushed face grew redder.

Lizzie shot her a ‘pull the other one’ look, before glancing at her watch. ‘Well, can’t stick around nattering all day, much as I’d like to put you on the spot a bit more about how you’re going to respond to the lovely Mr Sutherland’s flowers. I’ll catch up with you later.’

‘Thanks for the personal delivery.’ Polly, who was valiantly trying to slow down her still-racing heart, managed a smile at her friend. ‘I’ll see you soon.’

Lizzie departed, and as she did, Polly buried her nose into one of the beautiful pink roses. It had a sweet, honeyed scent, and she was transported back to the memory of the summer days she’d spent in her grandfather’s garden, helping him tend his own flowers. Those warm, hazy days seemed so far away on a wintry late November afternoon. Opening her eyes again, she came back to the present with a bump. Oscar was regarding her with polite interest, and she leaned down to give him a stroke. Flowers from Will were a nice gesture, and they’d made her feel momentarily better, distracting her from the more pressing concerns in the shop, but the problem still remained. What the hell was she going to do to get Roseford Reloved up and running again?

That evening, feeling that the walls of the flat were beginning to close in on her, Polly decided to go to the pub. The Treloar Arms was a cosy former coaching inn that had a warm fire on cold nights and a welcoming atmosphere. Polly knew the landlord Dave and his wife Trish well and had no worries about going there for a drink alone. She'd find herself a cosy spot by the fire, nurse a pint of Guinness (her favourite winter tippie) and try to forget, for an hour or two, the disasters that had befallen her.

Entering the pub, she smiled to see a newly framed poster on the wall of the latest production that had used Roseford as a location. The film, named *A Countess for Christmas*, had been a global hit for FilmFlix, the streaming company, and had pointed a spotlight on Roseford after its release. Much like the *Harry Potter* franchise had brought flocks of visitors to Lacock Abbey in neighbouring Wiltshire, Roseford had seen an influx of tourists as well. Things were quieter now, but people still came to see the film's locations in real life, and it helped that the two stars of the movie had formed strong connections in the village. Both had fallen in love with locals, and while Montana de Santo, the female lead, and her wife Serena, had now relocated to Los Angeles with their daughter, Finn Sanderson, the male lead, had settled in Roseford with his fiancée Lucy.

Polly still couldn't believe she'd got so used to seeing Finn mooching around Roseford, and even managed not to bat an eyelid these days when his fellow film star friends came to stay. She had, however, fantasised about what it would be like if one of them bought something in her little shop and wore it on some red carpet somewhere. That kind of exposure would

certainly help with Roseford Reloved's future, but that was unlikely to happen if she didn't get the building fixed.

She gave herself a shake. She'd escaped her crowded flat to get away from those gloomy thoughts. It could all wait until tomorrow, she told herself as, taking the pint that Dave had poured for her, she headed for her favourite armchair by the fire. Smiling at a couple of people she knew, but not stopping to chat, she sunk into the leather wing-backed chair and picked up a copy of the local newspaper. She didn't often read it, but she didn't want to hunch over her phone, and it was always good to keep track of what was happening in the area. With passing interest, she noticed an advertisement for a new women's football team. Ever since the England women's team had won the Euros under the expert eye of their talented Dutch coach, women's football had been having a renaissance. Now it seemed that a local women's league was being set up, with a call for players from children to adults. The senior team, the Roseford Roses were holding trials to expand their ranks. With a name like that, Polly wondered if Lizzie would jump at the chance to sponsor the team's shirts.

Thoughts of the beautiful game led her straight back to Will Sutherland. She was intrigued by what her grandfather had said about Will leaving his former post suddenly, and wondered what the story was. Perhaps, if she ever saw him again, she'd be able to ask him.

As if summoned by her curiosity, the pub door opened and in walked the man himself, flanked by his daughters. A couple of locals gave him the long view from their seats at the bar, and Polly found herself smiling back as he caught sight of her and smiled in her direction. What an attractive guy he was. Not in a drop-dead gorgeous, film star kind of way, but his height, bone structure and calm demeanour all marked him out as a leader. The broken nose only added to the appeal, and in profile she could see just what a bad break it must have been. She had a vague memory of watching a match on TV, many years ago, with her grandfather, where the injury had occurred. Will had played on, medical rules not being quite so stringent on the pitch back then as they were today, but at the end of the game he'd looked like some battle-scarred warrior, exhausted, but triumphant, when his team had won the game. It looked as though he'd never bothered getting it straightened since then, but she had to admit, she liked it. It gave his face character.

The two girls took a table by the window, on the other side of the fireplace. Hattie, who was glancing at her phone, didn't spare Polly a look,

but Maeve waved and smiled. ‘The dress is amazing,’ she called over as Will, drinks on a tray, headed back from the bar to join his daughters.

‘I’m so glad you like it,’ Polly replied. ‘It really suits you.’

‘It does,’ Will agreed as he placed the tray down on the table. He smiled briefly in Polly’s direction. ‘Hi again.’

‘Hi.’ Polly smiled back. She noticed the soft, brown hue of his eyes and how they seemed to focus only on her as he greeted her. He took a seat at the table with his girls and Maeve reached for her half-pint of cider. Hattie left her glass of lager untouched as she continued to focus on her phone a little longer. Polly noticed Will’s expression tightening briefly, but he didn’t say anything to his older daughter. He just took his pint of Guinness off the tray and sipped. Polly averted her eyes when she realised she was still observing him.

Should she take this opportunity to say thank you for the flowers, she wondered? It seemed remiss not to say something, but perhaps he wouldn’t have mentioned to his daughters that he’d sent them to her. She didn’t want to give the wrong impression and suggest that she thought there was something other than a ‘thank you’ intended in the bouquet. Even though Will’s daughters were in their late teens, young women, she didn’t want to create any tension.

Instead, she leaned back in the chair, and was just taking another sip of her own, half-finished pint, when Will spoke again. ‘How’s the shop looking?’ he asked.

Polly smiled ruefully. ‘Pretty much the same, but at least the claims assessor’s been out.’ She filled him in briefly on the upshot of the visit and saw the sympathy on Will’s face as she did.

‘That’s a difficult situation,’ he said, when she’d finished. ‘I hope you manage to get back up and running, though. It seems like a great little place.’ He grinned. ‘Well, before the ceiling fell in, anyway!’

Polly, despite her worries about the future of Roseford Reloved, grinned back, then took another drink. ‘Thanks,’ she replied. To hell with it, she thought, and added, ‘And thanks for the gorgeous flowers, although you didn’t have to do that.’

Will looked blank for an agonisingly embarrassing moment. ‘Flowers?’ he echoed.

Polly’s face began to warm, and it wasn’t just the effects of the pint of Guinness. ‘Yes,’ she added. ‘Lizzie dropped them off this afternoon, with a

card.’ She furrowed her brow, but she knew there was no way she could have been mistaken.

Will cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said quietly. ‘I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about. I honestly didn’t send any flowers.’

Polly, whose stomach had started to churn in embarrassment from the moment Will had looked blank, felt the hot lava of mortification washing over her.

‘Never mind,’ she said quickly, and pushed her still half-full glass away. ‘My mistake. Someone must have been playing a prank.’ She stood up and grabbed her winter coat from the back of the chair. ‘I’ll see you around.’ Needing the cool blast of winter air on her flaming cheeks as she exited the Treloar Arms, she chanced a glance back at the table where Will and his daughters were. Will had a confused expression on his face, and Hattie, who’d looked up from her phone at the mention of the flowers, was now glaring at him. Clearly, the thought of her father sending anyone a bouquet was enough to trigger her. Polly imagined what the young woman would have been like if Will actually *had* sent her the flowers.

But he hadn’t. Someone had obviously played a joke at her expense. The question was, who, and why?

‘Well, that was weird,’ Hattie remarked as she reached for her half-pint of lager and took a gulp. ‘I mean, we all know you still have groupies, Dad, but who knew you’d find one in this crappy little place?’

Will, flummoxed, shook his head. ‘There must have been some mistake. Poor Polly, though, she looked mortified when I told her I didn’t know anything about it.’ Polly hadn’t seemed the type to make something like that up, just to get his attention, and he was turning the last few minutes over in his mind, trying to work out what might have happened.

‘Perhaps you should go after her,’ Maeve, who had been quiet until now, suggested. ‘I mean, she seemed pretty embarrassed.’

‘Don’t be daft!’ Hattie snorted. ‘What if she is some kind of psycho and she made it up? She could pull a knife on you or something. Or her pinking shears!’ She laughed, but there was a harsh edge to it.

Will shot a warning glance at his daughter. ‘I don’t think that’s likely, do you?’

‘She could be a right nutter,’ Hattie persisted. ‘I’d just forget about it if I were you. You’ve had enough crazies over the years – why go and seek out another one?’

Will shook his head. Hattie was partly right; at the height of his fame on the pitch, he’d attracted his fair share of fans, both male and female, who’d wanted him to sign not just their footballs but varying parts of their bodies. And, although he’d never been the sort of footballer who’d fallen out of nightclubs and into the cleavages of adoring female fans, he’d been persuaded into employing a Sharpie on more than a few occasions.

Thankfully, his agent had protected him from the more ribald (and in some cases, unhygienic) 'gifts' that people sent, but there was always the worry that, after a good performance or a bad one, people would take things too far.

'Perhaps giving her some space would be a better idea,' he conceded. 'I'll pop in and see her in the morning, see if we can work out where those flowers came from.'

'If there actually were any,' Hattie persisted. 'You've only got her word for it.'

'What have you got against Polly?' Maeve interjected. 'She seems really nice, and she has a lovely shop. Well, it was lovely until the roof collapsed. Get off her case!'

'And why are you defending her?' Hattie snapped back at her sister. 'Just because she fixed a dress so your short arse could fit into it, doesn't make her your new bestie!'

'Girls, that's enough,' Will interjected. 'We came out for a quiet drink. Let's not spend it arguing with each other.' He felt incredibly weary again. It had been a strange few days, and having to constantly referee the scrapping between his daughters was making him even more tired. They used to get on so well, but as they'd grown older, they'd become more argumentative, and the past few years hadn't helped. Too much upheaval, on top of the usual uncertainties of his job, had taken their toll. Although, a less rational part of him interjected, they did seem to pick fights about anything and everything these days. And the performative nature of it was wearing thin. They needed to grow up, both of them.

Maeve had fallen quiet again and was staring into her drink. She was never quite quick enough to respond to her sister's jibes and took things more to heart. He reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. 'It's Christmas soon. What do you want as a present?'

Maeve looked up at him, grateful for the contact. 'Oh, I don't know,' she replied. 'Anything, really. I'll have a think and let you know.'

'You do that.' Will turned his attention to Hattie, who was once again engrossed in her phone. 'What about you, Harriet? Does anything spring to mind?'

Hattie's head snapped up and, with challenge in her eyes, she answered immediately. 'Sell the house and go back to London? Oh, no, you won't do that, will you, so no, Dad.'

Will waited ten seconds to respond, drawing in a deep breath as he did so.

Patience with Hattie was something he really had to fight for at times. She knew how to push his buttons and he'd snapped back too often lately, suffering from his own wounds as well as the ones she kept trying to inflict.

'Well,' he said eventually, 'if you can think of anything that I can actually put under the Christmas tree for you, be sure to let me know.' He drained his pint. 'Do you want another one, or shall we call it a night?'

Something about his tone must have cut through to Hattie, since she looked back up from her phone and gave Will an apologetic smile. 'I'm sorry, Dad,' she said quietly. 'Can we just go home?'

Will smiled back at her, feeling his heart lift fractionally. All wins, however small, were worth celebrating, and Hattie rarely apologised these days. 'Of course. Let's get back into the warm. I'm sure we've got something in the fridge we can have for dinner.'

As they left the pub, Will glanced at Roseford Reloved, which stood in darkness on the other side of the street. He felt a pang of sympathy for Polly's embarrassment and decided that he'd pop in and see her again tomorrow. Perhaps, between the two of them, they could work out just who had sent the flowers.

After a fairly decent dinner of steak in a delectable béarnaise sauce and salad, washed down with a rather nice glass of red, Will settled back in his chair in the kitchen and smiled. For once, Hattie and Maeve were working in tandem to clear the dinner things away, after he'd cooked for them all, and he appreciated the calm. It almost felt like the old days. Sam had been clear in her views that the girls should be taught to tidy up after themselves as soon as they were capable, and it had certainly paid off. He was still grateful to her for that, despite everything.

'So do you fancy another movie?' he asked as they finished up. 'I'm sure there's an *Avengers* one we still haven't seen.'

'No ta,' Hattie replied. 'I'm going to call a couple of friends, see what they're up to.'

'You can invite some down if you want,' Will said, seizing the moment of relative civility to make the offer. 'There's plenty of room.'

'Yeah, maybe,' Hattie answered noncommittally, mooching out of the kitchen. In a few more seconds, Will heard her footsteps on the stairs, and the quiet closing of her bedroom door. At least she wasn't slamming it tonight, he thought with a small smile.

'Looks like it's just you and me, then, Miss Maeve.' Will turned to his

youngest. 'Shall we watch that film, then?'

Maeve smiled at him, but he could see there was a worried look behind it. 'Sure,' she said, wiping her hands on the tea towel. 'If I get to choose.'

'It's a deal,' Will replied. He paused before he asked, 'Is there something on your mind, sweetheart?'

Maeve took a long few seconds to answer. 'If I tell you something,' she said eventually, glancing away from him to study the tabletop with an intensity it didn't deserve, 'will you promise not to go mental at me?'

'Depends.' Will raised an eyebrow. 'Have you run up a huge bill online shopping?'

Maeve shook her head. 'No, Dad,' she said quickly. 'Nothing like that. But... I did do something. And I don't think you're going to be very pleased with me when I tell you what it is. Just promise you won't shout at me?'

Will, taking the deep breath he usually had to employ with Hattie, nodded his head. 'I promise.'

'Well, it's kind of like this...'

The next morning, Polly awoke to an optimistic sun streaming through her bedroom window. She hardly ever bothered closing the curtains in the winter, as she preferred to be woken by the gradual lightening of the room. She must've slept late, though; in early December, as it was now, sunrise didn't even begin until gone 7 a.m., and it was up and shining now. She'd stayed up late, trying to do the sums to work out if she could finance the repair of the roof without going back to the bank for an advance on the mortgage, and finally crashed out at gone midnight, on the verge of a breakthrough. It would take everything she had put aside, but if this wasn't a rainy day, she wasn't sure what was.

She'd needed something to take her mind off the feelings of embarrassment that thanking Will Sutherland for a bouquet he knew nothing about had provoked. She must have looked like some kind of weirdo, and even though she *knew* (and had checked again when she got home, just to be sure) that his name had been at the bottom of the message, she was still reeling. Who would have done that to her? Was it someone's idea of a joke? A malicious prank, to add insult to injury? She couldn't think of anyone she'd upset that would resort to such a thing, but, she supposed, it could have been a disgruntled customer. Perhaps she'd better check her online feedback for the shop, in case someone had been so dissatisfied with their purchase that they'd set the thing up as a dark joke? But that sounded so ridiculous, she couldn't even bring herself to check. Besides, how would they know to use Will's name? Then she wondered if perhaps Grandpa had sent them as a more light-hearted trick. She'd spoken to him about drenching Will, and the

man did have a quirky sense of humour at times. He wasn't to know that she'd see Will again so soon. Their meeting in the pub had been a coincidence. Perhaps she'd mention it when she gave him a ring later. But then again, how would Grandpa have known about Maeve's dress?

She had more important things to think about. If she was going to commit to getting the work done on the roof, she'd better get a wriggle on. Builders were notoriously busy around these parts, and if she wanted the repairs done before the Christmas season really kicked off, she needed to be proactive. Jumping out of bed, filled with a kind of manic energy, a need to just get something done, she was determined to get things in place today.

After breakfast and a morning spent making phone calls, Polly's earlier optimism was being severely tested. As she'd half expected, most building firms were on jobs that needed completion before Christmas, and none had availability. She put her phone down on the kitchen table dispiritedly, crossing another option off the list. It looked like Roseford Reloved was going to be closed for longer than she'd hoped, at least until the new year. Even an old mate of hers hadn't been able to help. Letting out a long sigh, she was brought out of the doldrums by another knock at the shop's front door. Hurrying through to the shop, she very nearly stopped and scuttled back into the flat. There, standing on the other side of it, was Will Sutherland.

'What can you possibly want this time?' she muttered. There was no point pretending that she hadn't heard the knock; he'd seen her through the shop window. But why was he here again?

'Only one way to find out,' she said to the air. Fighting back the wave of discomfort that seeing him again after last night immediately evoked, she opened the door.

'Can I help you?' she asked brightly, hoping her face didn't look as red as it felt.

'Can I come in?' Will asked.

'Of course.'

As Will stepped through the door, he seemed ill at ease and nervous, and Polly was immediately curious. Surely, she was the one who should feel that way?

'Was there something that you needed?' Polly asked. 'I, er, thought we'd said all we needed to say regarding what happened.'

'It's not that,' Will replied. He averted his gaze from hers, and seemed to shift on the spot. 'Look, Polly, I wanted to come and talk about the flowers.'

Polly's face lost the battle with her embarrassment, and she blushed. 'There's no need,' she said quickly. 'It was probably just someone playing a prank. Don't think anything of it.' She gave him a quick smile. 'Honestly, it couldn't matter less.'

Will shook his head. 'No,' he said, 'you don't understand.' He met her gaze again. 'Look, do you mind if we have a chat? Have you got time for a coffee? We could go to Roseford Café.'

'I've got a Nespresso in the back.' Polly smiled, still embarrassed but also quite intrigued by how cryptic Will was being. 'What's your poison? Latte? Flat White? Espresso?'

'A latte would be great,' Will replied.

Polly led him through to her living area at the back of the shop. The building was arranged on two levels, with her living room and kitchen on the ground floor, and a storeroom and small office for the shop, and then two bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. The space was compact, especially with the stock from the shop now taking up so much space, but Polly had managed to clear some room so she could use her sofa and just about get around without causing too much damage to the clothes she was storing.

She busied herself making two lattes, and then handed one of the tall coffee glasses to Will. They sat at the small kitchen table, and Polly regarded him as he folded his long legs under the surface and took a sip of his coffee.

'So, what was it that you wanted to discuss?' she asked, when they'd both put their latte glasses down.

Will looked at her, and she was struck again by his serious brown eyes. The intensity in them took her by surprise, and she suddenly realised why he'd had such a successful career in football management. When he looked at you, you couldn't look anywhere else.

'I owe you another apology, I'm afraid,' Will began. 'Or, to put it more precisely, my daughter Maeve does.'

'Why?' Polly replied with a smile. 'Maeve's been the model customer. What could she possibly have to apologise for?'

Will took another sip of his coffee, and as he lowered his eyes to the glass, Polly was surprised to see that they were shining. He swallowed his mouthful of coffee, and then swallowed again before he looked up at her.

'I'm sorry,' he said softly. 'I suppose everything's starting to catch up with me.' He shook his head. 'It's been a tough few months for my daughters, and, if I'm being honest, for me.'

Will wasn't making much sense, Polly thought, but she didn't interrupt.

'The move here... it was supposed to be different. But things changed and the girls have had a hard time coming to terms with it. They've both been expressing that in different ways.' Will looked up at Polly again. 'Hattie's really angry about everything, and Maeve...' He trailed off, cleared his throat. 'Maeve says she's all right, but really...'

'She's trying to be brave for you.' Polly filled in the gap.

Will nodded. 'I keep telling her I'm fine, but...'

'But you're not.' Polly's heart expanded with sympathy for the man across the table. His confession was so unexpected, and she wondered if he'd been missing having someone to talk to. Moving to a new location, especially one as small as Roseford, could be isolating until you found your place in the community.

'No.' His voice was so quiet, it was almost a whisper. 'I'm not.' He shook his head.

Polly longed to reach out and touch one of his hands that were both curled around the latte glass. Instead, she leaned forwards, so she was a little closer to him across the small dining table.

'So why are you here, Will?' she asked gently. 'Why are you telling me all this?'

Will looked up at her again. 'Because Maeve did something a bit daft yesterday,' he said quietly. 'She told me about it last night. And much as I wanted to be angry with her, I promised that I'd come and sort it out.'

Realisation hit Polly like a brick. 'Maeve sent those flowers to me, pretending to be you, didn't she?'

Will nodded. 'She, er, didn't think I'd given you a convincing enough apology, so she took matters into her own hands.'

Polly felt the relief washing over her. 'Thank goodness for that!' She began to laugh and found she couldn't stop. Gasping for air, she wiped her eyes and looked at Will.

Will was just staring at her in complete confusion. 'Is it really that funny?'

'After the past few days I've had, I think it's hilarious!' Polly kept smiling. 'I mean, I barely know Maeve, but I can imagine her standing there, giving you the third degree, and then deciding she needed to intervene. Bless her.'

Will began to chuckle. 'Actually, it was a bit like that. She told me to, er,

“apologise harder”, and when I said I thought it was fine, she asked me if I’d ever had any clue about women.’

‘Well,’ Polly said, ‘for what’s worth, *I* thought your apology was fine, and your anger wasn’t exactly unjustified in the first place. So, I think we’re OK.’ She took another gulp of her latte. ‘But thank you for coming over to explain what happened. I won’t be spending the next few days torturing myself about who did it now.’

‘It was the least I could do.’ Will finished his latte and stood up. ‘And thank you for being so understanding, and for the coffee. I, er, haven’t had much of a chance to talk to anyone since we moved in, and it’s nice to sit and have a chat.’

‘Any time,’ Polly said gently. ‘My door, despite what it looks like, is always open.’ She paused. ‘Well, it will be as soon as I can get a roofer in to sort out the mess.’

‘Not having much luck?’ Will asked, obviously noticing the pessimism in her tone.

Polly shook her head. ‘You could say that. Everyone’s fully booked until the new year, and if I have to stay closed over Christmas, I might as well not bother reopening.’ She felt the desolation washing over her again. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I don’t mean to offload on you. I just wish I could wave a magic wand and get all of this sorted out.’

Will smiled, but then uncertainty flitted across his face again. ‘I’m sorry, as well, for dumping all that on you.’ He gave a short laugh. ‘I mean, I barely know you. You must think I’m a complete weirdo.’

‘Not at all,’ Polly reassured him. ‘Sometimes, we find people to talk to at the right time.’ She stood up and reached for the latte glasses. ‘Perhaps we both needed that today.’

‘Let me,’ Will volunteered. As he reached for them, they found themselves standing a whole lot closer together than they’d intended.

Polly cleared her throat nervously. ‘Thank you,’ she said softly. ‘The, er, dishwasher is just behind you.’

Will smiled down at her, and for a delicious moment, Polly wished that he’d put the glasses back down on the table so they could be even closer. She saw his full bottom lip, that looked just right for kissing, and the flecks of silver grey in his dark beard, and wanted to feel what it would be like to put her mouth on his.

But all too soon the moment had passed as Will, with a gentle smile, had

taken the glasses to the dishwasher.

‘You know,’ Will said as he straightened back up, ‘I could have a word with the guys who did my place, see if they’ve got room to fit you in before Christmas. I’m sure if they have, they’ll do it. And they’re very good.’

Polly smiled ruefully. ‘I’m not sure I could afford your builders. They’re pretty high end, I should imagine. I’m more in the market for a bodge it and fix it job – that’s all I’ve got the funds for.’

‘All the same, if you’d like me to, it couldn’t hurt to ask.’

Polly supposed Will was right. She could only say no, she thought. And when he mentioned the name of the company to her, she could confirm that she hadn’t already called them. ‘OK then,’ she said. ‘Thanks.’

‘I’ll get onto them when I get back home,’ Will said.

As Polly walked him out through the shop, he paused just before he got to the front door. ‘So,’ he said, and Polly could feel his nervousness again. ‘This Yuletide Ball at Roseford Hall that the girls have tickets for... are you going?’

Polly’s face broke into a smile. ‘I hadn’t thought about it,’ she said. ‘Simon, you know, Simon Treloar who lives there, mentioned it a few weeks back but I haven’t got round to buying a ticket yet. It should be a good night though, and it would be a great chance for someone new to the village to meet a few people.’

Will smiled back at her. ‘Well,’ he said softly. ‘Maybe I’ll see you there.’

Polly closed and locked the front door again, and, when she was sure Will was out of sight, she leaned against it, head spinning from the caffeine in the latte and knees suddenly weak. Had Will Sutherland just been on the verge of asking her out? Or was she in danger of reading too much into things again? All the same, perhaps she would see if there were any tickets left for the Yuletide Ball. After all, as a local business owner (for the time being, at least) it was a great networking opportunity. And if Will just happened to be there... Smiling, she tried to shush that line of thought. She wasn’t looking for Prince Charming, no matter how much she’d wanted to kiss him in the kitchen.

Will left Polly's place feeling strangely lighter. He'd expected the conversation about Maeve's faux pas with the flowers to be far more awkward than it actually had been. What he hadn't expected was to be unbuttoning to a virtual stranger about how he was feeling now the move to Roseford had happened. But there had been something about the way Polly had looked at him when they'd started talking, the gentle, non-judgemental air she had, that made him want to share it with her. They often said that wounded spirits found each other, and he'd sensed a kind of empathy in Polly. He wasn't sure why, but he felt he could trust her. He shook his head. If someone had suggested that forty-eight hours ago, when he'd been standing drenched in the shop, losing his temper, he'd never have believed it. And yet, there it was.

'You look happier,' Maeve observed as he let himself in and walked through to the kitchen. 'Was Polly all right about everything?'

'More all right than you deserve,' Will replied, pouring himself a glass of water. 'She found the whole situation quite funny, believe it or not. For some reason, the idea of you giving me a bollocking for not making enough of an apology seemed to tickle her.'

Maeve grinned. 'See? No harm done.'

'I wouldn't go that far,' Will said, his face assuming a more serious expression. 'What you did could have led to a more serious misunderstanding. It's a good thing Polly didn't read any more into it.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Maeve teased. 'The way you were smiling just now when you came in, I think you quite enjoyed going to see her.' She raised an

eyebrow at him.

‘That’s enough, young lady, or I’ll reconsider what I said about grounding you,’ Will growled, good-naturedly. He couldn’t really contradict her; he *had* enjoyed talking to Polly over coffee, and he’d asked her about the Yuletide Ball, as well. He wasn’t sure where *that* had come from.

‘So where did you say you got the tickets for that ball thing up at Roseford Hall?’ He tried to sound nonchalant, but only partially succeeded.

‘Why? Are you thinking of going with us?’ Maeve asked. Then a look of excited speculation passed over her features. ‘Dad! Did you ask Polly to go with you to the ball? You work fast!’

‘No, I did not,’ Will replied firmly. ‘I just thought that it might be a good idea if I went along as well. There’ll be plenty of people from the village to meet, and it means I can keep an eye on you and Hattie, make sure you don’t run off with any dodgy local lads.’

‘And I suppose Polly’s going as well, is she?’

‘She didn’t say either way.’

‘So you *did* ask her about it? I knew it!’

Will shook his head. ‘You are incorrigible, young lady. I just thought it might be fun, that’s all.’

‘You don’t do fun,’ Maeve replied. ‘I’m surprised you even know what the word means.’

Will was still standing by the sink, and he turned on the tap and flicked water at his younger daughter. ‘Oh, I don’t, do I?’

As Maeve squealed, Hattie slunk in through the kitchen door, threw them both a withering look, grabbed a Diet Coke from the fridge and slunk back out again.

‘Better unpack your tuxedo, then, if you’re planning on hanging out with us at the Yuletide Ball,’ Maeve said, once she’d got out of range of Will’s impromptu kitchen tap sprinkler. ‘And if you happen to see Polly there, make sure you look presentable.’

Will just rolled his eyes. The last thing he wanted to do was discuss anything like this with either of his daughters. And however light-hearted Maeve was being, he knew she was still hurting after the family split. If anything was going to happen with anyone new, he was going to be taking things *very* slowly. And if that person happened to be Polly, well, he was fairly sure she wouldn’t want to rush into anything, either. Not with what she had to deal with at the moment.

All the same, after he'd made the call to the building firm who'd worked on Parson's Grange, he ambled through to the walk-in closet in the far corner of his bedroom. It had been built for Sam, whose wardrobe was extensive, but in the end his own clothes had gone in there. They took up about a third of the available space. While a career spent in football had taught him the importance of dressing well off the pitch, and he'd invested in some excellent quality clothing over the years, he wasn't a vain man, and didn't buy things for the sake of it.

Thankfully, on the wardrobe rail, tucked away at one end and still in the protective wrapping from the dry cleaner's, was his dinner suit. He'd worn it to an awards ceremony a couple of months back, and had it cleaned straight afterwards so it was good to go if he did decide to go to the Yuletide Ball.

Perhaps he should just bite the bullet and attend the ball, he thought. The girls were going, and he now knew Polly, at least a little. But it felt like such an effort to get dressed up and go out for the evening. In the past, with Sam on his arm, socialising had been easier. As a couple, they'd faced events like this united. Sam, with her easy smile and gregarious nature, had made the small talk that he'd often struggled with less of a chore, and he'd been grateful for her. Now she was on someone else's arm doing the same thing.

Jesus, being single at his age was exhausting. As part of a married couple, things had just been easier somehow. Having to make decisions alone felt overwhelming. He was one step away from shutting the wardrobe door with himself inside it and never going out of the house again when Hattie's voice drifted up the stairs.

'Dad? Are you there? Mum's on the phone and she wants to talk to you.'

Polly was surprised, later that morning, to get a call from Jed Lewis, the builder who'd been in charge of the Parson's Grange project. Having told Will that she wouldn't be able to afford to employ such a high-end builder, she wasn't optimistic that they'd be able to help. Jed, however, seemed confident that he could come in with a decent quote for the work on the roof, so she arranged to meet him in an hour.

In the meantime, after sending out the flurry of online orders that had come through in the past twenty-four hours, Polly put her mind to her own sartorial choices for the Yuletide Ball. Obviously, she had a lot of options, if she wanted to borrow something from her own stock, and it might be good publicity for Roseford Reloved if she wore something from the shop.

Polly had always adored fashion, and her own style comprised good quality, colourful pieces that she felt were a good advertisement for her business. She'd learned early on that people liked to see you as part of your brand, and she was often to be found in the pieces she'd acquired for the store, having things on rotation so that she could model and showcase the ethos behind her ideas for Roseford Reloved. Today, she was wearing a pair of maroon corduroy dungarees that were embroidered with small forget-me-nots. A cream-coloured shirt and a cashmere cardigan were keeping her cosy, and on her feet were a pair of Converse All Star trainers in the same cream and maroon colours. All bar the shoes had come in as stock, and she knew the deep shades complimented her pale skin tone and dark brown hair well.

But what should she wear for the Yuletide Ball? Since Will had hinted that he might be attending, she'd gone into a bit of a tailspin. That was daft,

she knew it was, but she still wanted to look her best.

Rifling through the rail of formal dresses she'd been meaning to sort out, she paused as she spotted one she'd nearly forgotten about. It had been in stock a while, but for some reason no one had bought it yet. Could this be the one? Pulling it off the rail, she held it up in front of herself. The size and length were right... perhaps she should brave it.

Glancing at her watch, she realised that Jed was due to arrive, so she hastily put the dress back on the rail. She'd try it on later and see if it would fit the bill.

On cue, there was a knock at the front door of the shop.

'Hi,' she said as she let Jed in. 'Thanks for coming out at such short notice.'

Jed smiled down at her. He was tall, and broad, and had the ruddy features of a man who did a lot of physical labour. His well-worn jeans and plaid shirt fitted nicely, and his friendly gaze immediately put her at ease.

'No problem,' he said as stepped over the threshold. 'Will said you needed this job done in a hurry.' He glanced up at the hole in the ceiling. 'Looks like your roof gave up the ghost, then.'

'Yup.' Polly nodded. 'Is there anything you can do that'll meet the demands of the insurance company?'

'Well, I'll have to get up on the roof and take a look, but the weather's been pretty unprecedented, lately, even for Somerset.' Jed squinted up at the beams that were on view now the plasterboard had disintegrated. 'Let me work you up a quote, and I'll get it to you by the end of the day. Is there any reason why you don't want to start straight away?'

'No,' Polly replied. 'The sooner the better as far as I'm concerned.'

'Great.' Jed smiled at her. 'I'll come in as low as I can... That ought to keep the insurers happy.'

Polly smiled back. 'Thank you. And thank you for coming over so promptly.'

'No problem. Will Sutherland's a decent guy. When he told me what happened, I was more than happy to help.' He glanced down at his phone. 'Just checking when I can fit you in.'

Polly waited, hoping against hope it would be sooner rather than later. She needed the shop back up and running quickly.

Jed looked back up at her. 'I can start the end of next week if your insurance company gives the go ahead,' he said, swiping his phone again.

‘How does that sound?’

Polly forced a smile. It was as good an offer as she was going to get, this close to Christmas, she supposed. Roseford Reloved was unlikely to be back open for the village festive shopping night, but at least the shop would be sound for the last few trading days before Christmas.

‘That would be great. Thank you, Jed.’

‘No worries. I’ll go and have a look at the roof, and I’ll be in touch with the quote by the end of the day, so you can clear it with them.’ He smiled again. ‘If you don’t hear from me, you can find me in the pub this evening. I’ll even buy you a drink.’

Polly smiled back. Jed was very charming, and she was sure she wasn’t imagining a come-on in his last words.

‘Thanks,’ she said again. Then she remembered what had happened the last time she’d set foot in the Treloar Arms and her face started to burn. She wasn’t inclined to hurry back yet, even if Will had straightened things out with her.

Showing Jed back out, so he could get on with looking at the roof, she made her way back to the stock room. Then, she checked her email to see if there had been any more sales on the pre-loved website. She was surprised to see an email from Lucy. Roseford Café was almost in hailing distance from her shop, so she wondered why Lucy would be emailing her. Clicking on the email, she felt a rush of emotions.

Hey Polly,

I’ve been thinking about the situation with the shop, and I wondered if you wanted to put a clothing rail in the café, just until you get things organised and back open again? I wouldn’t want any commission for it but thought some of my customers would be interested in your beautiful stock. Lizzie’s offered to have one in Roseford Blooms, too, if it’ll help. Let me know what you think.

Best,

Lucy

Polly’s eyes filled with tears at the kindness of the gesture. She’d always loved the community spirit that was present in Roseford, from the way residents greeted each other when they met, to the welcoming atmosphere of places like Roseford Café and the pride that village dwellers took in showing

off Roseford to the many visitors who flocked there, and it was lovely to feel as though she hadn't been forgotten during the crisis with the shop. Perhaps she could pick out some of her key pieces and curate a couple of rails that would catch the eye of customers in the café and the florist? She had so much to choose from, she was sure she could come up with a selection that would appeal. Replying with an enthusiastic 'yes' to Lucy's suggestion, Polly set about deciding which clothes to include. It was important to pick her most appealing pieces, and those that might inspire impulse purchases. Deciding on seasonal colours, she dug out a rail of cosy winter clothes and party dresses for the café, and a broader selection for the florist. It took an hour or so, but by the end she was satisfied she had a decent range.

A knock brought her back to earth abruptly. It was Jed, back off the roof.

'Hey,' he said as he stepped through the doorway. 'I've had a look, and it shouldn't take too long.' As he filled her in on the specifics, Polly felt reassured. Despite appearances, Jed seemed to think the damage could be repaired fairly swiftly.

'And while I was up there, I had a text about a job in Yeovil we were meant to start tomorrow.' He grinned. 'We can't now, so if your insurance company is agreeable, we can get this out of the way sharpish.'

'That sounds great. Thank you so much, Jed.' Polly felt relief washing over her. Of course, she'd have to clear it with the insurers, but if they were agreeable to the quote, it could save her bacon as far as getting back open for the Christmas season was concerned. Letting Jed know she'd get back to him as soon as she'd contacted the assessor, she said goodbye to him and scurried off to give the insurance company a call.

A short time later, start date agreed with the insurance company, and Jed contacted to confirm, Polly wasn't sure what else to do. She could already see footfall increasing in Roseford now that December was here, and she needed to get the business back on track, so she was at least turning something over. The online sales were steady, but not having the shop operational was making a dent in her takings.

With that in mind, deciding that she'd chosen enough to fill a couple of the mobile wardrobe rails, she was just about to pop across the road to Roseford Café to see when Lucy would be happy for her to bring them over, when Maeve Sutherland passed by the shop window. The girl peered in, and Polly waved in greeting. Smiling at her, Maeve paused outside the front door.

'Hey,' Polly said as she opened the door. 'How are you? We're not back

open yet, I'm afraid.'

Maeve grinned, but Polly could sense that the girl was nervous. 'I hope it won't be too long. I really like your place.'

'Thanks.' Polly smiled back. 'So, what brings you back to the village centre on this fine day?'

Maeve sighed. 'Bored, I guess. A couple of mates are coming down next week, but until then I'm just, you know, hanging out. I thought I'd grab a coffee at the café.'

'I'm on my way over there myself,' Polly said. 'Mind if I walk with you?'

'Sure.' The two of them headed over the road, and Polly pushed open the café door. 'Lucy's red velvet cake is out of this world if you're peckish,' she said as they entered the warm and welcoming Roseford Café.

'I didn't have any breakfast, so I might try it,' Maeve replied. She paused, looking a little uncertain before adding, 'You can sit with me if you like.'

Polly smiled again. 'I'd like that. What would you like to drink?'

When she'd ordered two coffees and a couple of slices of cake, Polly joined Maeve at the table. The girl was tapping away at her phone but put it away as Polly sat down.

'So how are you finding life in Roseford?' Polly asked as Maeve reached eagerly for her slice of cake.

'Quiet,' Maeve replied before she took a bite. 'But nice. I love the new house, and even though we're miles from anywhere, it's kind of nice to be away from all the rush.'

Polly was curious about Maeve's future plans, and found herself asking her about them.

'I'm on my gap year,' Maeve replied. 'I've got a place at Bristol University next September to study Art History, but I wanted to take year out after... well, after everything that's happened. Mum and Dad's divorce wasn't the best of times for any of us, and Dad said I could take a bit of a break. I was supposed to get a job when I finished my A Levels, but that hasn't really happened yet.' Maeve looked as though she was going to elaborate on something but stopped herself at the last moment.

'Well, although there aren't quite as many opportunities around here as there might be in London, I'm sure you'll find something,' Polly said. 'Especially in the spring and summer when there are more tourists around. Roseford Hall are always looking for people to be tour guides and help out.'

Maeve nodded. 'They've got one of the most beautiful portrait collections in the country, so I was hoping I might be able to go and have a look.'

'I bet if you spoke to the manager at the house, they'd be more than happy to show you,' Polly replied. 'And Simon, Lord Treloar, is a lovely bloke – he doesn't own the house any more, but he could put in a good word for you.'

Maeve smiled. 'Thanks for the info, I'll totally check it out.' She paused. 'I'm glad I bumped into you, as well. I, er, well, I've been wanting to apologise.'

Polly kept quiet, knowing what was coming. She took another sip of her coffee and waited.

Maeve took a bite of her cake before she continued. 'Sending you those flowers... I didn't mean to embarrass you. I know that sometimes Dad can be a bit abrupt, and I didn't really trust him to say sorry to you properly.'

'To be fair, it was my shop's ceiling that fell in on him,' Polly pointed out. 'He didn't owe me an apology at all.'

Maeve shook her head. 'He shouldn't have lost his temper like that. It was an accident.'

Polly refrained from getting into a discussion about her own laxness in getting the roof repaired. After all, the ceiling collapsing at just the point that Will had been standing underneath had been terrible timing.

'But the last thing I wanted to do was to make you feel bad,' Maeve added.

Polly smiled at the girl. 'It was a bit awkward,' she conceded, 'but I appreciate the gesture. Maybe next time, though, be honest about where they came from!'

Maeve grinned, and Polly saw the relief in her eyes. 'I will.' She sipped her coffee again. 'So, have you decided whether or not you're going to the Yuletide Ball?'

Polly nodded. 'Probably. I need to get a ticket, but it sounds like it'll be fun.' She paused. 'Did, er, did your dad decide whether or not he was going to go?'

Maeve gave her an assessing look. 'He said he might.' A grin split her features. 'Why? Do you think he's fit?'

Polly laughed. 'You don't mess about, do you? I just thought it might be nice for him, and you, to see a friendly face, someone to talk to, that's all.'

Maeve gave her a pull-the-other-one look but kept smiling. 'You didn't

answer my question.'

'And I'm not going to!' Polly said briskly. She drained her coffee cup. 'Now, I'd better go and have a word with Lucy. She said I could put a rail of clothes in the café while the shop was being repaired. No time like the present.'

'I'll give you a hand if you like,' Maeve said. She gave a wistful smile. 'It's not like I've got anything else to do.'

'Thanks,' Polly replied. 'Give me a sec while I check with Lucy.'

When Lucy confirmed that Polly was fine to bring the rail straight over, Polly headed back to Roseford Reloved with Maeve in tow. Perhaps, while she was setting up the other rail at Roseford Blooms, Maeve would get the chance to ask Lizzie about a job at Roseford Hall.

Will paced his study and tried not to replay the conversation he'd had with Sam for the millionth time. While he appreciated the communication from her, he was finding the information she'd passed on more than a little difficult to swallow. Their conversations these days had evolved into a kind of strained civility, based on the things they couldn't avoid. Sam had made sure that any engagements she and Ben were attending were known to Will ahead of time, and vice versa, so they could both keep things as polite as possible.

The problem was that since Ben and Will both worked in the football industry, it was inevitable, eventually, that something would come up where their paths would cross. That 'something' had now occurred. The Footballer of the Year awards, sponsored by the Football Association, were due to take place in a week's time, and both were involved. Contact was unavoidable. Sam, of course, could have cried off, but, for some unknown reason, she'd decided to accompany Ben, which meant that the three of them were going to be in the same room for a whole evening, with very little chance of escape.

Will wondered if he should cancel. While he wasn't receiving an award himself, he'd been asked to present one to the best regional player of the year, and he was reluctant to duck out. He needed the publicity since he was thinking about his job options, and he'd always made a point of endorsing regional football throughout his career. He'd come through the grass roots system himself and wanted to support the next generation. Similarly, Sam was keen to accompany Ben, who was up for Coach of the Year for his work with a youth team in the north of England, and while she felt it necessary to

give Will a heads up that she would be there, it didn't make the prospect of seeing them any easier. The humiliation of facing the wife who had left him, and the former best friend who she'd left him for, still burned, especially when everyone talked in the football world.

Maybe he should take one of his daughters. Hattie was itching to get back to London, and a night away might be just what she needed right now, but did he really want to leave Maeve all alone in Roseford in a new house? He could take them both, but he'd have to leave one of them behind in the hotel, which didn't seem fair and he wasn't sure how either one of them would cope with seeing their mum out with Ben.

'Everything OK, Dad?' Maeve poked her head around the door of the study.

Will immediately stopped pacing and gave her his best smile. 'Fine, sweetheart. Was there something you were after?'

'Just to see what Mum wanted. Hattie said she'd called. Any news?'

'Everything's fine. Mum just wanted to talk to me about this awards thing that she and Ben are going to. Sound me out about how I felt about them being there.'

'And are you all right with it?'

Will nodded, despite the reservations that were rattling around in his brain. 'Yes. Honestly. You don't have to worry. It's been long enough now that we should all be able to be in the same room without screaming at each other.'

'I hope so.' Maeve's expression was serious. She picked up a Venetian paperweight that Will had recently unpacked and put on his desk. 'I remember when you bought this. I've still got the one you got for me upstairs.'

Will smiled. 'It was a reminder of a great night,' he said. The England Youth team had triumphed in Italy against a very difficult side, and the paperweight, designed with the Three Lions' colours, had been a popular souvenir. Will couldn't resist buying a couple of extras as mementoes.

That game had been one of the best of his career as a manager and had happened just before the one that could absolutely be said to have been the worst. But that was football: one week you were the darling of the country, the next they were throwing you out with the recycling. A lot of water had passed under the bridge since then, but the reminder still gave him a sinking feeling. The fallout from that last game was something he knew he'd never

truly get past.

‘Are you all right, Dad?’ Maeve, still toying with the paperweight, looked up at him.

Will forced another smile for his daughter. ‘I’m all right, sweetheart. But I’ve got some work to do. Can you give me an hour or so?’

‘Sure,’ Maeve replied. ‘I’ll sort some lunch out for us in a bit.’ She paused. ‘I went to see Polly today to apologise. She seemed to take it OK.’

‘I’m glad.’ Will was temporarily roused from his introspection at the thought of Polly. ‘Er... how was she?’

Maeve grinned at him. ‘She was fine, Dad. Why? You interested?’

Will’s grin became less of an effort. ‘Mind your own, young lady. It was just a polite enquiry.’

‘Sure.’ Maeve raised an eyebrow. ‘Anyway, I helped her to take some of her clothes over to the café and the florist, who are going to sell some for her while the shop’s being fixed.’

‘That’s great news.’ Will felt relieved for Polly. ‘I’m sure she’s pleased to have the support.’

‘Yeah,’ Maeve said. ‘Maybe Roseford isn’t so bad after all.’ She put the paperweight down. ‘And,’ she added mischievously as she headed towards the study door, ‘when she heard you were going to the Yuletide Ball, she said she might get a ticket, too. I think you’ve scored there, Dad!’

‘Out!’ Will growled playfully.

Maeve scuttled out of the door, closing it behind her. Will shook his head. He’d never imagined that his daughters would be trying to matchmake him with someone new, especially after the dark days they’d been through when the family had broken up, but somehow the thought of seeing Ben and Sam at the awards now seemed a little less daunting.

Bright and early the next day, Jed Lewis and his small team of builders arrived to tackle the mess that was Roseford Reloved. Polly found herself supplying tea, coffee and bacon sandwiches to them all, but she was happy to do so – after all, Jed had come in with a decent quote; had, when requested, spoken to the insurers and given them his expert opinions to ensure all of the work would be covered; and had begun work on time, with assurances that she'd be back up and running within the week. A bacon sandwich and a cup of coffee seemed a fair exchange for all his help.

Jed's team were polite and courteous, and Polly was able to continue with the day-to-day work of running the other aspects of her business relatively unhindered. She ventured out to her usual haunts to source more stock, which mostly involved visiting flea markets and charity shops in the surrounding areas, but was mindful that she wasn't shifting much, and wouldn't be until the shop had reopened. All the same, she felt relieved to report back to her grandfather when she phoned him after the first day's work, that it was all going as planned.

'I'm so pleased, Pol,' her grandfather said. 'I can head off on the cruise next week with a clear conscience that I'm not leaving you in the lurch.' His doctor had recently given him the all-clear and he'd wasted no time in booking another holiday.

Polly laughed. 'I'm a grown up, Grandpa. You don't need to worry about me.'

'I'll always worry about you,' her grandfather replied. 'Now your mother, God rest her, isn't around, who else do I have to worry about?' The

desolation in his voice broke through for a second. Polly knew he still felt the bereavement very deeply, and that she, as his only grandchild, wasn't just important to him for herself, but as a proxy for the daughter he'd lost ten years ago. It was why he took such an interest in her life and her business, and she was grateful for it, even if she felt the weight at times, especially when things went wrong.

'I appreciate the thoughts.' Polly smiled down the phone. 'But honestly, things are looking up. You can go on your cruise and have a wonderful time.'

'And you're sure you'll be all right on your own this Christmas?' Grandpa asked, not for the first time.

'Of course,' Polly replied. She was so relieved to get the repairs to the shop underway, she hadn't given a thought to spending Christmas alone. 'I'll even book lunch at the pub, if it makes you feel better to think I won't be by myself on the day.'

'You do that,' Grandpa said. 'And I'll think of you when Susan and I are raising a glass on Christmas Day. We should be in Barbados by then.'

Polly suppressed a pang of envy. She didn't begrudge her grandfather his happiness, after years of being a widower, but she did wish she had someone to share Christmas with; someone to cuddle up on the sofa with and watch the cheesy Christmas movies and the monarch's broadcast. Someone to kiss goodnight. Someone to share her life with. She shook her head. It was only because she'd seen a shot on Instagram of her ex, Jenna, and her new girlfriend. Even though she knew she and Jenna had done the right thing when they broke up, being alone still gave her pause for thought.

'We're knocking off for lunch now, Polly.' Jed's voice drifted from the shop floor. 'We won't be long.'

'OK, see you soon,' Polly called back. She wandered through, mentally creating pictures of where she'd put everything when it was restocked. She'd been giving some thought to moving things around, and it seemed as good a time as any to put those ideas into practice. It would be great to treat the shop as a clean slate, and to try to improve and rejig things where she could. Even though the ceiling falling in had been a terrible shock, she was beginning to see that in some ways it might have been for the best. The building had needed sorting out, and even though the event leading to the renovations had been dramatic, it had forced her to get the work done.

And, she thought, with a flush colouring her cheeks at the memory, it had led her to getting to know Will. She wondered what he was up to, and

whether he'd thought any more about the brief 'moment' they'd had when they'd had coffee. Probably not. Although she did feel slightly hopeful, since Maeve had mentioned the Yuletide Ball. Perhaps she wasn't the only one who'd felt a spark...

Polly jumped a mile as the door to the shop opened again.

'Sorry!' Jed strode back through. 'Forgot my phone. I didn't mean to startle you.'

Smiling, Polly shook her head. 'I was miles away.'

'Don't worry.' Jed's tone was reassuring as she glanced up at the hole in the ceiling. 'When we've finished, you won't even know it all happened. Trust me.'

He was so certain, and his smile was so confident as he spoke, that Polly immediately felt more optimistic that the shop would be back open soon, and, hopefully, better than ever.

'I appreciate you stepping in at such short notice, Jed,' Polly replied. 'When I'm back up and running, remind me to give you the friends and family discount code.'

Jed grinned. 'I'll do that. You seem to have a good eye for what suits people. I'd be intrigued to see what you'd suggest for me.' His eyes met hers, and Polly got the distinct impression he was flirting with her.

'I'm sure I could sort you something out,' she said, laughing nervously. 'Although I tend to focus more on women's clothes than men's.'

There was a brief pause between them before Jed reached for his phone, which he'd stashed on the shop's counter. 'See you in a bit, Polly.'

'See you.'

As Jed walked back out of the door, Polly found that she was still smiling. Jed might have the ability to charm the birds from the trees, and he was a bit of a ladies' man, but it was still nice to be noticed.

The next week passed in a blur of activity as Jed and his team repaired the roof and then moved inside to tackle the ceiling. Polly's sense of relief was building; it looked as though she would be open for the festive night on 6 December after all. Jed estimated that they'd be cleared up, and everything would be plastered in time, ready for some quick-drying paint. Since the ceiling was fresh plasterboard and skimmed, this should speed up the process. Polly would be free to move her stock back in and reopen the day before the event. It would be tight, but she was relieved.

Her chats with Jed had been getting more frequent, and she felt as though she'd made a friend during the time he'd been working in the shop. He was clearing up on the last day of work, ensuring that there were no snags, and that he and his team didn't leave anything lying around.

'I can't believe you've done all of this so quickly.' Polly walked around the clean, freshly painted, much warmer shop floor in wonder. 'It looks a thousand times better than it did before the accident, and I can't wait to get everything back in.'

Jed paused as he was folding up the last of the dust sheets. 'I could give you a hand if you like. Just say the word.' His eyes regarded her warmly, and Polly felt, again, that he was putting out signals. Even with hands splattered with plaster and his worn work jeans, he was very attractive. The old baseball cap with its worn-out logo added to the impression of a man who was used to physical work, and Polly felt more than just a passing flare of attraction towards him. He wasn't her usual type, that was for sure, but she'd got to know him a bit better this week and she felt flattered by the attention.

‘Thanks, Jed.’ Polly smiled. ‘I’ll see how it goes and I’ll let you know.’

‘You do that.’ His gaze lingered on her for a little longer. ‘So...’ he began, putting the sheet to one side, on top of his tool bag. ‘Are you going to the Yuletide Ball?’

Polly’s heart gave a little leap. She’d finally bought a ticket a couple of days ago from Roseford Hall and tucked it behind the clock on the mantelpiece. Lizzie had urged her to get one when she’d popped into Roseford Blooms to see how the sales of the rail of clothes she’d put in there had gone, and when Lizzie had informed her that she’d managed to sell more than half of what Polly had supplied, Polly felt she could splurge on a ticket. The fact that she kept thinking back to her conversation with Maeve, and the possibility that Will might be there, had nothing to do with that decision, she told herself firmly. It would just be a good night out.

All the same, she hesitated before she answered Jed. ‘Yes,’ she said eventually. ‘I am.’

Jed shuffled a little nervously on the spot. ‘Do you, er, would you like to go with me?’

Polly gave a broad smile. ‘That’s really sweet of you, Jed, but I’m probably only going to go for an hour or so. I wouldn’t want to cramp your style.’

Jed took it on the chin. ‘Well, if you change your mind, let me know. And you’ll let me buy you a drink on the night, at least?’

‘Definitely.’ It was Polly’s turn to fidget. ‘I’d, er, better get on with sorting things out to come back into this space that you’ve made so wonderful. I’ll see you soon?’

‘Sure.’ Jed smiled back. ‘I wouldn’t move anything back in here until after lunch tomorrow, though – let the dehumidifiers do their work a little longer. Make sure the paint’s dry.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’ Polly walked him to the door. ‘And thanks again, Jed. You’ve made this a far less painful experience than I thought it was going to be.’

‘Any time,’ Jed said as he left. ‘See you at the ball, if not before.’

‘See you.’ Polly closed the door, and sank back against it, suddenly feeling a bit lightheaded. Why had she declined Jed’s offer of a date to the ball? What had been holding her back? He was a good-looking, sweet man who, while he had a bit of a reputation with the ladies, had shown himself to be reliable and considerate. What had stopped her from saying yes to going

with him? She'd only recently been thinking about how much she missed being part of a relationship. Why hadn't she just taken the plunge?

The simple answer to most of it was that, despite how lovely he was, it just hadn't *felt* right. Polly's instincts were something she'd always relied on, and much as she'd liked getting to know Jed, there had been something holding her back. She wasn't the type to go out with someone just for the sake of it, and she didn't feel happy agreeing just to save a person's feelings. Jed was an attractive guy; he'd find another date without any problems.

Instinct had propelled her to take a risk and start Roseford Reloved, and instinct had guided her whole life. She was an excellent reader of people and situations, and although that sometimes made her cautious, she'd mostly been proved right over the years. Also, she thought as she walked back across the empty shop floor to her office and storeroom, if she'd said yes to Jed, and then met Will at the ball, she wouldn't feel so free to spend time with him. If he was even there, of course, and if he wanted to talk to her.

Cursing her ability to get side-tracked along rambling mental paths, she brought her mind back to the present. Jed's advice about not moving anything back into the shop until tomorrow afternoon was sound as far as the stock went, but she wanted to get the rails back in situ today.

Fortunately, the rails were lightweight, and it wasn't long until she'd arranged them back on the shop floor in the configuration she wanted. She'd get up early tomorrow and sort through the stock, ready to put it all back on show in the afternoon. As she settled down for an early dinner, she was amused to see a picture that her grandfather had sent through of himself standing in "Titanic" pose at the bow of the ship. Relieved that he was having a lovely time, Polly felt optimistic that things were, at last, starting to get back to normal.

As was his wont, Will awoke early. He wasn't the best sleeper, never had been, and he'd worked out that the best way to shake off the tiredness was just to get straight up and do some exercise. In the old days, when he'd been a top midfielder at a selection of Premier League football clubs, the training regime had been ingrained; missing sessions meant risking poor performance, and the repercussions of that, being dropped for matches, poor press coverage and, in the longer term, transfers to other, less successful clubs, had kept him sharp.

Of course, these days the necessity to stay at peak fitness had waned. He wasn't the one covering huge distances up and down the pitch twice a week and training most days. But it had been important to maintain his level of fitness as a coach; football is as footballing does. He'd have felt like a hypocrite if he hadn't kept himself in decent condition. His knees weren't all they used to be, and the aches and pains were creeping up on him as he aged, but he still liked to start the day with at least half an hour of something, be that cardio or strength training.

When he and Sam had commissioned the building of Parson's Grange, Will was clear that it needed space for a gym, and, once the planning had been passed, a swimming pool had also been built. The pool felt like the ultimate indulgence now that Sam wasn't around, but Will had taken to swimming every morning, to shake off the mental cobwebs. Diving into the pleasantly heated depths after a night of insomnia, he felt himself reviving.

As he plunged through the water, focussing on his breathing and the regular, measured crawl he'd perfected as a teenager, he began to turn things

over in his mind. He'd have to decide about the coaching job at City. It was a step down, there was no getting away from it, but it would still present challenges. If he took it, it would certainly fill his days. And anything that did that was worth serious consideration. He didn't do well with stagnation; he needed the constant fix of hard work to keep him on an even keel.

But there was something else that was playing on his mind. He'd had an approach from a literary agent recently, whom he'd met at an event before he'd left his previous role. They'd asked him if he'd considered a memoir. At the time, he'd laughed off the suggestion; memoirs were for people much older than him, surely, who actually had things to say, knowledge to impart? What could he, a former player and coach, possibly have to say that anyone would want to read?

The more he'd thought about it, though, the more the ideas had taken root. A lot had happened in the past few years, and perhaps writing about it was the way to make sense of it. Perhaps it was time to take a step back, to process it all, and maybe, even, to put his side of the story out there? It was a tempting thought, and it came back to him now as he tracked through the water. He'd always loved writing and had kept diaries and journals throughout his time as a player and in management. Perhaps now was the time to reclaim them from the boxes they'd been shoved in and see if there was anything worth shaping into a memoir.

Forty lengths completed, and heart beat raised satisfactorily, Will pulled himself up out of the pool. Glancing down, he conceded that he wasn't in bad nick for his age. He could go back into coaching and management without too much effort. The physical demands weren't beyond him. But was that what he really wanted? Was it time to take stock, to reflect, and to go in a different direction? Drying off, he threw on a white towelling robe and headed off to the shower.

After a day rattling around the house, Will was no closer to an answer. The clock was ticking on the City job, and he'd have to let them know one way or the other. He was just about to pour a glass of red and make a start on dinner for himself and the girls and mull it over some more. Neither had been much in evidence today, but he'd sent them a WhatsApp ten minutes ago to ask them to come down and set the table.

'Don't worry about dinner for me just yet, Dad.' Hattie entered the kitchen. 'There's some festive night thing going on in the village tonight. Thought I'd head on down there and check it out.'

Will jerked an eyebrow at her in surprise, then swiftly lowered it. He hadn't expected Hattie to want to venture out into the village tonight, after everything she'd done to make her dislike of the place so plain since they'd moved in. But not wanting to discourage or antagonise her, he merely replied, 'OK, sounds good. Shall we make a night of it and go together?'

Hattie gave him a withering look. 'I'm nineteen, not nine, Dad. Anyway, I'm meeting someone.' She blushed.

Will tried not to go into protective-Dad mode. 'Oh yeah? Who?'

Hattie paused. 'One of the guys from Jed's team. You probably won't remember him. He was working as a construction apprentice. He texted me and asked me if I fancied a drink.'

Will cast his mind back to the late days of the house build and recalled that there were a couple of younger guys working for Jed. All of the team had been polite and friendly, so he tried to curb his fatherly internal monologue that urged him to give Hattie the standard warnings about being safe, careful and not taking any nonsense. Instead, feeling pleased that she'd actually told him about her plans, he simply smiled. 'Well, have a good time. I might pop down later myself and take a look. Maybe Maeve'll come and keep her old dad company.'

Hattie grinned. 'I'm sure she will.' She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. 'Don't wait up.' Grabbing her coat and scarf from where she'd slung it over one of the kitchen stools, she sailed out of the kitchen, and a few seconds later, Will heard the front door slam behind her.

Putting the bottle of wine back on the rack, Will decided that he might as well go out as well. He could always grab something from the village if he got peckish, and have a drink or two in the pub. It might give him the opportunity to check out who Hattie was meeting, too, although she'd give him an earful if she suspected he was spying on her.

'Maeve?' he called as he passed her bedroom with its half-open door. 'I'm heading out to this festive night thing in the village. Did you fancy coming with me?'

'Yeah, all right,' Maeve said sleepily.

'We'll leave in about ten minutes,' Will replied. Maeve could snooze for England, he thought fondly. She still hadn't quite got past that tendency to curl up in bed and sleep, no matter what time of day it was. If only he still had the ability, he thought ruefully. Since Sam had left, his insomnia had got far worse, and the thing he most needed was a decent night's rest. Maybe

coming to some conclusions about his future would help to bring him some.

Taking a deep breath, Polly unlocked the front door of the shop and prepared to welcome customers for the annual Roseford Christmas Countdown Night. A tradition that had been going for nearly a decade now, this was Roseford's festive late-night shopping evening, and attracted visitors from all around the surrounding area who wanted to take advantage of the later opening hours of Roseford's quirky independent shops to buy presents that were as unique and original as the village itself. Roseford Reloved had profited from this evening last year, and now that the shop was back up and running, Polly hoped her takings would see a boost that would put her shop back on an even keel for a little while, at least.

The shop now looked as good, no, better, Polly thought with pride, than it ever had before, with the added benefit that the roof was now future-proofed, no matter what the West Country weather decided to throw at it. Working late the previous night, Polly had moved her stock back in, and was now hoping that she'd make some decent sales. The steady stream of cars pulling into Roseford Hall's car park, which had been opened up for the night by the British Heritage Fund, suggested that tonight was going to be the busiest one yet. Polly crossed fingers, toes and everything she could think of that this would be the case.

A little while later, and business was brisk. Roseford Reloved had plenty of early footfall, and Polly had managed to convert a fair few of them into sales. Along with locals, many customers from further afield had made the trip, and Polly began to feel some of the magic that a good day's trade could impart. That, combined with the carol singing outside the pub, which had just

started, and the evocative scent of pine from the small Norway spruce that she'd placed in one of the corners of the shop made her feel deliciously Christmassy.

That feeling was compounded a few minutes later when Lizzie came bustling into the store.

'I forgot to give you this earlier,' she said without preamble. 'We've had a bumper delivery from one of our suppliers, Saint's Farm, and I thought you'd like some for your doorway.' Lizzie was brandishing a generous bunch of mistletoe, replete with pale green and white berries. 'I still can't get over how prevalent this stuff is in the West Country. In the south east, people would pay twenty-five quid for a bunch half the size!' She regarded Polly with a look of amused speculation. 'I'm sure you can find somewhere, er, *convenient* to put it, where it might be used for its intended purpose!'

Polly laughed. 'I'm not sure we should be encouraging uninvited kissing these days!'

'Who says it has to be uninvited? Ebenezer Scrooge!' Lizzie, who tended to speak in exclamations when she was excited, disregarded Polly's objections. 'No one's holding a gun to anyone's head. It's just a bit of fun.' Spotting an old nail sticking out of one of the beams that ran across the ceiling about a foot clear of the entrance to Roseford Reloved, she hooked the mistletoe over it. 'Perfect. And unmissable, for those who choose to look.'

Shaking her head, Polly knew better than to argue with her friend. Lizzie had quite the strident personality when she got an idea into her head.

'Perfect timing.' Lizzie's partner Simon ducked his head under the doorframe of Roseford Reloved and looked up at the mistletoe approvingly. 'Good to see you've found a spot for it.' Glancing at Polly slightly nervously, he caught hold of Lizzie before she could move away and kissed her. 'Shouldn't you be over at Roseford Blooms?' he asked, as he let her go.

'I'm back off there now,' Lizzie replied. 'Just making sure Polly had some of this in place for her more romantic customers!'

Simon laughed. 'I'm not sure that includes us, these days, does it?'

'I live in hope, my lord!'

Polly couldn't help but smile at Lizzie's teasing retort to Simon. For years, it had seemed as though he would never find anyone who was prepared to take him, Roseford Hall and the British Heritage Fund on long term, but when Lizzie had come into his life, they'd both fallen hard. And while Lizzie was still content to live by herself, having not succumbed to the charms of

living in a stately home, they were as well matched a couple as Polly had ever seen. She couldn't help envying them that.

'Hope it all goes well tonight, Polly,' Simon said as he and Lizzie headed for the door. 'The shop looks great, even better than before.'

'Thanks,' Polly replied. 'I didn't think it would be ready in time, but Jed Lewis and his team worked wonders.'

'Good guy, Jed,' Simon said. 'The BHF had him doing some work at the hall recently.'

'He is,' Polly replied. 'Will Sutherland put me onto him – he did most of the build for Parson's Grange, too.'

Simon rolled his eyes. 'That excrescence? How it got past the planners I'll never know. I've seen better looking supermarkets than that place.'

'You'll have to excuse Simon,' Lizzie cut in before Simon could get started on what was clearly a pet subject of his. 'Anything around here that's not at least four hundred years old brings him out in hives.'

'Present company excepted!' Simon teased. 'And before you say it, I know I'm closer to that age than you are!'

Polly watched with amusement as, still bantering good-naturedly, they left the shop. Remembering that she had some festive themed canapés to put out, she hurried back to her kitchen to retrieve them. She placed them on a table to the left of the shop window, ready to tempt her customers and, within minutes, Maeve Sutherland came barrelling through the door.

'Hey,' Polly called as she spotted the girl. 'How are you?'

'Good, thanks.' Maeve smiled back at her.

'Well, it's lovely to see you. How's your sister?'

'Oh, you know Hattie,' she said noncommittally.

'And, er, how's your dad?'

Maeve gave her a knowing look. 'He's fine. He's coming down later. We were just about to leave when he had to take a call from some club chairman in Yeovil, so he said he'd meet me in the pub when he'd finished.' She paused mischievously. 'I'll tell him you said hi.'

Polly felt her face flushing. 'Thanks,' she said, busying herself with the stack of carrier bags and tissue paper on the counter.

'So have you decided if you're going to the Yuletide Ball?' Maeve called over from where she was eagerly browsing the newly installed clothes.

'I have.' Polly looked up briefly and grinned at the girl.

'So?' Maeve repeated, a trace of impatience in her voice.

Polly's grin grew wider. 'I'll be there.'

'Great! I'll let Dad know.'

Polly flushed. 'No need to do that.'

Maeve threw her a 'pull the other one' look, smirked and went back to looking at the rail. After browsing a short time, Polly saw her pull out a cheery red jumper and hold it up against herself.

'The colour really suits you,' Polly called. 'And there's a 10 per cent Christmas Countdown Night discount if you buy it tonight.'

'Sold!' Maeve exclaimed. She pulled out her phone and snapped a quick shot of the jumper. 'I'll put it up on my Insta. You sell stuff online, too, don't you?'

'I do,' Polly confirmed. 'Thanks.' She found herself liking Maeve more and more. The girl was a real sweetheart.

Polly carefully wrapped up the jumper in her trademark jungle-print tissue paper, and then tucked it into a carrier bag. 'There you go.'

'Thanks.' Maeve smiled.

As the girl turned to leave, the shop door opened and Will walked in. He was wrapped up against the cold in his England branded Helly Hanson blue anorak, with a dark blue scarf coiled around his neck. He had to duck to get through the door and paused when he saw Maeve.

'You got down here OK, then?' he asked her.

Polly clocked Maeve's eyeroll. 'Yeah, Dad, of course. And I've bought something from Polly, too.' She waved the bag in his direction. 'I'm hungry though. I might go and see if I can get some food.' The enticing scents of freshly fried doughnuts, cinnamon spiced mulled wine and other festive goodies drifted through the open door of Roseford Reloved.

'Sounds good.' Will didn't move though and as Polly, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious, started to rearrange the garments on the rail nearest the till, it looked to her as though he was in no hurry to leave the shop.

'How are you finding your first Christmas Countdown Night?' Polly asked, when it was clear Will was sticking around.

Will smiled, and Polly's knees buckled just a tiny bit. The way the crow's feet around his hazel eyes softened that rather austere expression was nothing short of gorgeous. She tried to get a grip as he replied.

'It's lovely,' Will replied. 'Lot of people around though. Does it usually get this busy?'

'It's become a bit of an institution over the past few years,' Polly said.

‘We get a lot of outsiders, which is good for sales, but the locals like it too. It’s a chance to catch up with people you might not have seen for a while, and the Treloar Arms is usually heaving by the end of the night, too.’

‘I was going to pop in for a drink later,’ Will said. He looked on the verge of adding something, but Maeve interrupted him.

‘Make sure Hattie doesn’t see you,’ she teased. ‘She’s meeting some guy for a drink, and she’ll be well annoyed if she thinks you’ve gone in there spying on her.’

‘I’ll keep my head down,’ Will promised.

Chance’ll be a fine thing, Polly thought. Even if people didn’t recognise Will straight off the bat, the England FA coat was a bit of a giveaway.

Polly, by now, had drifted over to where Maeve and Will were standing. Maeve shot her a glance.

‘So will you be going out for a drink later?’ the girl said, raising both eyebrows speculatively.

Polly smiled briefly. ‘I’m not sure yet,’ she said. ‘It depends how busy things get in here. I’m still playing catch-up after the repair work.’ She laughed as she saw Will glancing up at the ceiling directly above his head. ‘It’s all right. Jed’s assured me it’s completely watertight and secure now!’

‘Glad to hear it!’ Polly saw Will’s expression change as he realised what was also right above his head. The mistletoe that Lizzie had hung up earlier dangled tantalisingly. Maeve, with a grin, saw it, too.

‘Go on,’ Maeve teased. ‘It’d be rude not to. You’re standing right underneath it.’

Will’s discomfited look sent a rush of embarrassment through Polly. The last thing she wanted was to put him in a tricky position, and it didn’t come trickier than this – being pressured to kiss someone under the mistletoe by your teenage daughter must rank up there as a top humiliation.

‘No, honestly, don’t be daft, Maeve.’ Polly laughed nervously. ‘It’s a stupid tradition, and I’m sure in these days of #MeToo, one that should be banned altogether.’

Maeve gave her the side eye. ‘I don’t think you really believe that, or you wouldn’t still be standing there. Go *on!*’

Will turned to Polly. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I don’t know where she gets it from.’ His eyes carried an expression of warmth and amusement, but he made to move away.

‘No worries,’ Polly replied. ‘I’d, er, better get back behind the counter

and serve, anyway.'

'Spoilsports!' Maeve called. 'What's up, Dad? Too chicken?'

Polly saw Will's back stiffen, and she was suddenly reminded of Marty McFly in *Back to the Future*, which was one of her grandfather's favourite films. It was basically the law that, if it was on television, it had to be watched. Marty could never stand being called chicken, and, it seemed, neither could Will.

Will turned back to her, and Polly saw the look in his eyes change to something a little more tender, more hopeful. 'Say no if you'd rather not,' he said softly, 'but the easiest way to shut her up is to do what she wants.'

'I admire your parenting skills!' Polly quipped, but her heart started beating nineteen to the dozen. 'For the sake of father-daughter harmony, I'm prepared to take one for the team.'

'Then may I kiss you?' Will asked.

Polly looked up and met his gaze. A heartbeat passed. 'You may,' she said softly.

Will leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek. The warmth of his lips on her face made her colour rise a fraction more.

'No fair, Dad!' Maeve interjected shrilly. 'That wasn't a kiss. Do it properly!'

Will huffed out a breath that spoke tacitly of his nervousness. His eyes met Polly's again. 'Well,' he said quietly, 'it is Christmas. Would you mind?'

Polly shook her head. 'Not at all. In the spirit of Christmas, of course.' She wanted to keep her eyes open as Will's lips moved towards hers, but she couldn't help it. As his beautiful mouth touched hers, her eyes closed. His lips were so gentle, so tentative, that she wasn't even sure, in those first few seconds, that he had kissed her. Then, the pressure increased, and she felt the texture of his beard against her face, and it all became real. This was the kind of kiss she'd read about, and it was everything she could have imagined it would be. The warmth, the slight undercurrent of nervousness, made her senses reel and she desperately wanted to prolong it. The kiss, while chaste enough to be performed in front of Will's teenage daughter, carried with it an element of promise, a sense of wanting more, that Polly could feel, and yearned for. They stayed there for the exciting space of several heartbeats, and Polly felt as though she could have lingered under the mistletoe all night.

'Whoo!' Maeve's voice broke through the bubble of intimacy. 'That's more like it, Dad.'

Polly and Will sprang back from each other, and the spell was broken.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Polly said, a little shakily.

‘Merry Christmas,’ Will replied, his eyes wide and looking as though they wanted to communicate more than words ever could.

‘So,’ Polly said quickly, ‘maybe I’ll see you in the pub later?’

‘I hope so,’ Will replied. He shook his head slightly and gave a nervous laugh. ‘Thank you for, er, indulging Maeve.’

Polly laughed, too. ‘My pleasure.’

They turned back to the street, where Maeve was already outside and impatient to browse the stalls that had been set up in the road.

‘Come on,’ Will said more briskly. ‘I think you’ve caused enough trouble for one night, young lady. Let’s get some food and maybe a drink or two.’

Maeve grinned. ‘OK, Dad.’ She linked arms with Will, and Polly watched them heading off into the night. As they turned the corner, she brought a slightly shaky hand to her lips. She could still feel where Will had kissed them. It astonished her just how much she’d wanted that kiss to last longer.

After a busy evening's trade, Polly flipped the sign on the shop window to 'Closed' and let out a long breath. It had been wonderful to see so many people in the shop, and she had been flattered and charmed that many of the locals had commented on how nice it was to see the place back open. She'd made a lot of sales and put a fair few pieces of stock aside that people had reserved. She generally offered a twenty-four-hour grace period for people who might want to consider their purchases a little longer before buying, and this had worked surprisingly well in terms of returning trade. Not only was Roseford Reloved a success because increasingly more and more people wanted to explore the concept of sustainable fashion, but also, in times where money was tight, an option to 'cool off' about a purchase had proved popular.

But she'd be lying to herself if she said that decent sales were the only thing making her smile tonight. Her mind kept drifting back to being under the mistletoe with Will. The moment had definitely felt like something. Was she the only one who'd enjoyed it? Judging by the look in Will's eyes when they'd finished the kiss, she didn't think so. But perhaps it was just the scent of the cinnamon and pine, and the Christmas cheer in the air that had pushed them into the fleeting euphoria of a delicious kiss. Perhaps, if she decided to meet him in the pub later, it would be a let-down... Awkward. Embarrassing. Those were all emotions she'd felt before in connection to Will Sutherland. Did she really want to risk it again?

'Hey, Polly!' A voice broke into her reverie just as she was about to lock the door. Glancing up, she saw Lizzie and Simon, arm in arm, walking up the road towards the pub. 'Are you coming over to toast the success of the festive

night?’

Polly smiled. Why not? If she sat with Simon and Lizzie, she wouldn't feel quite so stupid if she'd misread the situation with Will. 'Sure,' she said. 'I'll see you over there. Get me a pint of Carter's Cider in.'

'Will do.' Lizzie huddled closer to Simon as they hurried past and then disappeared through the doors of the Treloar Arms.

A few minutes later, after she'd shrugged into her coat, Polly locked up and headed the same way.

As she had expected, the Treloar Arms was buzzing with locals and incomers alike, all imbued with Christmas cheer. This evening really did bring out the best in the village. The pub itself looked particularly festive, with sprigs of newly cut holly bedecking the picture rails and fronds of evergreen dotted everywhere. If you took the modern clothing out of the equation, not much would have changed in the pub for a couple of hundred years.

Lizzie and Simon were sitting at a table off to the side of the roaring fire, and had managed to get the drinks in. They beckoned her over, and she plonked herself down on the banquette seat gratefully. She'd been on her feet all evening, and it felt like the comfiest thing in the world.

'Thanks,' she said as Simon pushed her pint of cider towards her. 'I need this.'

'Good night?' Lizzie asked, taking a sip of her own drink.

Polly nodded. 'Yes, thank goodness.' She relaxed against the back of the banquette. 'Looks like I might live to fight another day.'

Lizzie grinned at her, and then her eyes widened as they roamed the bar area. 'Looks like our Mr Sutherland decided to come out tonight as well.' She gave Polly a sidelong look. 'Why don't you go and say hello?'

'Can I finish my drink first?' Polly said lightly. She got the distinct impression that Lizzie, much like Maeve, had a nose for intrigue, and that she and Will were definitely on Lizzie's radar.

'I'll allow that,' Lizzie replied, shooting Polly a knowing look. Then, she nearly choked on her own pint. 'Don't look now, Pol, but he's coming this way.'

'You're kidding.' Polly took another gulp of her drink for Dutch courage.

'Nope.' Lizzie murmured. 'Sexy ex-football manager incoming. Put your game face on.'

Before Polly could think of a suitably withering response, she saw Will

approaching their table.

‘Hi,’ Will said when he got there. ‘I, er, saw you come in. Wondered if I could buy you a drink, but it looks like I’m too late for this round.’

Polly shuffled a bit so she could see him. ‘Er, thank you, but I’m fine at the moment.’

‘We should really be buying you a drink,’ Lizzie said quickly. ‘As a kind of welcome to Roseford.’ She glanced at Simon. ‘Why don’t you sit down, and Simon and I will get them in.’

‘Will we?’ Simon asked. Polly was amused when she saw him flinch slightly. Lizzie had obviously given him a swift kick under the table. ‘I mean, yes, of course we will.’ Simon stood up. ‘What’ll it be?’

‘A pint of Carter’s Cider, please,’ Will replied. ‘And thank you. That’s very kind.’

‘It’s the least we can do. Why don’t you take a seat?’ Lizzie beamed at him, and then dragged Simon briskly away to the bar. Polly was tickled by the look of utter bemusement on the current Lord Treloar’s face as she did so.

Will thanked them both as they passed and then slid down onto the banquette next to Polly.

‘That was nice of them,’ Will said. ‘Does the lord of the manor offer to buy every new resident of his village a drink, or am I being given special treatment?’

Polly laughed. ‘I have no idea. But if I were you, I’d stay off the subject of your planning applications for Parson’s Grange, or you might end up wearing that pint of cider instead of drinking it.’

‘Duly noted,’ Will replied wryly.

‘Where’s Maeve?’ Polly asked.

‘Gone home with Hattie, whose date had to get a lift with a friend,’ Will replied. ‘For once they seemed to be getting on all right, so they’re off to watch some Christmas movie or other. I figured I’d hang around a bit longer, um, just in case... I mean, in case you, er, decided to come over for a drink.’ He looked briefly down at the table. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘I’ve never been very good at this.’

‘You’re doing fine,’ Polly said softly. She gave him a little nudge on the bench. ‘I mean, you kiss pretty well, especially under that kind of pressure to perform!’

Will laughed nervously. ‘I’m sorry about that. Maeve’s incorrigible. I hope I didn’t make you feel uncomfortable.’

‘Did I seem uncomfortable?’ Polly replied. She looked him straight in the eye as he raised his from the table top. They held each other’s gaze for a heartbeat, and Polly’s breath hitched in her throat at the memory of just how unexpected and lovely that first, gentle kiss under the mistletoe had been. She knew she wanted to try it again, now that Maeve wasn’t watching, and they were alone in their small bubble inside the busy pub.

‘Here you go!’ Lizzie’s voice abruptly burst that bubble as she set two glasses of golden cider down on the table. ‘Drink up, both of you. It’s going to be even colder out there when you walk home.’ She slid in on the other side of Polly, and in another couple of minutes Simon had returned with their own drinks.

Polly felt the loss of intimacy, and she was sure she didn’t imagine Will shifting slightly away from her on the bench. She adored Lizzie, but sometimes her timing was awful. Draining her previous drink, she reached for the new one, and took a sip.

‘So how are you settling in?’ Simon asked Will as he set his own drink back on the table after a gulp.

‘Pretty well, thanks. Roseford is a bit of a culture shock, after living in London for so many years, but we’re all getting used to it.’

‘Glad to hear it. It took long enough for the house to be finished.’

‘Here we go,’ Lizzie muttered in an undertone to Polly. ‘That took about half a second longer than I thought it would.’

Will, however, obviously wasn’t going to be led. ‘It’s all done, now, though. And we’re happy to be here at last.’

Simon looked at Will as if he was going to say something else, but at the last second before it could have got uncomfortable, he cracked a smile. ‘Well, whatever my misgivings were about the building work on your place, I’m glad it’s turned out how you wanted it. Welcome to Roseford.’

‘Thank you, Lord Treloar,’ Will said, a trace of ironic mischief in his voice.

‘Oh, call me Simon,’ Simon replied. ‘Everybody does.’

‘Or you could just call him a throwback fuddy duddy who’s allergic to change!’ Lizzie interjected. ‘Everyone calls him that, too.’

‘Thank you, my sweet,’ Simon said good humouredly. ‘It’s so nice to be appreciated.’

Lizzie blew him a kiss. ‘You know I love you for it.’

As their good-natured banter batted back and forth across the pub table,

Polly felt herself relaxing. Simon and Lizzie were both a little eccentric, but they'd welcomed Will into their company easily and from the way Will was now laughing and joking with them both, he appreciated that.

An hour later, they were all still laughing, had sunk another drink each and were well on the way to being friends.

'So, I said to him, for goodness' sake, will you just clip their bloody wings and then they won't end up denuding every vegetable patch from here to Taunton. Not to mention the stuff they had out of the local horticultural society's allotments. Eventually, Simon agreed, but you should have seen him trying to grab hold of Ernie. He's the bigger of the two peacocks and wasn't having any of it!' Lizzie couldn't stop giggling. 'I had to accept a lot of bribery to stop *that* from ending up on the Roseford Blooms Instagram feed!'

Polly felt weak with laughter. 'And did it work?'

Lizzie nodded. 'Eventually. Poor Ernie... he scarpered every time he saw Simon coming for about a month afterwards, but at least the locals aren't kicking off about roaming peacocks any more.'

'I've dealt with a few peacocks in my time,' Will replied, grinning. 'But the kind where it's not so easy to clip their wings.'

'I bet you could tell a few stories,' Lizzie replied.

Will paused, and Polly observed the mischievous look in his eyes again. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'But probably best not around a pub table.' He glanced down at his pint glass, before lifting and draining it. 'And on that note, I'd better get going or the girls will be wondering where I am.'

'I'd better get off, too,' Polly replied.

'Can I, er, walk you back?' Will asked.

Polly grinned and stood up. 'Well, if you're heading that way...'

Bidding Simon and Lizzie goodnight in the pub doorway, Polly wrapped her scarf around her neck a little more tightly. 'Yikes,' she yelped as the cold air hit her flushed face, 'it's even colder out here than I thought.'

'That'll be the cider making you warm,' Will said lightly. 'I don't tend to drink it much, but when in the West Country...'

Polly giggled. 'Exactly.'

They began the short walk back to Roseford Reloved. Polly felt relaxed from the booze. She glanced up at the clear, starry sky above, and shivered again.

'Are you still cold?' Will asked.

Polly nodded. 'I'll be fine. It's not far.'

They began a leisurely walk, and their shoulders brushed as they navigated the narrow pavement. Polly couldn't help thinking back to the kiss under the mistletoe, and the easy way the conversation had flowed around the pub table. She'd had a great evening, and she didn't want it to end quite yet.

'Er, would you mind walking me round the back of the building to the door of my flat, rather than the shop?' Polly asked as Roseford Reloved came into view. 'The lock on the shop door can get a bit fiddly in the cold.'

Will smiled. 'Sure.' He didn't seem to want to leave just yet, either.

They fell in step again and navigated their way around the back of the row of buildings that made up the terraced main street of Roseford. Walking along the smaller street, and down the little path to the door of her home, Polly felt as though it was now or never. She paused at the door that led into her living space. Then, seeing what was attached to it, she burst out laughing.

'Lizzie Warner is incorrigible!'

There, wrapped firmly around her cast iron door knocker, was another generous bunch of mistletoe.

Turning back to Will, who was grinning broadly in the moonlight, she shook her head. 'She can't help sticking her oar in. She said she'd got a load of it from Saint's Farm.'

'Well,' Will said quietly, 'it would be a shame to waste the opportunity, don't you think?' He paused, and Polly immediately knew he was weighing up whether or not he'd said the right thing.

Polly drew closer until she was gazing up at him, his face slightly haloed in the bright moonlight. His expression was an adorable combination of desire and uncertainty, and she couldn't resist a smile.

'I completely agree,' she said, and very gently, she brought a rather chilly hand up to rest on his cheek. Guiding his mouth to hers, she drew in a sharp breath as their lips touched again, parted, and the kiss immediately became deeper, firmer, than the one they'd shared in the shop earlier that evening. This time, there was no teenage daughter, and no embarrassment. Their lips moved together, and Polly stepped closer to Will as he slid his arms around her, pulling her against him until they were pressed against one another. It was only when she felt as though she was going to need to draw more of a breath that she moved slightly away.

'Wow,' she whispered. 'Merry Christmas to you, too.'

Will smiled. 'Can I see you again?'

‘I think that’s a great idea,’ Polly replied. ‘Thank you for walking me home.’

‘Any time.’

A gentle, loaded pause drifted between them. ‘So, this Yuletide Ball?’ Will asked. ‘Shall we, er, meet there?’

Polly laughed. ‘You really *are* out of practise, aren’t you? There’s a week to go before that happens.’

‘So, what would you suggest?’ Will asked. ‘Would you, er, like to come over? I can cook some dinner. The girls are heading off to their mother’s for a couple of days tomorrow...’ He trailed off. ‘Unless you’d rather meet somewhere more public, of course?’

Polly smiled. ‘I’d like to come over. I’m intrigued to see what your new house looks like. Tomorrow, or the next day?’

‘Tomorrow night? About seven thirty?’

‘Sounds great.’ She smiled. ‘Thank you. I had a lovely night. And I’m looking forward to tomorrow.’

‘Me too.’ The look of relief on Will’s face made Polly’s heart warm. He was an attractive combination of nerves and confidence, and she couldn’t wait to get to know him a little better. ‘Goodnight, Will.’

‘Goodnight, Polly.’

As Polly let herself into the house, there was no stopping the broad grin that was spreading over her face. Thank goodness for Lizzie and her glut of mistletoe...

The next evening, Polly took more care than usual with her appearance. She slipped on one of her favourite outfits, a Prussian blue knee-length tunic dress, and, remembering with a smile the conversation about peacocks from the night before, teamed it with a peacock brooch and a green coat, and her favourite cream-coloured scarf. Although she was going to drive the short distance to Will's house, she also put on some sensible, black, flat heeled boots. The night was already getting cold, and although snow was rare in the West Country, it had been forecast for the early hours of tomorrow morning. If she ended up leaving Will's place late, she didn't want to go arse over tit on ice.

The drive only took a few minutes, and once she'd been buzzed through the security gates, she took the long, freshly tarmacked stretch up to Parson's Grange carefully. The pristine lawns on either side of the driveway sparkled with fast settling frost, and the tiny chestnut saplings that lined the route looked hypothermic in their little plastic cages. Everything looked brand new, perfect and distinctly different to the rest of historic Roseford. Polly's interest was kindled to see the rest of the place. If nothing else happened between her and Will, at least she could say she'd had a good look at the new house.

Parking carefully on the wide, circular sweep of driveway that fronted the ultra-modern residence, she checked her appearance one last time in the driver's mirror before hurrying to the front door. Before she could press the video doorbell, it opened and Will was standing there, backlit by the warm white light from the hallway.

'Hi,' Polly breathed, caught off guard by just how attractive he looked.

Dressed casually in indigo washed, slim-cut jeans and a cream-coloured polo shirt that revealed toned biceps and forearms, she caught a breath of expensive, spiced cologne as he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. As he made contact, she shivered, and not just from the cold.

‘Come in,’ Will said, gesturing through to the hallway. ‘It’s starting to feel arctic out there.’

‘Snow’s forecast for later,’ Polly replied. She saw Will’s socked feet and swiftly unzipped her long boots, putting them on a space on the shoe stand in the hall. Will carefully helped her out of her coat and hung it on the rack, swiftly followed by her scarf.

‘I might be walking home if it gets too bad.’

‘I can run you back if you like,’ Will said. ‘You can always pick your car up in the morning.’

This conversation felt like a formal dance, setting out rules that should be followed but may well have been broken by the end of the night, Polly thought. Although she and Will hadn’t known one another very long, her emotions had been infused with a kind of sweet recklessness since that kiss on the doorstep the previous evening. Would she really be going home tonight?

Polly tried to shush those thoughts; after all, she still barely knew Will. They’d had a couple of good conversations, but there was still a way to go. She sensed that Will wasn’t the impulsive kind.

As they were walking down a long hallway to the kitchen at the back of the house, Polly took in the generously proportioned rooms that led from the hall: a huge living room; a room with its door ajar that, when Polly glanced through, seemed to be Will’s study; a bathroom, she presumed; a couple more reception rooms and finally, a kitchen that stretched the width of the house. The back wall of the kitchen was all glass, allowing what would, in daylight, be a spectacular view of the grounds of Parson’s Grange. In the darkness, but with a sky that was emitting an odd light, presaging snow, Polly could still make out the outlines of a summer house, and the newly landscaped lawn and patio.

‘Would you like a drink?’ Will asked, breaking into her reverie.

Polly smiled. ‘That would be great, thanks. Have you got something soft as I’m driving?’

‘Sure. I’ve got some sparkling Kombucha if that suits?’

‘I’ve not tried it before, but go on, hit me up,’ Polly laughed nervously.

Will grinned back and popped the cork on a bottle from the fridge. Pouring the drink into two champagne flutes, he passed one to Polly. She felt as fizzy as the contents of the glass as their fingers brushed. Wishing she hadn't driven, but unwilling to risk more than a small glass of alcohol because she had, she took a sip.

'That's lovely,' she said in slight surprise. 'Pretty close to the real thing, I'd say.'

Will nodded. 'It's not bad, is it? I've got some red wine to go with dinner, if you're happy to have a glass. If not, there's plenty of this.'

'Thank you,' Polly replied. 'I'm not a huge drinker, but a small glass of red would be nice.'

The small talk was getting a little awkward. Polly took a deep breath. She put her glass down on the table that Will had already laid for them.

'Look,' she said quickly, before she could change her mind. 'In case you were wondering, I'm not in the habit of kissing men on my doorstep or accepting invitations back to their houses on an official first date. But kissing you last night was... wonderful. And I don't know about you, but I'm really, really nervous about being here, and I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to say.' She gave a flustered giggle.

Will's face relaxed into a broad smile, and he gave a soft, rumbling laugh that made Polly's heart beat even faster.

'I am so glad you said that!' he answered. 'I've been pacing the floors all day, worrying about what to say to you, what I should cook, what I should wear... I'm not exactly well practised in this game, either.'

At this admission, Polly felt herself starting to relax. 'Well then,' she said, taking a step closer to Will. 'That makes two of us. I haven't been on a date since my last relationship ended, so I'm a bit rusty, too.'

'Compared to me, you're a pro! I haven't been on a date since I was married, and I'm not sure any of those really count.' He wrinkled his brow. 'So that would make it twenty-two years since my last one.'

It was Polly's turn to laugh. 'Let's just say we're both feeling our way.' She picked up her glass and took another sip. 'So, Will Sutherland, what would you like to talk about?'

Just as Will was about to open his mouth to reply, Polly saw his eyes tracking to the kitchen windows. 'Wow. Looks like the snow's coming in a little earlier than forecast.'

Polly turned to see that Will was right. In the time it had taken them to get

their drinks, heavy flakes had begun to drift from the sky and were already coating the patio and the vast sweep of lawn. She immediately thought about how she was going to get home.

Will must have seen her expression change, as he touched her shoulder briefly.

‘If you want to head back to your place before it gets too bad, I’ll understand,’ he said. ‘Driving in the snow, even a short distance, isn’t exactly fun.’

Polly smiled at him. ‘I was thinking that, if you didn’t mind, I could leave my car on your drive? I can pop up and get it in the morning.’

Will nodded. ‘That’s absolutely fine. And I bought a brand-new pair of heavy-duty green wellies for country living, so I’m more than happy to walk you home when you’re ready.’

At this, Polly couldn’t help but burst out laughing. ‘You know everyone’ll just take the mickey out of you until those wellies are five years old and ingrained with mud, don’t you?’

‘Well, if you’d rather navigate my driveway by yourself...?’ Will’s eyes sparkled with mischief, and Polly knew immediately that there was no way he was going to let her do it.

‘Thank you, kind sir,’ she murmured. Then, before she could change her mind, she put her glass back on the table again, leaned forward and raised her lips to his. ‘That would be very much appreciated.’

Polly enjoyed a refill of Kombucha while Will sorted out dinner, and when he placed two generous plates of beef Stroganoff down on the table, with servings of creamy, chive infused mashed potatoes and green beans, she was pleasantly surprised. Will selected a bottle of red wine from the rack, and she accepted a generous, bowl-shaped glass. After all, now she didn't have to worry about driving home, she might as well enjoy it.

'This is great,' she said, a few minutes later, having made enthusiastic headway with her food. 'Don't be offended, but I was expecting a personal chef, or the other extreme, something out of a foil tin from the supermarket!'

Will grinned. 'I'll take that. I had to learn to cook quickly when I got married. Sam, my ex-wife, was very clear that when I was at home it was my job as much as hers to make sure everyone got fed, and with two hungry, growing daughters, I learned a lot in a short time. I'm still not great at it, as my daughters would probably testify, but this is something I found that I can do.'

'But surely you had to be careful about your own diet?' Polly asked. 'When you were playing, I mean? I can't imagine Stroganoff and creamy mash featured high on the menu.'

'Our diet was pretty strict,' Will conceded, 'but there was room for the occasional treat, so I made the most of it where I could. Now I'm coaching, I still have to be a little careful, but I can afford to push the boat out occasionally.'

'So are you starting a new job then?' Polly asked. She paused before adding, 'I mean, now you've, er, moved on from the previous one?'

There was a silence which Polly tried hard not to fill. She had the feeling that Will was making a decision whether or not to confide something in her, and she didn't want to derail him if that was the case.

'I've had a job offer in Bristol,' Will replied carefully. 'But I'm thinking it over. I'm not sure if it's what I want, after everything we've been through in the past couple of years.'

Polly took a sip of her wine. 'So, if you don't take it, what will you do?' A house like this couldn't have come cheap, she thought. Will would have to pay for it somehow.

Will put his cutlery down and raised his eyes to meet her gaze. 'That's a question I've been asking myself pretty much since I left the England Under-19s.'

'And have you got any answers?' Polly probed.

Will shook his head. 'Not exactly. For the first time in my life, I don't have a concrete plan, and that's a weird situation for someone like me to be in. I've always had a trajectory, a destination at the end of it, whether it was as a player, a manager or a coach. Now... well, let's just say things haven't quite worked out the way I'd imagined.'

Polly put her knife and fork together and took another sip of wine before she replied.

'Not having a plan isn't the end of the world,' she said gently. 'When my mum died, I suddenly had to drop everything and come back to Roseford. My grandfather had recently had a heart attack, which had forced him to make some drastic life choices of his own, and Mum's death, while not unexpected, still came as a shock to us both.'

Polly squeezed Will's hand when it slid across the table to take hers, in silent comfort.

'It's tough when you lose someone close,' he said softly. 'Sam and I went through it when she lost her dad. I don't know if I was as much help as I should have been, but that pain, it eviscerates you. She seemed lost for a long time after he died.'

Polly nodded. 'That's exactly how it felt. I'm an only child, and my dad buggered off not long after I was born, so Mum, Grandpa and I were the tightest family unit when I was growing up. He was a father to both of us, and when Mum died, he was so broken.' Blinking as sudden tears threatened, Polly centred herself with a couple of deep breaths. 'It took us both a long time to be able to function in any way that was normal. I left my job in

Manchester, and came back here to Mum's place, which I'd inherited, but living there was too much, with all of the memories of her and the life we'd had when I was growing up, so I knew I'd have to sell it. When I told my partner at the time that I wasn't coming back to Manchester, it caused... complications. Jenna didn't want to up sticks and move down here, so we went our separate ways.'

If Will was surprised that Polly's former partner had been female, he didn't show it. Polly felt that familiar flare of relief that she'd told him. Although it shouldn't matter, it was often an acid test with new relationships to see how someone reacted.

'So, in a way, you were beginning afresh, too,' Will observed. 'Even though you grew up here.'

Polly nodded. 'It felt like a new start at times. Without Mum here, the place felt different. Even with Grandpa still in Roseford, it wasn't the same. He decided, because of his health, and because he was also struggling to come to terms with Mum's death, that he'd sell up too, so he now lives in the supported living village on the outskirts of Yeovil.' She smiled fondly. 'It was the best move he could have made. He loves it, and he's made a lot of friends.'

'And you still see him a lot?'

'Yes. At least once a week, usually more. He helped me finance Roseford Reloved, along with the proceeds from selling Mum's house, and I'm grateful for that.'

'And what made you want to go into the er, second-hand clothing business?' Will asked. Polly sensed that it was an area that was as foreign to him as some of the more obscure places he'd played football in his time.

'I prefer the term pre-loved.' Polly smiled. 'I worked in a sustainable living project up north for most of my career, and learned a lot about what goes into the manufacture of clothing, and, as importantly, how it's disposed of. I wanted to put the money I got for the house into something I could be passionate about, and Roseford Reloved was born. It allows me to indulge my interest in clothes, while also feeling happier that what I'm selling is more sustainable. My customers seem to agree.'

'Maeve certainly does,' Will said. 'I'm pretty sure she's going to be one of your best customers.'

Polly flushed with pleasure. 'Glad to hear it. You must be very proud. Of them both,' she added hastily, remembering Will's older, less friendly

daughter.

‘I am.’ Will took another sip of his wine, and then refilled their glasses. ‘They’ve had a tough couple of years. Maeve told me how Hattie was with you. I’m sorry about that. She can be moody and defensive when she’s upset. It seems you bore the brunt of it.’

‘It’s fine.’ Polly tried to sound reassuring, although she felt, with a slight twinge of irritation, that Will might be cutting Hattie a bit too much slack. ‘I understand how things can be difficult at that age.’

‘It’s not just her age,’ Will confessed. ‘She’s always struggled with change, and she’s been through a lot recently. When I had to leave my last job...’ He trailed off, gave his head a shake and reached for Polly’s empty plate. Polly had the feeling, yet again, he might have been on the cusp of telling her something, but he’d pulled back. ‘I’ll get these sorted, and then would you like a tour of the house? I know some of the village is curious about it, and it’ll give you something to report back to Simon and Lizzie!’

‘I can’t say I’m not intrigued,’ Polly replied as she helped Will carry the serving plates to the dishwasher. ‘Lead the way!’

As they exited the kitchen, Polly reflected on just how much she’d opened up to Will about recent events in her past. She hoped, given time, he might do the same.

There was no denying it, Polly thought as Will showed her around the house: Parson's Grange was a masterclass in modern, elegant living. The old building had been razed to the ground in order to create an efficient, modern space, with every conceivable device to provide sustainable yet comfortable living. There was a part of her that felt irritated that this had been an option available to a very wealthy man, when she'd spent her career before she founded her shop trying to create sustainable spaces for a far less privileged and wealthy clientele, but, she thought, at least when Will had had this house built, he'd taken the future into account.

'It was mainly my ex-wife's design,' Will said when Polly expressed her approval at the solar panelling, the heat pump system and the other eco-friendly measures in the house. 'She wasn't too fussed about it in principle, but the more the architects told us we could do, the more interested she became.'

Polly had a vague memory of seeing Sam Sutherland alongside Will in some videos and stills from the early noughties. The woman had seemed incredibly well groomed and poised, and not at all the eco-warrior type. More likely to be sporting a Louis Vuitton handbag on her arm than a more ecological brand; she clearly had more depth than Polly had imagined at the time.

'Well, it's very modern,' Polly said. 'But it's good to know it's not costing the planet to run.'

Will shook his head. 'Nope. Not quite carbon neutral, but as close as we could get.'

‘I bet Jed Lewis took some persuading about the design!’ Polly laughed. ‘He’s more used to barn conversations and working on listed buildings.’

‘He worked closely with the guy who’d designed it, and in the end did a great job,’ Will said.

Polly took a little while to observe the flow and space of the rooms, and modern designs, and agreed. It wasn’t really her thing, but the commitment to the vision was impressive.

After meandering through the upper floor, they headed back downstairs and towards Will’s study. Polly followed him in and was immediately blown away by the many team photographs that had been arranged on the walls.

‘Wow!’ she breathed as she began to look at them. ‘It’s a timeline of your career.’

Will blushed. ‘Well, it was either that or have them hidden away in storage boxes for the next twenty years. Hattie and Maeve dug them all out and had them framed as a moving in present for me.’

‘How lovely.’ Polly smiled. ‘They obviously think a lot of you, and what you’ve achieved.’

‘When they’re not bending my ear about moving back to London,’ Will sighed.

‘May I?’ she asked as she inched closer to the wall.

‘Be my guest.’

Polly perused the display, smiling at the pictures of Will as a teenager, lined up with the local teams he’d begun playing in, then to larger regional teams and then to national, Premier League and then the England men’s team. Each time she moved to study a new photo she had no problems identifying the tall, slightly gangling, serious-eyed Will, whose slender frame seemed at odds with the shorter, stockier players who took the front rows of each team photo. Eyes forward, sometimes with a sober expression on his face, sometimes smiling for the camera, she saw the progression from shy-looking teen to more self-assured adult. Time and experience had shaped him, and it was here on the wall for her to see. The kits that looked ill-fitting on his frame in his youth gradually seemed to mould to him, until, at what was clearly the peak of his playing career, she saw the man she’d remembered watching on television during her late teens.

As she moved along the timeline, she saw the progression from player to coach and manager, too. The first picture of Will sitting in the middle of a group of players in the England kit, all aged around sixteen, radiated pride.

The next photo, he was with the under seventeens, and then finally the under nineteens, which had been his most recent coaching job. Even though Polly had largely stopped watching football in recent years, she still remembered some of the faces in that last photograph, many of whom were now playing for the senior men's team for their country.

Glancing back at Will, who was observing her looking at the photographs, she wasn't too late to see a look of sadness crossing his features at where she'd paused.

'Are you all right?' she asked gently as he composed his features into a more neutral expression.

Will nodded. 'Fine. Just brings back a lot of memories, seeing someone looking at all of those pictures in such detail. I tend to walk past them on the way to the desk, these days.'

Polly turned back to the picture she'd paused at, the most recent one.

'I remember watching this team,' she mused. 'They got quite a long way in the Junior League European Cup, didn't they? Was that on your watch?'

'Yes,' Will replied. 'The final was my last match with them.'

Those young, fresh, boyish faces, many of whom were trying to stay solemn for the photograph, seemed so full of hope and possibility. A couple of them, including a supremely good-looking black teenager, couldn't help smiling at the camera. Eyes drawn to him in particular, Polly commented, 'That's Marius Stone, isn't it?'

Will's lack of immediate confirmation made Polly turn around. Before his expression locked down again, he nodded at her. 'Yes. One of the most promising players in the team.'

'I remember,' Polly replied. 'When he was on the pitch, it was difficult to look anywhere else. What happened to him? He just seemed to disappear.'

Will nodded, and Polly got the impression, again, that he was going to confide something in her. She waited.

'In a sense,' he said eventually. 'That's exactly what he did do.'

Will came and stood next to Polly, who had turned back to the photograph. 'Those were the days,' he said softly. 'When that team photo was taken, two days before my last game as manager, we thought we were invincible.'

Something in his tone made Polly turn her gaze from the picture to Will's face. 'What happened to change that?'

'A series of terrible decisions,' Will replied. 'Some of them mine, some

of them other people's. But in the end, it was better just to go.'

The desolation and weariness in his voice made Polly ache to put her arms around him, but she remained where she was, looking at the picture, hoping he'd elaborate.

'Why did you move on?'

Will sighed. 'Several reasons. I suppose the most significant one being that my wife ran off with the assistant coach, who was also my best friend. But there was so much around that, too. It was a hell of a time.'

'Oh God!' Polly breathed. 'I'm so sorry. That must have been terrible for you. And for the girls.'

Will shrugged. 'It was a bit of a shock, as I'm sure you can imagine.' The calm understatement, so characteristic of all the times Polly had heard him interviewed in post-match press conferences, was at odds with such a devastating personal revelation. Will had never been one to blow up at the perceived injustices of a lost game; he preferred to maintain dignity in front of the camera, and, it seemed, in front of other people, too.

Even so, Polly was unconvinced. 'More than a bit, I'd have said. Weren't you devastated?'

'I should have seen it coming,' Will replied, still gazing at the picture Polly was holding. 'But I was so wrapped up in everything, in the games, the team, the logistics of it all, that I didn't. In the end, I was gutted but I could see why she, why they, did it.'

'Will you stop being so damned reasonable?' Polly felt exasperated because Will appeared to be projecting the media version of himself into that study with her. She wanted to know how he felt, not what he thought she should see.

Will gave a hollow laugh. 'What do you expect me to say? It was a shit situation. Sam walked.' He turned away from her. 'To be honest, after everything that had happened with Marius after that game, it was just another nail in the coffin.'

Will had moved away from her and was watching the snow that was now falling heavily onto the parkland outside his study window. The darkness was all engulfing, but the flakes, big, powdery and insistent, were doing their best to light up the night.

'What happened with Marius?' Polly asked softly. This time she did turn around and padded across the thick carpet to join Will at the window.

'Whatever you think you know about Marius' situation, the reality was

far, far worse.’ Will’s back was ramrod straight as his eyes remained fixed outside. ‘And I have a lot to answer for.’

For a few seconds, Polly looked out at the same view, which was being steadily obscured by a heavier snowfall. ‘If you want to tell me, Will, I’m here. But I understand if you don’t, or you can’t.’

Will looked around at her. ‘I trust you, Polly. And I want to tell you. But I’m also asking you to respect that confidence. There are so many people involved in this... it’s not something that can get out now.’

‘I understand, and I’m here for you, in confidence,’ Polly said softly.

Letting out a long sigh, Will sat down on the window seat, his eyes now refocussed on Polly as she sat opposite him on the other side of the bay.

‘Marius was one of the most talented football players I’ve ever had the privilege to coach,’ Will began. ‘He was mature, disciplined, instinctive and the complete team player. He’d been dedicated to his game since he was old enough to dribble a football, and I have no doubt that, had things been different, he’d be in the England men’s first eleven now.’

‘So, what happened?’ Polly asked.

Will glanced down at his hands before looking back out of the window.

‘Marius was gay.’ The simple statement belied the complex truth of the situation. Polly knew enough to be aware of the issues of homophobia surrounding football, and that the male game in particular hadn’t exactly moved with the times. Terraces and pitches could be hostile places if you were a gay player; some of the chants that could be heard at Premier League games were testament to that. While the women’s game had fostered a far more inclusive stance, their male counterparts had a long way to go. The controversies over the ‘One Love’ armband at the Qatar World Cup was just one example of how much work there was still to be done.

Polly reached out a hand and squeezed one of Will’s. ‘Go on.’

Will drew a deep breath. ‘It was an open secret,’ he said. ‘His club knew, and his teammates, for the most part, were incredibly supportive. The Under-19s England squad were all friendly, and incredibly protective of one another. In-house, there was no controversy, and the lads knew that homophobia wasn’t something I and the other coaches were prepared to tolerate. The FA backed up that stance. But it wasn’t easy for him.’ Will ran a hand over his eyes, as he wearily relived the situation.

‘We had an away game for the semi-finals of the Junior European Cup. We were playing away in a country that had, shall we say, a rather less than

inclusive view of those who weren't straight. From the minute Marius stepped onto the pitch, the chants and catcalls started. The team took the decision to forfeit the game at half time. It was an automatic disqualification.'

'And then?'

'You can imagine what happened. We were taken to task by one half of the press for throwing the game and praised by the other half for taking a stand. Social media was annihilation. The players, especially Marius, got dogpiled. Marius went to ground. He took it all very, very personally. He felt enormous guilt that he'd caused his team to lose the opportunity of progressing to the finals, even though they made that decision in solidarity. No one blamed him personally, but as the only "out" player in the squad, he felt it deeply.'

'But if the wider world didn't know...' Polly said gently, 'how could he have blamed himself?'

'That's where I come in.' Will drew a slightly shaky breath. 'Forty-eight hours before a match, I would impose a social media ban on the lads. No phones, no iPads, no television if I could get away with it. It helped them to maintain focus and to keep their heads where they should be. They didn't like it, but they did it because they respected me and trusted my judgement.'

'Seems fair,' Polly replied. 'I remember, years ago, when all the media could talk about was WAGs. And that was before Instagram and the rest. You have so much to protect them from.'

Will nodded. 'I thought that's what I was doing. What I hadn't realised is that Marius's name had hit the social networks, conveniently an hour before the match was due to start, because he'd met a guy in a club who wasn't what he'd seemed. The guy had gone to the press with some photos and...'

'The rest is history,' Polly finished the sentence.

'With rolling news and citizen journalism, anyone can have a platform. The photos weren't explicit, but they made it clear enough what had been going on. Marius was a sitting duck on that pitch that evening. The press had tried to get to him for comment, but by that point we were huddled away in the dressing room, and I'd switched my phone off as well. All that mattered was preparing for the game. I didn't know that, by cutting myself off from the news, I was leading him into the lions' den.'

It was clear that Will blamed himself entirely for that decision, and Polly, from what she already knew about him, could see why.

'But you couldn't have known,' Polly said, shifting closer to him on the

window seat. ‘You made the right call, trying to keep them away from the nightmare of social media.’

‘I was a victim of my own hubris.’ Will shook his head. ‘Just because I didn’t play the social media game, I expected my players to live by the same rules. What I failed to realise was that, if anything like that was going to break, we needed to know. If I’d checked my own phone, at least I could have prepared them, all of them, for what was likely to come.’

Polly remembered, shortly after she’d first met Will, that she’d looked him up on Google, seen his Twitter feed and been faintly amused that his last tweet had been posted seven years ago. He really wasn’t joking about avoiding social media. The problem was, as he seemed to see it now, that because he didn’t check in regularly, when the eleventh hour had come, he’d failed to protect his players.

‘But surely you’ve got advisers to keep track of stuff like that?’ Polly asked reasonably. ‘Didn’t they let you know?’

Will shook his head. ‘We were in the tunnel by the time anyone got to me. By then, it was too late. When you go into a game like that, there’s a bubble around you that everyone involved tries to respect. After all, if the players aren’t in the right headspace, they can’t perform to the best of their ability. I let them run on to the pitch, and all I could do was pray.’

The look of desolation on Will’s face was a clear indication of how much anguish that decision had caused. Polly could only imagine the pressure he’d been under as he stood on the sidelines, watching the match and the media fallout, unfold.

‘It must have been awful, waiting to see what would happen,’ Polly murmured. She stood up, and moved so that she was standing next to where he was sitting on the window seat. Placing a hand on his shoulder, she felt a wash of empathy for him. He’d made what he thought were the right calls at the time, but then things, irrevocably, had changed.

‘The catcalls and abuse from the terraces were worse than anything we’d prepared ourselves to endure,’ Will continued. ‘We knew we’d be in for a hard time generally, after the team’s LGBTQ+ positive stance, but when it suddenly became directed at Marius, and his name was being yelled, I began to realise that this wasn’t just general homophobic chanting; this was personal.’ Will leaned into Polly’s touch and let out a long sigh. ‘It didn’t take long for Marius to realise it, too. And the look of confusion and hurt on his face will stay with me for as long as I live.’

‘Oh, Will...’ Polly began, but Will continued quickly, as if, now he was talking about it, he couldn’t stop.

‘We made it through to half time, and even managed to score, which, as you can imagine, went down badly with the home crowd. We could tell things were getting more and more heated in the stadium, and clashes between our supporters and those of the home team were escalating. When the lads came back to the dressing room, it was my job to tell them what they’d be facing when they went back on, and why. And the look on Marius’ face said it all. He immediately took responsibility, offered to be subbed off to take the heat out of the situation, but he was in shock. The team, to their absolute credit, decided that, despite the importance of the game, they weren’t going back on for the second half. Marius begged them to continue, but such was their loyalty, they all, to a man, forfeited the match.’ He rubbed his eyes with a slightly shaky hand. ‘Marius was the only one who disagreed. He didn’t see why the team should suffer because he’d been put in a bad situation. But in the end, with violence escalating, the decision was made.’

‘You must have been so proud of them,’ Polly said quietly. ‘That they’d take that decision, make a stand, when the stakes were so high. That takes a lot of guts for a young team.’

Will nodded. ‘I was.’ He paused again. ‘I was even prouder when they stood together after the match, took the flak from a group of supporters and, I hoped, made it through. Their dignity was way beyond their years.’

Polly felt confused. This seemed so much like the team, and its manager, had made the best of a terrible situation. So, what had gone wrong? She knew she had to ask him.

‘Some voices, powerful voices, in the FA decided that the players’ stand was the wrong thing to do. There was pressure applied, both on me, and, indirectly, on Marius, to deselect him from the squad. Nothing was ever said overtly, of course, but the newspaper coverage grew less supportive, more critical. The media started digging into all aspects of Marius’ life, tailing him night and day, trying to catch him out. The pressure on a nineteen-year-old kid became unbearable. In the end, he couldn’t hack it, and I don’t blame him.’

‘What happened?’

Will gave a bitter laugh. ‘I did something I shouldn’t have. I bowed to pressure to drop him from the squad for the next two international friendlies. I tried to justify it by saying his form had dipped, but, really, he was still

pouring everything and more into his game. It was the only thing he felt he had left. And I took it away from him. When he was dropped from the squad, well, his form really did nosedive. His club, also aware of the pressure, benched him. It took six months before the transfer window opened and he was sold to some club in the arse end of nowhere. And with that, his career was over.'

Polly gasped. 'That's brutal!'

'That's football. At the top level, it can be a series of hard choices. Marius lost out. Others will prosper.'

Polly took a step back and regarded the man in front of her. Will looked so broken by recounting it all; she could feel the guilt and sense of personal responsibility emanating from him.

'One of the awful things that happened in the fallout was that Hattie and Marius were really close. They'd become best friends since he'd been playing in the squad, and when he was transferred away from London and I had to drop him, she quite rightly blamed me for putting the distance between them. In her mind, I was responsible for splitting them up, and she's finding it very hard to forgive me.'

'And I guess the move to Somerset must feel, for her, being born and brought up in London, like she's suffered the same fate as Marius.'

Will nodded. 'Some days it seems as though she's working through it, but at other times, she's still hurting, mostly for Marius. They keep in touch, but it's difficult for her, being my daughter. And with Sam upping sticks and leaving shortly after this all exploded...' He gave a shaky laugh. 'I suppose you could say it's been a tough couple of years.' Will leaned back against the window frame and closed his eyes. 'I'm sorry.' His voice was suddenly shaking, and Polly got the feeling that she might be the first person he'd spoken to about all this for a very long time. 'Between my role in what happened with Marius, and the way things ended with Sam, I suppose I've been on autopilot for far too long. It just seemed safer that way, than to actually think about it all.'

Polly leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Will, and he sank into her embrace. She dipped her head and breathed in the scent of his shampoo, tightening her grip as he did the same. For a long time, they remained that way, Will shipwrecked in his own storm, and Polly the lifebelt he was clinging to.

Eventually, Will broke away and looked up at her. She suddenly felt a

huge rush of emotion for him, and it made her legs tremble.

‘Are you all right?’ Will asked, obviously spotting the look on her face.

Polly nodded quickly. ‘I’m fine. It’s just a lot to take in, that’s all.’ She took a step away from him, but he stood up abruptly.

‘Polly...’ he said softly. ‘Wait. Please. Tell me what’s on your mind.’

Polly looked at him and had the strangest feeling that she wasn’t just empathising. The rush of emotion she felt was more like the first stirrings of something deeper, more intense. Maybe it was just the intimacy of the snowstorm, she reasoned, making them feel isolated from the rest of the world. She couldn’t possibly be falling for Will Sutherland already. Could she?

‘It’ll keep,’ she said, forcing a smile.

Will wrapped his arms around her. ‘I’m so glad you’re here,’ he said softly.

After topping up their glasses with the last of the bottle of red, and watching the snow falling, coating everything in Will's grounds in sight, Polly had no desire to attempt the walk home. Will's living room was warm and cosy, and although she'd have preferred an actual wood burning stove to the flame effect fireplace that the architect had designed, the flames were warm and cosy enough to come a close second to the 'real' thing. As the evening meandered on, Polly wondered where else it might take them.

The conversation in the study had moved on to lighter matters, and Polly had found herself laughing along with Will's dry sense of humour. He was intelligent, thoughtful, eloquent: everything she'd hoped he would be. It would have been so easy to write him off as 'just' an ex-footballer, but in truth he seemed to be so much more than that. And the unsettling feeling that had washed over her in the study, that what she was beginning to feel for him was more than just the excitement of a Christmas fling, or the heightened sensations of being snowed in, was getting stronger by the minute.

Will shifted on the soft, white leather sofa so that he was closer to Polly. She was settled back into the sofa's comfortable embrace, but as she made to reach for her wine glass again, she paused and shook her head, laughing slightly.

'I thought I'd be heading home tonight, but I don't really want to move!'

She observed a mixture of expressions running over Will's face as she made the admission, from nervousness to pleasure and back again. Taking what she hoped was a calculated risk, she left her wine glass where it was on the coffee table and shifted a little closer to him on the sofa. 'Do you want me

to stay?’ she asked softly.

Will’s eyes met hers, and she could see the flare of desire that warmed them. The delicious anticipatory pause before the kiss seemed to last for an age until, unable to stand the tension any longer, Polly closed the distance between them. Tasting the red wine, she leaned into the kiss, savouring every last touch. With one hand finding the back of his head, running gentle fingertips through his dark, springy hair, and the other coming to rest on his muscular thigh, Polly felt a surge of excitement and anticipation about what could be coming next.

The snow falling softly outside seemed to shroud their world in a private cloak of warmth and intimacy. Polly felt as though the season and the weather were both conspiring to keep her at Parson’s Grange tonight, and she was more than happy with that. It would be a long, cold walk back home, and it was the last thing she felt like doing. Not to mention the fact that she was responding with alacrity to Will’s kisses, and her body was already screaming at her that she wanted, and needed, to feel more.

After several long delicious minutes, which culminated in both of them sprawled and breathless on the large sofa, Polly shifted slightly to get a better look at Will.

‘Wow,’ she breathed, ‘you are very, very good at that.’

‘You’re not so bad yourself!’ Polly could hear the shudder in Will’s breath as he spoke, and she knew he was getting just as hot under the collar as she was. The way their bodies were pressing together left her in very little doubt that, if they were to follow their physical desires, they were going to end up very out of breath indeed. She arched towards him as he brushed her hair away from her face, and as the kissing began again, she knew exactly where she wanted things to go.

‘Are we on the same page, here?’ she murmured as he drew back to give them both a little air.

Will nodded. ‘If that page reads that I would very much like to spend the night making love to you, then yes, we definitely are.’

The formality of Will’s speech made Polly gasp with gentle laughter. ‘I love the way you’ve put that. Very cautious and diplomatic!’

‘They were my professional trademarks back in the day!’ Will joined in with her laughter. ‘I guess old habits die hard.’

‘Speaking of hard...’ Polly wriggled against him, and she felt his body leap with desire. She was in no doubt that he wanted her, but it was flattering

to be having such an obvious effect.

With an intake of breath, Will disentangled himself from her embrace, and, cocking a quizzical eyebrow towards the hallway, said, 'Somewhere a bit more, er, cosy than my living room, then?'

'Well, as comfortable as this is, that sounds like a great idea.' She heaved herself up from the sofa, marvelling that her legs could still hold her up after such a knee-trembling necking session, and picked up her wineglass. 'Are drinks allowed upstairs?' she teased. 'I promise not to spill any on your new decor!' Joking about things seemed to make the transition easier, and she noticed that Will visibly relaxed when she did.

'Of course,' he replied. 'I mean, you've already ruined one of my suits with the shop flood... what's a little red wine on the shag pile?'

If Polly hadn't been holding her glass, she'd have given him a swat on the arm for that. 'Come on then, Mr Sutherland,' she said, grinning widely. 'Show me that you've got some moves in the bedroom that are as good as the ones on the pitch.'

'No pressure then,' Will mock grumbled as he picked up his own glass and passed her to lead the way to the master bedroom.

Smiling at his turning back, Polly knew instinctively what a big step this was for him and knew that she had to be mindful. All the same, she couldn't wait to get up the broad staircase and find out exactly the kind of moves Will Sutherland had between the sheets.

The thick, still falling snow cast Will's enormous bedroom into even more cavernous relief as he pushed open the door and allowed Polly to walk through. Polly's eyes widened at the sheer dimensions of the bed, which looked to be a Super King Size, sitting patiently, waiting to be occupied. She'd only ever slept in a bed that size in a hotel and found herself wondering if she'd be staying around long enough to sleep in it, too. Adorned with a non-fussy, typically masculine bedding set in checked blue and white, it looked distinctly inviting.

The brisk click of the bedroom door closing behind her brought her out of her thoughts, and she turned in a full circle, admiring the understated decor and what was clearly a beautiful view from the large windows, although much of that was obscured by the still flurrying snow.

'This is quite a room,' she breathed as Will came to join her.

'Far too big for one person,' he said as he began to nuzzle her neck. 'I've been wondering what it would be like to share it with someone else.'

Polly let out a contented sigh as the attention to her neck brought her out in goosebumps. 'Well,' she murmured, 'I'm so glad you've chosen to share it with me.' She leaned into him, feeling that wonderful mixture of warmth and shivers as he continued to kiss her, until she felt as though her legs were turning to jelly.

'I think I need to sit back down,' she said softly. Her eyes flickered towards the bed. 'Is it as comfortable as it looks?'

Will's eyes widened before he could stop them.

'Sorry,' he chuckled, 'I'm a bit out of practise at this. Is it right that I'm

feeling like the about-to-be-seduced heroine of a trashy romance novel?’

Polly burst out laughing at that. ‘I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted.’ She squared her shoulders in her best ‘assertive romantic lead’ pose. ‘I’ve every intention of seducing you, if that’s what you want, but if you don’t...’ She trailed off, leaving him with an out if he needed it. She already knew that she, herself, didn’t need one.

‘I’m more than happy to be seduced,’ Will said, then cleared his throat. ‘Er, where do you want me?’

Still smiling, Polly took hold of his hand and led him to the bed. The thick white carpet sank like sand under her feet. She knew already that she was Will’s first lover since his divorce, and that he’d clearly been a one-woman man. This encounter had the potential to be as challenging as it was pleasurable, she thought.

‘Let’s just take it slowly,’ she breathed as they sank down on the end of the bed. ‘We’ve got all night, haven’t we?’

Will nodded, and then let out a long sigh. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, ‘they used to coach us about performance anxiety, but this feels scarier than being part of the starting eleven at Wembley ever did!’

Polly smiled. ‘Just relax,’ she said gently. ‘You can trust me, I promise.’ Pausing just long enough to ensure he was happy, she reached out and began to unbutton his polo shirt. Then, glancing up at him to see his eyes were already widening with pleasure, she reached down to his waist and tugged the polo over his head. His broad chest with its covering of dark hair against lightly tanned skin made her draw breath in appreciation, and before she could stop herself, she’d leaned forward and was kissing his neck and shoulders, then running her hands over his torso.

‘You really are the most gorgeous heroine of a trashy romantic novel I’ve ever seen,’ she murmured as she worked her way back to his mouth.

As he laughed, she pushed him gently back, and swiftly took off her tights, before pulling her dress over her head so that she was only in her underwear. Will, taking advantage of the pause, undid the buckle of his jeans and discarded them to one side of the vast bed. Then Polly entwined herself with Will, relishing the sensations of their scarcely clothed bodies as they touched. She’d realised he was in great shape from the times they’d met; it was something that the cut of his clothes couldn’t help but accentuate, but now he was only in a pair of cotton boxer shorts, that toned physique from years of being on the football pitch, was evident for her eyes to feast on. The

rush of heat between her thighs as she looked at him and then felt him made her desire every inch of him even more.

‘I’m so glad it’s snowing,’ she murmured as they kissed and touched. ‘It makes everything so much more... erotic.’

Will paused. ‘So, it’s the snow that’s turning you on and not me?’

Polly grinned. ‘Well, I wouldn’t exactly say *that*...’ She came to a sitting position above him and reached one hand back to undo the clasp of her dark rose-coloured bra. Sighing in relief as she discarded it on top of Will’s jeans, she added, ‘I thought I’d save you the worry of trying to do that for me!’

Will groaned and leaned back against the pillows. ‘Stop,’ he said, ‘you’re giving me flashbacks to some very embarrassing memories from my teens!’

Polly, who remembered the hilarity she and Jenna had felt when they’d both recounted their first attempts to unhook bras that they weren’t the ones wearing, smiled broadly. ‘You’ll have to tell me about them sometime.’

But she found swiftly that his attention had drifted from her words to her body. His warm hands cupped her breasts, and he sat back up to kiss his way downwards from her neck until she was sighing with pleasure.

‘That’s wonderful,’ she breathed, as the waves of delicious sensation began to pulse through her. She lay back down again and they removed the last of their clothing. Now both naked, it wasn’t long before Will’s worries seemed to have dissipated as quickly as the falling snow against the window pane. Polly explored his body, marvelling at the length of the legs she was wrapping her own around, and the feel of his arousal pressing firmly and substantially against her. She wanted nothing more than to part her thighs and feel him slip inside her. And as he touched and caressed her, she realised that his sexual drought since his divorce had in no way scuppered his enjoyment or expertise.

‘Am I doing OK?’ he breathed as he began to caress her even more intimately.

‘More than OK,’ Polly replied. ‘How are you feeling?’ She sped up the already regular rhythm of her hands where they were exploring.

‘If you keep doing that, it’ll be a quick end to the night.’ Will’s voice sounded shuddery, and Polly felt a surge of desire. But she slowed her pace. There was only one place she wanted, no, needed, to feel Will when he peaked. And they did have all night, after all. Lying back, she focussed on the sensations that Will’s fingers were creating, and before long, she was the one drawing shuddering breaths.

‘You are so good at that,’ she murmured. She was very close to the edge.

‘I’m glad you think so.’ Will’s voice was husky, and spoke volumes about his own desire, and his pleasure at the compliment.

In a few more seconds, the surge broke, and as Will’s warm, caressing hands guided her over the edge, the aching waves of completion washed over her. Exhaling a long, satisfied breath, she turned her gaze to Will, who was watching her, entranced.

‘Come here,’ she said gently, feeling him pressing against her hip. ‘I think it’s about time you made a night of it.’

Needing no further encouragement, but with a brief pause to reach into the bedside drawer, Will looked down at her where she was lying, still feeling the aftershocks, against the pillows.

‘Happy for me to lead?’ he asked.

Polly smiled. ‘Be my guest. I’m not sure I can move from here right now after that.’ She watched him intently as he propped himself on one elbow and continued to caress her until she was once again on the edge.

‘I need you,’ she murmured into the kiss they were sharing. ‘I need you right now.’ The tingles were becoming more intense.

Will shifted position until he was above her, then, with tantalising, pleasurable slowness, they were joined. The sensations were exquisite, and as Will found his rhythm, Polly was soon heading towards a second peak. Breaking once again, she pulled him closer, and then rode the wave, moving in tandem with him until he, too, was panting and on the edge. As he shuddered, Polly couldn’t resist looking at his face, which showed the depths of pleasure and relief, and realised just what a mountain this had been for him to climb, emotionally.

Polly shifted slightly beneath Will. ‘Still glad you invited me here?’ she asked, a tone of gentle teasing in her voice.

Will nodded. ‘Absolutely.’ He pulled back from her and collapsed onto the bed next to her. ‘But if you’re expecting me to talk any sense for the next half an hour, you’ll be disappointed.’

‘Duly noted,’ Polly said, brushing his sweaty hair away from his forehead. ‘I wouldn’t expect much sense from me, either, after that.’

They lay together, sated and relaxed, and Polly thought again how this felt much more than just a Christmas fling. She only hoped, when the daylight came, that Will was feeling the same.

Some hours later, as dawn was beginning to creep over the polar landscape of Parson's Grange, Polly awoke feeling thirsty. She rolled over in bed to see that Will had brought her a tall glass of water and gulped it down gratefully. The red wine had been more than she'd been used to drinking, and while she felt a little fuzzy, she was in full possession of her memories of what had happened between them.

She was alone in bed, but as she stretched luxuriously against the pillows, the door to the ensuite opened and there stood Will, white towel slung low on his hips, hair wet from the shower.

'I didn't want to wake you,' he said as he walked across the room and back to the bed. 'You were spark out.'

Polly smiled sleepily. 'I was. Thank you for the water, though. I usually drink a bucket load before I go to bed, but I was, er, somewhat distracted last night.'

Will grinned. 'I can't think why.'

'Oh, I can...' Polly, whose tiredness had all but vanished at the sight of Will, pushed back the duvet and stood up. Padding over to where he still stood, she ran a hand down his chest, pausing at the place where he'd tucked his towel, low on his abdomen. 'Is it all right if I use your shower?' she asked softly.

'Of course,' Will replied, his gaze running slowly and thoroughly the length of Polly's naked body. 'Would you, er, like some company?'

Polly smiled. 'If you can face getting wet again. But can you give me a couple of minutes?' Turned on as she was by the sight of a wet and willing

Will, she also really needed a wee.

‘Shout when you want me,’ Will said. ‘I’ll be ready and waiting.’

Polly walked to the ensuite and, when she was ready, called for Will to join her. It was a while before they both had breakfast.

‘So, you close the shop on Sundays, and have a half day on Wednesdays? Is that all the time you get?’ Will shook his head in astonishment. ‘You must be knackered.’

‘It was a bit of a slog in the beginning,’ Polly replied, ‘but it’s getting easier now. I might even be in danger of turning a decent profit at the end of this tax year!’

Having very gingerly driven her car back home and fed Oscar, Polly and Will had walked back to Parson’s Grange and shared a leisurely, late breakfast. Some while later, Polly was as reluctant to leave as Will seemed to be to let her go, but she needed to get some paperwork done before the shop reopened on Monday. Wanting to prolong their time together, they decided to walk back to Roseford Reloved.

Polly tried not to let work interfere with her Sundays, but she’d fallen a little behind in the busy run up to Christmas. And Hattie and Maeve were due back that afternoon. Will wasn’t sure when the driver was dropping them off, but Polly felt she shouldn’t be in evidence when they came home. She knew how tough it had been for both of them to consider Roseford ‘home’, and she didn’t want to muddy the waters for them. Will hadn’t said as much when he’d mentioned they were coming home, but Polly sensed he’d rather keep things between them quiet for now.

Polly was glad she’d put her winter boots on again and as she huddled deeper into her coat, she was grateful of Will’s firm arm around her, steadying her on the snow-covered paths. It was only when they were reaching the main street that she realised she’d left her long scarf on the coat stand at Parson’s Grange.

‘Bugger,’ she said. ‘I thought I was getting chilly.’ She explained what had happened to Will.

‘Here,’ he said, a husky note in his voice. He unwound his own scarf, a crimson cashmere number, from his neck and wound it carefully around Polly’s. ‘Can’t have you catching a cold, can we?’

‘Thanks.’ Polly smiled up at him. ‘I’ll give it back to you for the walk home.’ She ducked her face down into the top of the scarf and inhaled the heady combination of Will’s cologne and his own, distinct scent. It made her

wish they'd had more time today. But there would be plenty more opportunities to come, she was sure of it.

They made their way up the main street, which was hushed because of the snow. The village felt cut off from the rest of the world when it snowed, and although the main road had been cleared, there were still banks of snow on either side of it, and the pavements were treacherous.

'Careful,' Polly cautioned as she felt Will stumble. 'I'm guessing a broken ankle wouldn't exactly do wonders for your career, even now you're not actually playing any more!'

'Absolutely,' Will agreed, treading more carefully. 'Although at least I can go out and enjoy it a bit now. Back then, we were banned from setting foot outside! I missed a lot of snowball fights with the kids because of it.'

'That's a shame,' Polly replied. 'It must have been tough, sometimes, having to stick to all of the rules.'

Will paused, and Polly watched as he looked at the family who were chucking snowballs at each other in the village square. Their brightly coloured coats were a sharp contrast against the snow, and she smiled as the younger of the two children managed to throw a perfectly aimed snowball at their father's chest. The father collapsed into the snow and was quickly pelted by both children until they were all a laughing, icy mess on the ground.

'I often wonder what it was all for,' he said quietly. 'Whether the sacrifices were worth it. I was away from home so much in the early years that Sam joked she was basically a single parent. Weekends are meant to be spent as a family, but for me, it was often the busiest time. I'd be travelling in this country or abroad for games, often getting back home just as the kids were off to school, then having to spend days and evenings training and preparing for the next fixture. I got to do something I loved for a living, and got paid well for it, but at what cost?'

Polly stayed quiet. She got the sense that Will didn't open up much, and she was intrigued that the snowy scenes in Roseford had triggered something in him. She tightened her arm around him, letting him know she was listening and interested.

'Sam put up with a lot, over the years,' Will said, half to himself. 'When she left, it wasn't just because she had an affair with Ben. She claimed I'd left her, emotionally, long before that. And in some ways, she was right. Going into management was supposed to mean more time at home, with the family, but it didn't really work out that way. At club level nothing really changed,

and by the time I was managing the England Juniors, the girls were in their early teens and more independent. I threw myself into work, as always, and Sam was lonely. She didn't want to be married to my job as well as me any more. That's why she walked.'

'She didn't have to have the affair,' Polly observed. 'Couldn't you have worked things out?'

Will shook his head. 'Too late for that.' With visible effort, he pulled himself away from the past. 'But anyway,' he said, wrapping both arms around her. 'If life hadn't dealt me the hand it has, I wouldn't be standing here with you. And for that I'm grateful.' He paused, as if uncertain whether to continue.

'What?' Polly asked gently. 'I get the feeling there's something else?'

Will smiled, and his hazel eyes were full of affection when he did.

'I really, really want to spend more time with you, Polly. Last night was wonderful, and I hope we can do it again. I never thought I'd feel anything for anyone else after Sam, but being with you makes me incredibly happy.'

Polly smiled so broadly, she thought her face would split in two. 'Truly?' she breathed.

'Truly.' Will's mouth met hers, and the kiss, despite the cold, felt warm and sensual.

They broke apart and began to navigate the rest of the way back to Polly's place. As they reached the entrance, Will paused. 'There is just one thing, though, that I wanted to ask you.'

'What?' Polly asked, door key already in hand.

'Do you mind if we keep things low key until I've had the chance to discuss it with Hattie and Maeve? I don't want them to find anything out on the local grapevine, and I really want to be able to sit down with them and explain how things are. As you know, you're the first person I've, er... been, um, "acquainted" with since their mother and I divorced. I want to give them time to get used to the idea, no pressure, you know.'

'Absolutely,' Polly said. 'I understand. I once dated a guy who had a ten-year-old daughter, and he felt exactly the same. Take your time.'

The look of relief on Will's face made Polly realise just how unsure he was about this new territory, and she really did feel for him. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to explain to children that you were starting a new relationship. And even though Hattie and Maeve were both teenagers, she was sure it could still be an emotional minefield. No matter

how much Maeve had encouraged her father to get to know Polly, the reality of that might still be hard for her to adjust to. And as for Hattie... Polly was just glad that Will was going to be having that conversation with his daughters without her.

‘Well, this is me,’ she said brightly as Will hovered on the doorstep. ‘I would invite you in for a coffee, but goodness knows where that might lead!’

Will pulled her close and groaned. ‘I’ll be lying all alone in that huge bed tonight, wishing you were still next to me,’ he murmured into her hair.

Polly relished his warmth, unsure when they’d next be able to be so close. ‘Until next time,’ she murmured back. ‘Hopefully it won’t be too long.’

Will released her. ‘I’ll let you know how things go with the girls,’ he said.

‘I’d like that,’ Polly replied. ‘And if I don’t see you before, I’ll see you at the Yuletide Ball next week.’

Will grinned. ‘I can’t wait. I’m looking forward to checking out the inside of Roseford Hall, so that I can understand exactly why Simon Treloar thinks my house is so awful!’

‘Oh, don’t mind Simon,’ Polly replied. ‘He’s a decent old thing really. It’s just that sometimes it seems as though he’s been born into the wrong century!’

As Polly let herself into the house, it was only when she went to hang up her coat that she realised she still had Will’s scarf. Breathing in its scent, she felt her knees going weak again. She hoped telling Maeve and Hattie would go well. She wasn’t quite sure how she’d feel if it didn’t.

Will hurried home as swiftly as he could, despite the snow and ice that seemed determined to impede his path. He could barely believe that last night had happened, and he needed some time alone before the girls returned in the early afternoon. He strode down the main street, taking the now familiar lane on the western edge of Roseford that would lead him back to Parson's Grange. It wasn't often he'd actually walked it, since he was usually in the car and heading further afield than the village centre, so it was lovely to be able to take in the sights at a rather more sedate pace. The village, shrouded in snow, looked like something out of a Thomas Hardy novel: the rooftops of the houses and shops were blanketed in a thick, white covering, and the fields that rose upwards to form the valley in which Roseford sat seemed to stretch to the horizon. The Quantock Hills, faintly outlined in the distance, stood protectively, as if warning the rest of the world to stay away from such a beautiful, unblemished sight.

It had been the right decision to come here, Will thought, this time with real conviction. He'd spent so long trying to convince Hattie and Maeve that the move to the West Country had been the best path for them. How could it not be, with the change of pace, the country air and now, for him, the exciting, exhilarating prospect of a new relationship? He hoped that, with time, Hattie and Maeve would begin to heal as he himself felt he was.

But the question remained: how was he going to tell his daughters about him and Polly? He knew he shouldn't be worrying so much; they were virtually adults, after all, but the lives they'd led had insulated them to a great extent from the hurt and pain that other, less cosseted children had faced.

When he and Sam had broken the news to them that they were separating, and then getting a divorce, it had devastated them both, coming as it had, at least for them, so out of the blue. Sam had begun to travel extensively with Ben after she'd left him, and so he'd become the main caregiver after the split, and it had taken the girls a long time to come to terms with the change in relationship with their mother. Over time they'd recovered, but Hattie especially still keenly felt the break-up of the family. She was almost twenty, but she might well have been ten years younger at times. Will knew that protecting them so fiercely all these years had probably affected their resilience, but then what parent wouldn't want to protect their children from pain?

All the same, he knew he had to level with them, sooner rather than later. It was better to be upfront and calm, rather than have to face questions after the fact. That being said, he was feeling more than a slight sense of trepidation. His communication skills as a father had been on a sharp trajectory since the divorce, without having Sam to rely on to have those 'difficult' conversations, and although he was better at it these days, he still struggled.

Will was nearing the turn for his own driveway. Pausing, he glanced back to look at the view again. It really was perfect. The snow seemed to symbolise the fresh starts he'd been making over the past couple of months: the new job prospects, wherever they took him, the new house, and now, hopefully, a new and exciting relationship. Will couldn't help but feel optimistic as he began the walk to the house.

That feeling of optimism persisted while he waited for Hattie and Maeve to return. Their driver had called him when they'd left, and warned him that, because of the snow, it might take longer than usual. Will had told him not to rush. Better to be home safely than to end up in a ditch in the back end of beyond. To keep himself busy, he sorted out what they were going to have for dinner tonight, put on a load of washing and then, pausing to give himself a wry smile about just how domesticated he'd become in the years since he'd been a divorcee, he settled into his study to catch up on some paperwork.

He soon realised he couldn't concentrate on anything, though. The night with Polly kept coming back to him. It had been so perfect. He'd opened up to her, told her things, done things that he hadn't thought about in years. It had all felt so right. And something told him that she was feeling the same way. He knew he had to be careful; he didn't want to consider the possibility

that he was throwing himself into something because it was the first time he'd been stirred by anyone since Sam, but he vowed to take things steadily. They were both adults, and there were his daughters to consider, too.

Discovering that the stuff he had on his desk couldn't hold his attention for more than a few minutes, he closed the document he'd been trying to read with a sigh. He still had a few days before he needed to give City his answer about the job; it could wait. With a little pause before he did so, he located another file on his computer and double clicked it. It was stored away in a folder in his desktop, hidden just in case either of the girls looked over his shoulder and spotted what he was doing. He didn't want to have to answer any awkward questions. As he perused the file, he was assailed by equal feelings of excitement and fear. What was he doing? What was the point of even looking at it? But something inside him felt compelled, drawn to what it contained.

He leaned back in his chair and let out a long sigh. The contents of that file made him so nervous but again and again he was brought back to it. In some ways, if he allowed himself to go down that road, it had the potential to blow his world, and a great deal of other people's, apart. Why, then, did it keep haunting him?

He stared at the screen for a long time, reluctant to close the file. Then, as if afraid to interact with it, he began to type.

This is my story. And as many of you know, it's one I've kept private for the whole of my career. But the time has now come for me to invite you into my world, and into my life. Much has been said about me by others, but now it's my turn to tell the truth. To set the record straight. If you've ever wondered about just what makes Will Sutherland tick, then this may well just give you some answers.

Too trite? he thought. Probably. Too clichéd? Without a doubt. But if he was going to do this, he was going to be the one to write it. The question was, did he have the nerve?

'Dad! We're home!' Maeve's cheerful voice rang in the air as Will heard the front door slam. Hastily, he saved and closed the document he'd been working on and shut down his computer.

'I'm in the study,' he called back. 'I'll be down in a sec.'

Rearranging the loose papers on his desk, Will carefully took the brightly

coloured A5 notebook that contained some of his scribbles for his memoir and locked it in the top drawer of his desk. He wasn't quite sure, still, why he wanted to keep the memoir project a secret from his daughters, but he felt as self-conscious about it as if he'd been caught looking at pornography. He wasn't ready to share his ideas with them, or the wider world, just yet.

Hurrying out of the study, he jogged down the stairs and met Hattie and Maeve, who were still in the hallway, hanging up coats and taking off their shoes. Their driver, Colin, was helping them in with the last of the bags.

'Col, good to see you,' Will said, thrusting forward a hand in welcome. 'I'm glad you made it safely in this weather. Can I get you a coffee?'

'That would be great, thanks,' Colin replied. He rubbed his hands together. 'It's brass monkeys out there.'

Will grinned. 'It really is. Are you heading back to London today?'

Colin nodded. 'The missus won't like it if I'm away too long. We've got the grandkids staying and they're a bit of a handful. The main roads are clear now, anyway, so it's just a case of getting out of the valley.'

'Well, there are plenty of spare rooms if you want to stay the night and hit the road again tomorrow morning,' Will replied. 'Say the word and I'll make one up for you.'

'Thanks mate.'

Will gestured for Colin to follow him through to the kitchen as Maeve and Hattie took their bags up to their rooms. Colin had been his regular driver for years now, and although Will preferred to drive himself, whenever the girls wanted to go somewhere and he couldn't take them, he tended to call Colin. He trusted him, and the girls liked him, too.

'So how goes it with you?' he asked as he started making two cups of coffee using the machine in the corner of the kitchen.

'Oh, not bad, mate. Yourself?'

'Pretty much the same,' Will replied. The roar of the coffee machine stopped the conversation for a minute or two. Then, he came over to the breakfast bar where Colin was standing.

'Have a seat,' he said.

'You're all right, mate,' Colin said. 'I've been sat down for nearly three hours. I could do with stretching my legs.'

They sipped their coffee, cooled with a good glug of milk, and made idle conversation. It was nice to catch up with Colin, and Will realised he'd quite missed the chats they used to have when Colin drove him to places. As he

finished his coffee, Colin shook his head.

‘I can’t believe how grown up your girls are now,’ he said. ‘I remember, even when they were tots, they used to come to your games sometimes. Now they’re young ladies.’

‘That they are,’ Will said. He gave a short laugh. ‘Makes me feel old.’

‘Speak for yourself!’ Colin replied. ‘There’s life in the old dog yet, I’m sure.’

Will suddenly wished he could unburden himself to Colin like he had in the old days. His own dad had died in his forties, when Will was a teenager, and so had never seen the dizzy heights to which Will had climbed in his career. Colin had been a kind of surrogate father over the years, even though Will had never told him as such. But he didn’t have luxury of a long car journey to discuss things with him, and Colin was obviously keen to get back to his family.

‘Well, thanks again for seeing them home safely,’ Will said as Colin put his mug down on the counter.

‘You’re welcome, guv,’ Colin said.

After Colin had nipped to the loo, Will walked him out to where he’d parked his car on the driveway.

‘I hope you don’t mind me saying,’ Colin began, pausing before he opened the door to the car, ‘but you’ve done a great job over the past couple of years, raising your girls. I was worried, when you and the missus split up, that they’d struggle, but they’ve turned into such nice, polite young ladies. That’s your doing, that is.’

‘Thanks, Col.’ Will knew he’d begun to blush. He could never take a compliment. ‘That means a lot, coming from you.’

‘I think, though, and this is just between you and me, mind, that you have a right – as their father – to know what I overheard on the way home this afternoon.’

Will stopped dead. ‘What was that Col?’ he asked, trying to sound neutral and unconcerned.

‘Yer eldest, Hattie. She’s thinking she might drop out of university, from what she was saying to her sister. Says she’s not happy. That she wants to start a new course overseas. I couldn’t help thinking about it, because it was the same place that the young lad she was so close to a year or so ago ended up getting transferred. You know, the one that had to declare himself as gay. Didn’t know if you knew but thought you should.’

Will's blood seemed to slow in his veins, and it was suddenly very difficult to think. Was Hattie really serious about chucking in the second year of her studies to follow Marius to Melbourne? She obviously hadn't got as far as he'd hoped in getting over it all.

'Thanks, Col,' Will said. 'I'm sure there's nothing in it, but I'll have a chat to her.'

'You do that,' Colin replied. 'I'd hate to see her upping sticks and running after someone on a whim, mucking up her life.'

'I'll see you soon,' Will said. He thrust a hand out and shook Colin's. 'Drive safely and send my love to Maggie.'

'I will. Merry Christmas,' Colin said.

As Will watched Colin make his way down the drive, and back to the bosom of his family, he wondered how on earth he was going to raise what he'd just been told with Hattie. What on earth should he do if she was really set on chucking it all in to go and be with Marius on the other side of the world?

Later that evening, Will decided he couldn't put things off much longer. The Yuletide Ball was fast approaching, and he knew he'd have to tell Maeve and Hattie what the state of play was between himself and Polly before it became all too obvious. He didn't want to hide things from his daughters, and he wanted Polly to know that everything was out in the open. And after what Colin had just told him, he knew he'd have to tackle Hattie about that, too.

They had dinner together on their knees in the living room, and Maeve was just about to change the television to the Netflix series they'd all been enjoying, when Will decided that now was as good a time as any.

'Actually,' he began before he could bottle out. 'Can you leave that for a minute, Maeve? There's something I need to discuss with you.'

Maeve put the remote down beside her on the sofa, looking quizzical. Hattie, who'd been unusually quiet over dinner, glanced at him and then back down at her phone.

'If I could have your *full* attention, Harriet, that would be perfect.' It was the voice he used in the dressing room, he realised, and when the girls were in trouble. He gave her a quick smile to soften the instruction.

Harriet rolled her eyes, but she put the phone face down on the arm of the sofa. 'So, what is it you wanted to talk about, Dad?' she asked.

Clearing his throat, Will realised just how nervous he felt.

'Well, I've been meaning to talk to you. I know you've both been through a lot and because of that I wanted to put everything on the table, make things as clear as I can.'

'Are we moving again, Dad?' Maeve asked.

As Will shook his head, he saw Hattie shooting her sister an impatient look.

‘Let him talk, Maeve.’ She turned towards Will. ‘What is it, Dad?’

Here goes nothing, Will thought. His heart was hammering in his chest, and he felt as nervous as he had when he was preparing to run out on the pitch at Wembley.

‘Well, it’s like this. Over the past couple of days, I’ve been spending a bit of time with Polly, you know, Polly from the dress shop in the village? And I wanted to let you know. I’m not asking for permission, as such, but I didn’t want to shut you out or keep you in the dark.’

Maeve gave a squeal of delight. ‘I knew it! It was the kiss under the mistletoe that did it, wasn’t it, Dad? I knew you liked her!’

Will gave his daughter a relieved smile. ‘That might have been a factor, yes.’

‘So, have you been on a date yet? Have you kissed her again? Have you, er, you know?’ Maeve eyes glinted mischievously. ‘Spill, Dad.’

Pleasure at her reaction did a lot to calm Will’s nerves. ‘Yes, yes, and I wouldn’t tell you if we had,’ he said lightly. ‘A father should be allowed to keep some things from his daughters.’

Realising, as he replied, that Hattie hadn’t yet said anything in response to his news, he glanced at his older child. ‘Hat?’ he asked softly. ‘Is there anything you want to say?’

Hattie shook her head, not quite meeting his gaze. ‘Nope.’ Then, after a pause, ‘I mean, you do you, Dad.’

Will wasn’t quite sure what that meant, but he was relieved she wasn’t having screaming hysterics about the news. He’d half expected a meltdown of epic proportions. Harriet didn’t take change well, and she’d already said a few things about Polly that rankled with him.

‘Well, I just thought you should know,’ Will replied. ‘Polly’s great company and I’ve been enjoying spending time with her. I don’t know if it’s serious, but I wanted to keep you both in the loop.’

‘I think it’s lush, Dad.’ Maeve’s voice was reassuring, and she was still grinning from ear to ear. ‘And to think I was the one who started it all. I’m your matchmaker.’

Will couldn’t help but smile back at his daughter. ‘I’m sure we’d have got there eventually,’ he said dryly.

As he reached forward to pick up his daughters’ plates from where they’d

slung them on the coffee table, his attention turned back to Hattie. ‘Can you give me a hand with these, Hat?’

‘Can’t Maeve do it?’ Hattie muttered, eyes back on her phone. She seemed intent on whatever it was she was looking at, and as he stood up, Will caught a glimpse of what looked like some kind of list of times on her screen. He wondered if she was planning a trip somewhere before she went back to university in January. Adding it mentally to his list of things to discuss with her, he repeated his request for her to help him in the kitchen.

Grumbling, Hattie reached for the glasses of water they’d had and followed Will out of the room. Will watched as she slung them into the dishwasher with a careless crash.

‘Careful,’ he snapped, ‘I don’t want to be picking broken glass out of the filter.’

With exaggerated patience, Hattie put each plate carefully on the bottom rack. Will tried not to feel irritated. Hattie had always known how to push his buttons, virtually from the day she could talk. When she’d become a teenager, that ability had been amplified, and there didn’t seem to be an end to it yet, even though she was nearly twenty.

‘Are you sure you’re all right with me seeing Polly?’ he asked as she closed the dishwasher and made to leave the kitchen.

‘Would it matter if I wasn’t?’ Hattie replied. ‘I mean, you’re not going to stop seeing her, are you?’

The bald truth of that claim stunned Will for a second. ‘Well, I’d like to know if you have a real problem with it,’ he said.

Hattie shook her head. ‘No, you wouldn’t,’ she said flatly. ‘You’re just trying to make yourself feel better. You don’t really care what I think.’

‘That’s not true, Hat!’ Will moved towards his daughter, wanting to reach out with a hug and reassure her. ‘Of course I care what you think.’

‘Well then stop seeing her,’ Hattie countered. ‘Do you care enough to do that?’

Will’s mouth went dry. He had to fight with everything he had not to snap back the first thing that came into his head. Taking a deep breath, he drew on his reserves of patience, as he’d had to do for so many years when he was dealing with Hattie.

‘May I ask why?’ he said eventually.

‘I don’t like her,’ Hattie replied quickly. ‘I mean, she’s not exactly your type, is she?’

‘And you’re the expert on what my type is, are you?’ Will shot back, then kicked himself.

‘Whatever it is, it’s not *her*.’ Hattie’s voice was dripping with scorn. ‘She’s so... *weird*.’

Later, Will would spend a sleepless night trying to remind himself that Hattie was just hitting out, that she had no grounds to call Polly weird, and that, as usual, his daughter was just on the defensive because the situation was unfamiliar, but standing in the kitchen, seeing her eyes blazing with anger and defiance, daring him to lose his rag, she looked so like her mother that he lost what little patience he had.

‘That’s enough, Harriet,’ he said, trying to keep his voice as low and neutral as he could. ‘I told you about Polly so that you wouldn’t feel you were being excluded from my life. Because I wanted you to know. Not so that you could continue to be the spoiled brat you’ve been acting like ever since we moved down here. Why can’t you try to be positive, for once?’

‘What the hell have I got to be positive about?’ Hattie’s voice was rising. ‘If you want me to be happy about the fact that you’ve got a new girlfriend, you’ll be waiting a long time, Dad.’

‘It’s not like that.’ Will’s voice was rising, too. ‘As I told you, it’s early days. I don’t know what’s going to happen.’

‘Well, thanks so much for the reassurance,’ Hattie said, voice dripping with scorn. ‘It makes me feel so much better to be kept in the loop.’ She turned to leave the kitchen, but before she did, she looked back at him. ‘And if I am a spoiled brat, Dad, maybe it’s because you were never around to spend time with me growing up and just threw money at us instead. Have you thought about that?’ With that, she stomped out of the kitchen and the next thing Will heard was the violent slamming of her bedroom door.

Will leaned back against the kitchen counter, his heart racing nineteen to the dozen. That had gone about as well as he’d expected, and he hadn’t even got around to discussing what Colin had overheard. He had the feeling if he went upstairs to continue the conversation now, he’d get even shorter shrift.

‘Shit...’ he muttered, shaking his head. He never should have said anything. Hattie was obviously far too raw to act rationally. Her mother’s betrayal had knocked her for six and it seemed the news that Will might be moving on had triggered many of the same emotions.

‘Dad?’

Will looked up from the floor tile he’d been studying intently and saw

Maeve, looking small and vulnerable, standing in the kitchen doorway.

‘Are you OK?’ she said quietly, worry writ large all over her face.

Will mustered the best smile he could. ‘I’m fine, sweetheart.’

‘Hattie went off on one, did she?’

Crossing the kitchen, Will wrapped his arms around Maeve. ‘You could say that,’ he murmured.

‘She’ll come around.’ Maeve’s voice was muffled against his chest. ‘She’s just upset and angry about everything.’

Will closed his eyes briefly as he felt the beginnings of a stress headache encroaching. ‘Well, I wish she wasn’t quite so angry with me.’

‘It’s not you,’ Maeve replied. ‘You could have told us you were dating Beyoncé and she’d have kicked off. She’s in a bad place right now.’

Will broke away from his daughter and looked her square in the face, his hands on her shoulders. ‘Since when did you get so old and wise?’ he asked in bemusement.

‘Since I saw that you really like Polly,’ Maeve said gently. ‘I could see it in your eyes when you were telling us. You’re hoping this gets serious, aren’t you?’

Will shook his head. ‘You’re too perceptive for your own good sometimes, Miss Maeve,’ he said. ‘But yes, I do really like her. That doesn’t mean I’m going to rush into anything, and especially not when your sister’s so upset about it.’

‘Don’t worry about her,’ Maeve said. ‘She’s still gutted about Marius, really. She’s just taking it out on you. She’ll come round.’

As they walked back into the living room to watch an episode of the show they’d been bingeing, Will could only hope that Maeve was right. And he wondered when, if ever, would be the right time to raise his concerns about what Colin had said. He couldn’t say he was looking forward to it. Not one little bit.

In the few days between their snow-filled encounter and the Yuletide Ball, Polly and Will didn't manage to snatch much time together. Polly was busy in the shop, with a sudden flurry of locals all requesting posh frocks for the upcoming event at Roseford Hall, and she had an abundance of online orders to fulfil, too. They'd texted and called a few times, though, and Will had popped into the shop for a quick chat, although it had been during one of Polly's busier spells so she hadn't been able to stop for long. As a consequence, Polly couldn't wait to see him at the ball, and was fizzing with excitement at the prospect of an evening in his company, and in such auspicious surroundings as Roseford Hall.

Will hadn't elaborated on his planned conversation with Hattie and Maeve, other than to say that it had happened. This was a slight worry, as Polly wasn't sure just how much they knew about how far things had progressed between herself and Will, but she hoped she'd get the chance to find out tonight how they were feeling about their father's new relationship.

The Yuletide Ball was a tradition that the British Heritage Fund had reinstated last year, as an opportunity to raise funds for the Roseford estate in the winter season. It was a hark back to earlier times in Roseford Hall's history, when the lords of the manor would invite friends, business associates and other movers and shakers for a stay of up to three days in the house, the middle night of which would be the ball.

These days, the ball took place on the second Saturday in December, and the guest list was open to those who wanted to shell out the money for a ticket. It also included many members of BHF staff and acted as a thank you

for their hard work over the year.

Polly knew she mustn't jump the gun as far as Will was concerned, but it had been so long since she'd felt the excitement of such a powerful attraction to another person. She smiled as, with impeccable timing, her most recent ex-girlfriend, Jenna, texted her a cheery 'Merry Christmas'. She and Jenna had split amicably and they still kept in touch. For a long time, Polly had wondered if Jenna was 'The One', but she'd reconciled herself that she'd been 'The One For Then', instead. Now, she couldn't help wondering what the future held.

Dressing carefully in the beautiful, midnight blue Grecian-style evening gown that she'd had her eye on for a while, she fastened a diamond pendant that had once belonged to her grandmother around her neck. Her outfit had been a bridesmaid's dress that its former owner had donated six months ago, and it was elegance personified. It emphasised her curves, while flattering them, and skimmed her hips to fall to a long skirt. Her shoes, stack heeled rather than stiletto, as she was mindful of the icy pavements between her place and Roseford Hall, gave her an extra couple of inches in height, taking her to a statuesque five-foot-ten. Will, at over six feet tall, would still have the height advantage.

Her newly curled, piled up dark hair was swept off her face, and she paused to consider the final piece of her outfit. Was it too much? Would she look like an idiot for choosing it over a more sensible coat? Shaking her head, she slid the black velvet cloak with its dark blue lining off the hanger, and before she could change her mind, she slipped it around her shoulders. She was well known for the pieces she sold in the shop; why not lean into that tonight?

It wasn't often that she felt like a Disney princess, but there was something about the frost in the air, the festive decorations adorning the interiors and exteriors of the houses and businesses lining the street leading up to Roseford Hall that made Polly feel as though she really was stepping into a fairytale.

The effect of this was increased as she saw more people in evening dresses making their way to the wrought iron gates of Roseford Hall, and a steady stream of cars doing the same. She half expected to see a coach and horses out of the corner of her eye.

The gates were propped open to admit the guests, and either side of the driveway, contributing to the atmosphere, a series of candle torches had been

dug into the grass verges, lighting the way around to the main entrance of the house. The wreaths of holly and other evergreens on both gateposts added to the overall evocation of a time past, a throwback night of fun and frolics, and Polly's sense of excitement grew with every step.

Bringing her heady thoughts back to earth, a more prosaic note was added by a couple of BHF volunteers in their maroon sweatshirts and company issue parkas standing by the entrance to the house, checking tickets. Polly fumbled in her clutch bag and found hers, presenting it to one of them with a smile. As she was guided through the door and chaperoned towards the Great Hall, she felt, with relief, that the sometimes-chilly building had been warmed up nicely for the evening's festivities.

'Polly, hi!' Simon, looking every inch the lord of the manor, greeted her as she began to cross the floor. His immaculate black-tie was, of course, fitted to perfection. Lizzie was standing at his side, in an emerald-green evening dress that went gloriously with her pale skin and dark, almost black hair.

'Grab yourself a drink before they all go.' Simon gestured to the table off to one side of the Great Hall which was groaning with bottles and glasses. Several young servers in black waistcoats stood behind it, carefully dispensing glasses of bubbly.

'Will do,' Polly replied. She smiled at them both and hurried to grab a drink. As she sipped it, she scanned the hall, looking at the throng of arriving guests. She couldn't yet see Maeve, Hattie or Will, but there were plenty of other people she knew. A Yuletide Ball on the doorstep had been a welcome distraction from the cold, dark nights for the residents of Roseford, and they were making the most of it. She smiled at Lucy and Finn who'd just come in. Their wedding was only a handful of days away now, and from their air of excitement, they were more than ready to tie the knot.

And then, just as she was about to finish her first glass of bubbly, she drew a slightly shortened breath at the sight of Will, flanked by Maeve and Hattie, entering the Great Hall. It was Maeve who caught her eye first, looking fabulous in the dress she'd bought at Polly's shop, and then Hattie, in a contrasting crimson outfit, that complimented her skin tone and figure well, even if, to Polly's professional eye, it was a little too loose in places. Then there was Will.

The only word she could use to describe him was stunning. Although he was not conventionally handsome, the close fit of his dinner jacket, with just

a flash of deep red lining as he moved, was exquisite. The single-breasted jacket was buttoned, and the cut of his trousers emphasised those long, still muscular legs to perfection. Hair swept back from his forehead gave him the air of a man used to commanding his environment, and although it might well have been his first visit to Roseford Hall, he projected an impression of being completely at home. It must have been years of having cameras pointed at him, Polly thought, but it was decidedly attractive to see him in 'on' mode.

Before she could move towards him, Will was greeted by a succession of locals and BHF members, who shook his hand warmly and all tried to direct him to the drinks. There wasn't a sign of the animosity that had greeted the renovations and rebuilding of Parson's Grange, Polly thought in amusement as they all fell over themselves to talk to him.

Hattie and Maeve broke away from their father and as they did so, they drifted into Polly's orbit.

'Hey.' Polly smiled as Maeve said hello. 'The dress looks great on you.'

'Thanks.' Maeve grinned. 'Dad treated me to a pair of Louboutins to go with it. What do you think?' She waggled a stiletto-clad foot with the trademark red sole in Polly's direction.

'They go really well,' Polly replied. 'Great choice.'

Hattie, who was hovering nearby and looking distinctly less friendly, glanced Polly up and down, as if she was assessing every inch of what she was wearing. She didn't comment, but her eyes widened slightly when she saw the diamond pendant.

'You look lovely, too, Hattie,' Polly said, aware of the older girl's scrutiny.

'One of Mum's dresses. Balenciaga, I think,' Hattie replied. 'She has great taste.'

Feeling she was being snubbed, Polly smiled gamely. She couldn't compete with Hattie's designer labels, but she felt happy enough with her own appearance not to be too concerned by the casual name-dropping of the high-end designer. 'Well, it's a great colour on you.'

Hattie's expression could have won awards for insincerity.

Fortunately, at that moment, Will, who had fought himself free of the locals who wanted a chat, headed over to where Polly and the girls were standing. His eyes widened as he saw her, and she felt the warmth of being observed so intently rushing over her skin.

'Hi,' Will said, regarding her with such an aura of pleasure that Polly felt

herself relaxing under his gaze. 'That's a knockout dress.'

'What, this old thing?' Polly held his gaze. 'Just something I found in the back of the stock cupboard!'

Will laughed. 'Well, wherever it came from, you look great. And that cloak is great, too.'

'Getting rather warm, actually,' Polly replied. 'I think I might have to find somewhere to stash it before the evening really gets going.'

'I can take that for you,' a waistcoat-clad server interjected. 'I'll put it in the coat room off the main hall.'

'Thank you.' Polly smiled. Taking the cloak off, she adjusted the front of the dress a little, noticing Will's eyes darting over her as she did so. Another good sign, she thought. After the night they'd spent together at Parson's Grange, she was more than ready for a repeat performance. If not tonight, then hopefully soon. She only hoped he was, too.

Will was, if he was being honest, completely blown away by just how wonderful Polly looked in her dress. He'd got so used to seeing her in stylish but everyday clothes, that to see her dressed so elegantly knocked him for six. He was, of course, well used to being around beautiful women who took a lot of time on their appearance (he'd been a football player in the time of peak WAG, after all), but there was something about the way Polly looked tonight that made his breath hitch in his throat and his heart beat a whole lot faster. Whereas many of the women who'd been the partners of his teammates had had a coterie of stylists and make-up professionals at their disposal at the crook of a perfectly manicured fingernail, Polly had made herself look desirable and sensational with none of that. Sam, his ex-wife, would have been wildly envious of Polly's natural beauty, enhanced by well applied cosmetics and her own fabulous style.

Realising he was staring, he tore his eyes away from Polly, and tried to focus on what Maeve had been saying. He also noticed that Hattie was looking as wintry as the night outside. If only she'd thaw out a bit about Polly! He still didn't know how he was ever going to win *that* battle. Things had barely improved since he'd talked to his daughters about his new relationship, and he still hadn't managed to discuss the other, more unsettling concern with Hattie for fear of setting her off again. He knew he was being a coward, that he ought to just take the plunge and talk to her, but he couldn't work out how to broach it. Determined to at least try to rebuild some bridges tonight, he turned to her.

'Do you want a drink, Hat? I'm sure there's something on the table that

you'd like.'

'I'll get one later,' Hattie replied. She was still staring at Polly, who was getting visibly uncomfortable under the scrutiny.

'That really is a beautiful dress, Hattie,' Polly said. 'You have a great eye for these things.'

Hattie looked to Will as if she was trying not to smile at the compliment before her expression shuttered off again. 'Thanks,' she said quickly. 'I think I will get a drink, Dad.' And with that, she marched off.

'Well, I think we'd better mingle,' Polly said. Will noticed the sharp brightness in her tone. She was clearly taking Hattie's behaviour to heart. Will felt a rush of frustration that Hattie was being so openly hostile. Whatever her thoughts about his being in a new relationship, it was unfair of Hattie to put Polly at the centre of her upset. Combined with the desire to be closer to Polly, this was going to be a very long night.

Roseford Hall certainly looked the part though, he thought, as he cast his eye around the building. The Great Hall was decked out in seasonal splendour, with branches of evergreen, swathes of holly and strategically placed bunches of mistletoe hanging from every shelf, fireplace and architrave. Their scent permeated the warming air of the room, helped along by the fires in the grate, and if the guests hadn't all been in modern evening dress, Will would have sworn he'd been taken back in time. The musicians who were playing in the upper gallery, a string quartet, added to this sensation, and Will paused to appreciate the sights and sounds of the party.

Finishing his glass of bubbly, he glanced around for Polly and Hattie, but they had, for the time being, disappeared. Maeve was hovering by his side looking rather unsure about what to do with herself, and Will gave her an encouraging smile. 'I know this must be a bit weird,' he said in an undertone, 'but it's nice to be in such an historic building, isn't it?'

Maeve nodded. 'It is.'

'Have you managed to get in touch with the people who run this place yet, to ask about an internship?'

Shaking her head, Maeve gave a rueful smile. 'Not yet. Maybe I could talk to someone tonight.'

Will was about to recommend that his daughter collared Simon for a chat, when, with impeccable timing, the man himself headed in their direction, Lizzie by his side.

'Hi,' Simon said as he got to them. 'Thanks for coming. Are you having a

good time?’

‘This place looks great,’ Will replied. ‘You’ve done a terrific job.’

Simon looked pleased but qualified the expression when he answered, ‘Not really me, I’m afraid. The BHF put most of this together, but Roseford’s best florist had a lot to do with the decor.’ He smiled at Lizzie.

‘All part of the service, my lord,’ Lizzie teased. Then, looking back at Will, she introduced herself to Maeve.

Maeve, who’d suddenly gone shy, stammered an introduction. Will realised that, despite her desire to come and work at Roseford Hall, she was too nervous to approach Simon herself. Quickly, he filled Simon and Lizzie in on Maeve’s hopeful plan.

‘Well,’ Simon said, once Will had finished, ‘I know the BHF does take on volunteers and paid interns. I’m sure, if you put in an application, they’d be delighted to hear from you. And you’re welcome to come and have a look around beforehand, so you can get the lie of the land, so to speak.’

‘Thank you,’ Maeve enthused. ‘That would be awesome. I want to study Art History at uni, so it would be brilliant to be able to work with the Roseford collection. I’ve read so much about it since Dad said we were moving here, and if I was able to really get close to some of the pieces, it would be great experience for the course. I’m especially keen on seeing the Joshua Reynolds and your turn of the century ancestors, if that’s OK.’

Simon smiled with pleasure. ‘I’m sure that could be arranged. These days I need to run everything past my benevolent benefactors, the British Heritage Fund, but I’ll put in a good word.’

‘Awesome!’ Maeve said again. ‘Thank you so much, er, Lord Treloar.’

‘Oh, just call me Simon,’ the Tenth Lord of Roseford replied. ‘Everyone else does.’

Maeve turned back to Will. ‘Did you hear that, Dad?’

Will laughed. ‘Standing right next to you, daughter.’ He looked at Simon again as, excited, Maeve excused herself to get a drink. ‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘She’s absolutely dead set on Art History as a degree, and, as you can see, very enthusiastic. She’ll make the most of the opportunity if she gets it, I’m sure.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ Simon replied. ‘She seems like a lovely girl.’

‘They both are,’ Will said, not wanting to leave Hattie out. ‘I’ve been very lucky with them.’ He glanced across the Great Hall and saw Maeve in conversation with one of the servers who was sorting out the soft drinks, a

boy who looked only slightly younger than Maeve herself. They seemed to have hit it off.

‘Oh, that’s Gabe,’ Simon replied. ‘He had a ticket for tonight but he wanted to work and earn some money instead. He’s a sweet boy.’

‘Nice of you to say that,’ a voice interjected as another couple joined them. The man, who had a stern demeanour but whose face broke into a brief smile as he approached, shook Simon’s hand and then turned to Will.

‘Will Sutherland, meet Chris Charlton and Stella Simpson,’ Simon said. ‘They own Halstead House at the other end of Roseford. Chris renovated Halstead from the wreck it was into something truly beautiful, and, unlike me, didn’t need the help of a national heritage organisation to do it!’

‘But definitely needed the assistance of my partner in crime,’ Chris replied quickly. ‘Stella abandoned her scurrilous life as a journalist to help me create the writers’ and artists’ retreat at Halstead House, for which I’m eternally grateful.’

Will’s back stiffened. He’d had enough experience of the rough end of the press to be wary of anyone who went by the title of journalist, even if this man claimed that Stella had left the job.

‘It’s nice to meet you,’ he said guardedly as he shook both Chris and Stella’s hands.

‘You too.’ Stella gave Will a friendly smile and Will relaxed a fraction. ‘Don’t be surprised if Chris’ son Gabe sneaks away from his post to try to talk to you at some point this evening. He’s a massive football fan, and he was very excited when he heard you were moving to Roseford.’

Will smiled back. ‘It’s always a pleasure to talk to young people – I’d be more than happy to have a chat.’

Stella kept smiling. ‘How are you finding life in Roseford?’

‘Is that an on the record or off the record question?’ Will asked. He was only half joking.

Stella laughed. ‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘I left the journalism game some time ago when I became Roseford Hall’s writer in residence. Now I’m running the writers’ side of the retreat, I’m busy enough that I don’t need to be working for the press any more. It’s a neighbourly enquiry, that’s all.’

‘Sorry,’ Will replied, chastened. ‘I suppose I still hear the word “journalist” and my guard goes up. They haven’t exactly been kind over the years.’

‘I know,’ Stella sympathised. ‘I’m not particularly a football fan, but you

did get put through the wringer a fair bit, didn't you? Especially after the Marius Stone revelations. It can't have been easy.'

'It wasn't,' Will said. 'But thankfully that's behind me now. And Marius is doing great.' Thinking about those notes he'd written on his computer, Will thought it might be a good idea, since he had a writer in front of him, to be the one asking the questions for a change. He didn't want to give too much away as he'd not spoken to anyone yet about his vague plans to write a memoir, but Stella seemed trustworthy, and he instinctively liked her. With her merry smile, her quietly confident demeanour and her ability to put him immediately at ease, he didn't feel quite so weird about it.

As conversation flowed, Will relaxed even more. Stella and Chris were a lovely couple and were able to fill him in on some of the local highlights and interests, and Will was able, subtly, to begin to ask Stella about what her work at Halstead House involved. He was fascinated by the descriptions of some of the activities and courses she ran, and before he knew it, he was broaching the subject of his potential memoir. Maybe it was the bubbly loosening his tongue, or maybe it was that Stella's skills as a journalist had encouraged him to open up, but a little time later, Will blushed as he found himself suddenly, and surprisingly, self-conscious. He had been deep in conversation with Stella about it all. The problem was, he now felt as though the thoughts he'd been having were ridiculous; what could he possibly have to say that anyone else would be interested in reading? Perhaps the whole idea had been suggested by that literary agent as a way of blowing smoke up his arse. It wasn't unheard of for people to fly kites and see where they caught in his line of work.

'I think it's a really interesting idea.' Stella's response did a lot to dispel some of those doubts. She paused, as if considering how to ask the next question. 'Would you, er, be writing it by yourself, or would you be working with a ghost?'

Will tried not to feel affronted. He knew full well that plenty of celebrities, performers and sports people employed a ghost writer to make the process easier and more manageable, especially if they were still working full time, but in his current position, having decided during the week to turn down the City coaching job, he had a lot of time to devote to the subject.

'I'd like to have a go at writing it myself,' Will replied. 'But I might need some advice. Can you recommend any courses?'

'Leave it with me,' Stella replied. 'I'll look into what's out there. I'm

thinking about running a life writing course at Halstead House around Easter time next year. If that's not too late, I could put you down as a possible?'

'That would be great.' Will felt a flare of excitement in his gut. 'I've had some interest already from a literary agent,' he said. 'But they didn't really give me a deadline. It would be great to get something written if they do decide to go forward with it.'

'Lovely.' Stella beamed. 'Well, keep me posted, and if you want to discuss it further, my door's always open.'

As they were chatting, Polly, who'd popped to the drinks table a while back, returned with two more glasses of Cava. Handing one to Will, she exchanged pleasantries with Stella until Stella excused herself to go and check in on Gabe.

'See you later,' Will smiled. 'I'll be in touch.'

'I look forward to it.' Stella smiled.

Polly raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'That sounds intriguing.'

Will smiled and took a sip of his Cava. 'It could be. I've not decided yet.' He didn't immediately tell Polly what he was thinking; it was one thing to discuss it with a professional, but quite another to raise it with someone else, even if he was beginning to fall for Polly. He still felt the weirdest sense of imposter syndrome when he thought about writing and didn't quite trust himself to talk about it without curling up in embarrassment.

Playfully, Polly shook her head. 'Don't tell me then. I like a man of mystery.'

Will looked down at her and saw the irresistible sparkle in her eyes. Ever since he'd been snowed in with her at Parson's Grange, he'd had the urge to spend another night with her, exploring her body and losing himself in the sensations that being so close to another person could bring. Maybe, once the girls had been seen safely home, he could sneak out...

'Hi Dad!'

Will was dragged out of those thoughts by the chirpy voice of his younger daughter, returning from the drinks table.

'Hey you,' he said fondly. 'How's your evening going?'

'Great!' Maeve beamed. 'Simon found me by the drinks and introduced me to the Roseford Hall art curator. Although I'll have to do an official application form to join the team, she seemed confident that it would be fine. I might even get to start in January!'

'That's brilliant news!' Polly interjected before Will could.

Will felt a smile stealing its way across his face as he saw just how well Maeve and Polly seemed to be getting on.

‘Thank you for suggesting it,’ he said to Polly. ‘It was kind of you.’

‘Oh, it’s no trouble,’ Polly replied. ‘Simon’s a decent old thing, and I’m sure he was happy to help.’

‘Less of the old, if you don’t mind.’ Will, who was over forty by a few years, pretended to wince. ‘He’s a bit younger than me, I think.’

Polly grinned. ‘A little. But he seems a fair bit older!’

The evening ambled on in an amicable way, and Will began to feel more at ease in the glorious surroundings of Roseford Hall. Quite a few people had greeted him, and so far, none of them had confronted him over his building work. Maybe it was having Polly by his side, maybe it was the second, and then third, glass of Cava, but he really was beginning to feel festive. The only thing that niggled slightly was that Hattie hadn’t spoken to him since they’d arrived. But he assumed she was somewhere, perhaps making new friends. He kept his eyes peeled for her – she should have been distinctive in her red dress, but he hadn’t spotted her for ages.

‘Any idea where your sister is?’ he asked Maeve, as she passed him on the way to the heated marquee where a disco had been set up for those guests who were inclined to dance.

Maeve shook her head. ‘Why don’t you text her if you’re worried? She’s bound to be around here somewhere.’

‘I might just do that,’ Will replied as Maeve disappeared in the direction of the marquee.

Polly, who’d been standing with him for most of the night, turned a sympathetic look in his direction. ‘I assume Hattie didn’t take your news about us too well?’

‘You could say that.’ Will gave a hollow laugh. He wrapped an arm around Polly and drew her closer to him. ‘But she’ll come round. She’s not a kid any more. She needs to stop behaving like one.’

As Polly raised her eyes towards his, he saw a fleeting look of uncertainty in her expression before she covered it with a bright smile. ‘I’m sure you’re right.’

Ducking his head to give her a brief kiss, Will hoped against hope that he was. He was beginning to realise that he wanted to spend time with Polly, a *lot* more time. And if Hattie couldn’t accept that, it was going to be very tricky indeed.

Arm in arm, Polly and Will strolled through the Great Hall and out to the marquee. The music, a mix of nineties' classics and more modern floor fillers, was pumping out from the canvas, and there were already a fair few people starting to sway on the wooden floor that had been set up. As they ducked inside, Polly immediately spotted Maeve and she could feel Will's back relax in relief when they both spotted Hattie with her a few seconds later.

'I can't remember the last time I saw them dancing together,' Will said. 'Probably some wedding reception or other.' He turned to Polly. 'But at least she looks happier.'

'Do you want to join them?' Polly asked. The prospect of dancing with Will was a lovely one, but she couldn't help thinking that, with Hattie probably scrutinising their every move, it wasn't going to be as enjoyable an experience as she was imagining.

Will shook his head. 'Nope. I'm terrible at it and I make a point of not doing it in public unless I'm very, very drunk.'

Polly laughed. 'I'm sure you're not that bad!'

Raising an eyebrow, Will replied, 'Anything more creative than a shuffle for a slow song and I'm an embarrassment. Or at least that's what the girls tell me.'

'Well, perhaps we can come back when the pace gets a bit more your speed,' Polly said.

They regarded the girls for a little bit longer. Both looked as though they weren't going anywhere for a while, and Polly felt a sudden, mischievous

urge to bend the rules a little.

‘When you’ve finished being an attentive dad, how do you fancy sneaking off with me for ten minutes or so? There’s something I’d like to show you.’

‘Oh, yes?’ Will’s returned smile was equally mischievous. ‘What have you got in mind?’

‘Come with me and you’ll see.’ Taking his hand, she led him away from the marquee, but instead of following the route back to the Great Hall, she turned right and pulled Will towards the archway that led to the bottom of Roseford Hall’s main staircase. Made of pale cream stone, someone had placed a crimson cordon at the bottom of the stairs to stop people from getting up there.

‘Come on!’ Polly giggled. ‘No one’s looking, and it’s a crying shame you’ve not seen the glories of the Long Gallery. It’s one of the highlights of the house.’

‘Are you sure?’ Will’s brow furrowed. ‘It’s cordoned off for a reason.’

‘Oh, it’s probably just to stop people slipping on the steps in terrible shoes!’ Polly whispered conspiratorially. ‘And we’re not nearly drunk enough to worry about that.’

Will grinned. ‘On your head be it. These legs used to be insured for half a million quid, you know!’

‘And I’m sure you’ve taken *very* good care of them!’ Polly, who was actually feeling ever so slightly merry, emboldened by the fizz, hopped over the rope cordoning off the steps to the top storey of Roseford Hall and then took Will’s hand. ‘Come on!’

Will hopped gamely over the rope, and before they could be seen by any passing serving staff, or, heaven forbid, by Simon and Lizzie, he and Polly were scampering up the stone steps towards the Long Gallery.

‘Nearly there.’ Polly felt breathless as they turned another twist in the staircase, and the next thing they knew they were standing at the entrance to the long, open corridor that housed the best of the Treloar family portraits. ‘It’s worth it, I promise.’ She kicked off her shoes and turned to Will, who was looking from one end of the gallery to the other.

‘Wow,’ he said, ‘this really is something.’ He turned back to face Polly, and she smiled up at him.

‘So now you’ve whisked me away up here,’ he said gruffly, putting an arm around her, ‘what are you intending to do with me?’

Polly's heart was beating nineteen to the dozen, especially when Will's warm hand rested so gently on her waist. She was filled with split second ideas of what *exactly* they could do together, but this place, though quiet, was still a little too public for most of them.

'How about we start with this?' she said softly and stood on tiptoe so that her lips delicately brushed his in a kiss. His mouth was everything she remembered, and as she pressed hers to his more firmly, she felt the fullness of his bottom lip, and the warmth of him, and knew that there were going to be far more kisses to come.

Will responded with alacrity, and Polly felt his arms tightening around her as he pulled her closer to deepen the kiss. At first, he was gentle, but as she pressed herself more firmly against him, he returned the pressure with his lips and his torso. His body was hot, and getting more so, and Polly wanted and needed to go further than a secluded spot in the Long Gallery would allow. As she reached up with one hand to run her fingers through his hair, he arched his back towards her, leaving her in no doubt that he was feeling the pleasure every inch as much as she was.

Sliding her hand down his back and under his dinner jacket, she gently tugged his dress shirt out of his trousers and encountered his toned body. She teased his back with her fingertips until she felt him shuddering. As she broke the kiss and looked up, she realised he was laughing.

'Sorry,' he murmured, 'ticklish.'

'I'll bear that in mind.' Polly grinned back, putting her hand back over his shirt.

'Christ, I feel like a horny teenager at a college party,' Will replied. 'And I can't help thinking we're going to get sprung by the head teacher at any moment.'

Polly giggled. She felt giddy, more from the kissing than the booze, and decidedly 'teenagerish' herself. 'Well, we'd better make the most of it, then.' She brought her mouth to Will's again, and just as they were really starting to wish they were somewhere a little more comfortable and private, Will's phone buzzed in his jacket pocket.

'Sorry,' he said, 'it might be one of the girls. I'd better check it.'

'Of course,' Polly replied.

'It's Hattie,' Will said. He shook his head. 'She wants to go home.'

Fighting the disappointment, Polly nodded. 'Fair enough. Dad's taxi it is then?'

‘We walked,’ Will groaned. ‘I don’t ever drink and drive, not even a glass, and I figured I might need some Dutch courage tonight.’ He paused. ‘I was right.’

‘Was that kiss so nerve-wracking?’ Polly teased.

Will let out a long breath. ‘Honestly?’ He laughed. ‘You’ve no idea. I’ve been waiting since we got snowed in to be alone with you again.’ He trailed off and drew her to him. ‘But it was worth every nervous second, I can tell you.’ He dipped his head and kissed her again, and for a long, delicious minute they were wrapped up in each other, forgetting everything else but the sensations.

Reluctantly, Will disentangled himself. ‘I should go and check in on Hattie. And see where Maeve’s got to, as well.’

Polly nodded. ‘Er, do you want to go downstairs together, or shall I give it two minutes?’

Will rumbled a laugh that heated Polly in places she could only hope he’d soon be touching her again. ‘I’m sure no one’s going to spot us. One in trouble, both in trouble, I reckon!’

‘I was thinking more about being spotted by Maeve and Hattie.’ Polly grinned. ‘I’m guessing we still need to be mindful.’ *Especiallly when one of them seems very hostile towards me*, Polly added silently.

Will smiled back at her. ‘Maybe you’re right.’ He tucked his shirt back in and straightened his bowtie. ‘How do I look?’

‘Pretty good to me,’ Polly said softly. His eyes were still wide and full of desire, and there was a definite flush to his cheeks, but hopefully he could put that down to rushing down the steps if he got caught. She couldn’t resist leaning up and giving him a brief kiss again, and she was gratified when he gave a groan against her mouth.

‘We need to find somewhere more private,’ he murmured. ‘And soon, or I’m going to die of frustration.’

‘I thought you ex-footballers were all cold showers and ice baths,’ Polly teased. ‘Perhaps that would do the trick?’

‘It’ll have to be a walk in the cold night air,’ Will replied, grinning. ‘The frost out there’ll be just as effective as an ice bath, I reckon.’

‘Come on then,’ Polly whispered. ‘Let’s sneak back down the stairs before anyone comes up and springs us.’

Slipping her shoes back on, the two of them hurried down the wide, winding stone staircase back to the ground floor. From the music emanating

from the marquee, the DJ was still in full session, and they were optimistic they hadn't been missed.

They rounded the last corner, and just as they were about to hop over the cordon, Polly spotted Simon leaning against the wall of the small space that led from the Great Hall to the stairs.

Smirking at them, he mooched over. 'It unclips, you know,' he said dryly, and demonstrated.

'Thanks,' Polly stammered. 'Er... I was just showing Will the Long Gallery. He hadn't seen it before, and I thought it was a shame it was cordoned off.'

'Evidently.' Simon kept grinning. 'And did you appreciate the view? Must be quite tricky to see anything at night.'

Polly's face started to get hot, and, if she hadn't been such good mates with Lizzie, she would really have felt as though she was in trouble.

'Fear not, Polly Parrott,' Simon replied. 'Your secret is safe with me. We only cordoned it off to stop some of the old trouts from going arse over tit on the stairs, anyway. I'm sure the two of you didn't come to any harm. And most of the paintings have been taken down, so you wouldn't have done any damage up there.'

'We were very careful,' Will said. When he glanced at Polly, she couldn't help a small smirk.

'Well, I'm glad you've been, er, enjoying yourselves,' Simon replied. 'Now, if you fancy a quick boogie, the DJ's going on until midnight, I believe.'

Polly shook her head. 'Not sure I'm up for much dancing in these heels.'

At that moment, Hattie came through the door from the Great Hall, took one look at Polly and Will standing together, turned around and walked right out again.

‘So much for being subtle,’ Will murmured. He turned apologetically to Polly. ‘I’d better get after her. Will you be OK?’

Polly gave him a reassuring smile. ‘Of course.’ He felt a surge of electricity as she reached out and squeezed his hand. ‘Go and see if she’s all right.’

Will, grateful for her patience, hurried back into the Great Hall and, fighting his way through the crowds on the dance floor, spotted Hattie’s retreating back as she headed out of the other door and to the front of the house. He just about made it through the revellers and saw her hurrying away down the driveway, and into the freezing cold night. She hadn’t even bothered grabbing her coat.

‘Hattie!’ he called to her. The dress shoes that went so well with his dinner suit had virtually no purchase on the driveway, even though it had been salted earlier that evening, and his progress was thwarted. Not wanting to break an ankle in pursuit, he focussed on steady steps, calling her name repeatedly until, eventually, she slowed and then stopped about fifty yards in front of him.

By the time Will reached her, she was shivering in the freezing night air. Whipping off his dinner jacket, he slung it around her shoulders, but when he tried to keep his arm around her, she shrugged it off irritably.

‘What’s the matter, Hat?’ he asked gently. ‘Why did you want to go home?’

‘I’m just tired,’ Hattie said flatly.

Will looked at her steadily. ‘Are you sure that’s all it is?’

Hattie couldn't meet his gaze and she glanced away, but not before Will saw the angry glistening of her eyes.

'Tell me what's wrong, Hat,' Will said gently. 'You've been so angry at me for months. And it seems to be getting harder for you.'

'You don't get it, do you, Dad?' Hattie muttered. 'All you wanted to do tonight was stick your tongue down that awful woman's throat. You couldn't care less how I feel.'

'That's not true.' Stung by the reference to Polly, he nonetheless knew better than to take issue with the insult. It would have sent Hattie even more into orbit. 'I want to know what I can do to help you.'

'Then take us back to London!' Hattie exclaimed as the tears spilled over. 'I don't want to be here. It's not my home, it's not your home and I just want to go back.' She was openly crying now, and Will felt his throat constricting at the sight. He gently wrapped an arm around her and drew her closer to him, until she was sobbing in his arms. She'd got awfully thin, he noticed. He'd taken his eye off the ball lately, and he vowed to focus more on his daughters.

'I know, Hat,' he murmured softly into her hair. 'I know how hard this past year has been for you. And I know that moving here has been a real wrench.'

'I miss him, Dad,' Hattie sniffed. 'I miss Marius so much.'

Will's stomach churned uncomfortably at the mention of Marius' name. What had happened to him had been devastating, and part of the reason why he'd taken the job so far away from London. He'd thought that if he'd got Hattie away from the painful memories, then she'd begin to heal that much more quickly. It seemed he'd been wrong.

'I know you do, Hat,' Will said softly. 'I miss Marius too.'

'Why couldn't you have done anything?' Hattie continued. 'Why couldn't the team or the FA have done anything?'

Will tightened his hold on his daughter. This was a conversation they'd had many times. 'I'm so sorry, Hat,' he said as he stroked her hair. 'I know how much you love him.' He started to rock her in his arms, as if she was still the baby that he'd instantly fallen in love with from the moment she'd been born.

Hattie kept crying and with every ragged breath she took, Will's heart broke a little more. It didn't seem to matter that they were two years on from the events that had impacted their lives so deeply; the sadness and frustration

were as raw as they had been when it had all happened.

Eventually, she looked back up at him, her eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. Like the little girl she'd once been, she wiped her nose on the back of her hand. Smiling slightly, Will gave her his handkerchief. 'I'm sorry,' she said softly. 'This was meant to be a good night, wasn't it? And I've ruined it.'

'Don't be daft,' Will reassured her with a squeeze. 'You can't help how you're feeling. I'm just glad you stopped so we could talk.'

'It's just been so hard, being away from my friends, and Marius, too. I want to be there for him but I feel like I can't.' She turned hopeful eyes back at Will, and he knew what she was going to ask before she did. 'Can we go back for a bit, you know, so I can see everyone?'

Will smiled down at her. 'Of course.' But he knew how hard that was going to be. Hattie and Marius had been so close, that what had happened had been a terrible shock. Was going back, revisiting it all, the right thing to do?

'And when I found *her* scarf in the house... I mean, I know you're single now, Dad, but surely you could have stopped yourself from sleeping with the first person you met when we moved here?'

Will stopped in his tracks. 'What?' He was frustratingly reminded of his snatched time with Polly tonight, and the wonderful night they'd had when they'd been snowed in. 'Hattie. We've talked about this. It's early days. I don't want to hide anything from you.'

'But you want it to be more.' Hattie sniffed.

Will thought about his next words carefully. 'Whether I do or I don't... that's kind of up to me and Polly, don't you think?' His tone was gentle, but he still felt Hattie flinch at his words. 'I mean... aside from asking you to be careful, do I ever comment on any of your relationships?'

Hattie laughed. 'Well, there was Jayden, you weren't keen on him, and Trent, who you gave a "gentle" warning to, and Ed...'

It was Will's turn to laugh. 'OK, so maybe in the past I've made a few unsubtle suggestions, but you're nineteen years old now. What you do, and who you choose to do it with is your own business.'

'And what you choose to do is yours?' Hattie sniffed again.

Will smiled. 'Something like that.'

A gentle, contemplative silence settled between them as they regarded one another on the frozen driveway, only broken when Will saw Hattie giving quite a shiver.

'Come on,' he said softly. 'You need to get your coat if we're walking

home.'

Will saw a mixture of expressions crossing his daughter's face. She was clearly on the cusp of a decision: run away back home or concede that he was right.

'OK,' she sighed after a beat.

Will exhaled in relief as Hattie tucked her arm through his to keep herself steady on the icy driveway. As they approached the main entrance to the house once more, Hattie paused.

'I'm sorry, Dad,' she mumbled. 'I didn't mean to kick off. It's just that sometimes I can't get past everything. Mum says I'm not very good at handling change, and I guess I've proved her right.'

This, Will knew, was a huge concession for Hattie, who'd argue until she was blue in the face, sometimes. He decided to take the win.

'It's okay, sweetheart,' he said, pulling her close. 'I get it. Now let's see if we can find your sister and then call it a night, shall we?'

Hattie nodded. 'Sounds good. I'll make you one of my special caramel hot chocolates when we get back.'

Will, who couldn't stop himself from thinking about those amazing kisses with Polly in the Long Gallery, summoned all of the enthusiasm he could. Hot chocolate was clearly the most exciting way this evening was going to end.

The morning after the ball, Polly was pleased to see a series of affectionate texts from Will, thanking her for a lovely night and apologising for having had to rush off so quickly. She texted back to reply that there was nothing to apologise for. Hattie and Maeve would always come first, she knew that. If she had a place in Will's life on a more long-term basis, she would be happy to accept that.

That train of thought made her nervous. She'd already fallen far harder for him than she'd have thought possible in this short time, but, as Jenna had once told her, 'When you know, you know.' And it really did feel as though she was falling in love with Will, scary as that thought was. She only hoped that Hattie would come around in time and, if not be friendly, then at least suspend hostilities.

Will must have had an inkling about her thoughts, as the next text she received was one inviting her to lunch with him and the girls. He'd suggested the neutral ground of the Treloar Arms, which Polly was glad about. It meant that if things went sideways, she could make a quick, dignified exit. Polly texted back that she'd love to, and then tried not to think about what it was going to be like to face Hattie over the dinner table and make civilised conversation. She wasn't worried about Maeve; she knew the girl liked her. But Hattie... she was a whole different kettle of fish.

Walking into the Treloar Arms at lunchtime, she found, to her relief, that Will, Hattie and Maeve were already there, at a table near the fireplace. Will stood as she approached and gave her a peck on the cheek. 'Thanks for coming,' he said in an undertone. A little louder, he asked, 'Can I get you a

drink?’

‘Just a white wine and soda, please,’ Polly replied. She wanted to keep her wits about her during lunch. She didn’t want to give Hattie any ammunition.

Surprisingly, Hattie gave her a broad smile as she sat down at the table.

‘Hey,’ Polly said, smiling back. ‘Did you two have a good time last night?’

Maeve grinned. ‘It was awesome! And I’ve spent the morning writing my application for an internship, so hopefully I’ll be able to start in January.’

‘That’s brilliant,’ Polly replied. ‘I’m so glad you’re feeling confident about it.’ She turned to Hattie. ‘And did you have a good time, Hattie?’

‘It was nice,’ Hattie replied, eyes dropping for a split second before she brightened again.

Will, fortunately, returned to the table with Polly’s drink before the ensuing silence could get too awkward.

‘Dave says the roast beef’s local and excellent,’ he said as he sat back down. ‘But you’re welcome to have what you want, girls.’

‘The beef would be great,’ Polly said quickly. Maeve and Hattie said they’d have the same, and when the server came to take their order, it was roast beef all round.

They discussed their plans for Christmas while they waited for their food, and although Will’s brow furrowed when Polly said she’d be spending hers alone, since her grandfather would still be on his cruise over the festive period, he didn’t suggest that she join them at Parson’s Grange. That would have been a step too far, Polly concluded. Besides, she was just looking forward to the shop being closed for a couple of days, and the chance to veg out and relax.

‘Are you excited about your first Christmas in a new house?’ Polly asked them.

Will grinned. ‘Well, it’s not quite how we planned it, but I’m sure it’ll be great.’

Maeve agreed, telling Polly about her plans for the Christmas decorations, which they still hadn’t unpacked. Hattie, Polly noticed, said nothing. Still, she thought, sitting around the table with them was progress. She felt herself beginning to relax: it was a good feeling, being accepted around this particular family table.

‘The girls are going to their mother’s on the twenty-seventh, so we’ve got

lots of time to spend together before then.'

'Except for your trip to the Football Manager of the Year awards,' Hattie reminded him. 'Aren't you going to be away for a night for that?'

'Oh yes,' Will replied. 'But I won't be away any longer than I need to be. I want to spend as much time as I can with you both before the new year begins and you're back at uni, Hattie.'

'You haven't got a date for it yet, have you Dad?' Maeve's eyes were glinting with mischief as she glanced at Polly, who tried not to notice.

'Well, er, no,' Will replied, obviously flustered. 'But it's no big deal. I'm only presenting an award, not receiving one.'

Polly suppressed a smile. Maeve was far from subtle. She was surprised, though, to see that Hattie, counter to her usual behaviour around Polly, was also smiling. She could have fallen off her chair when Hattie then chipped in.

'Well, it seems rude not to ask Polly,' Hattie said. 'I mean, you two are seeing each other, right?'

From Will's immediate look of surprise, Polly knew that this was the last thing he'd been expecting to hear from his elder daughter.

'Well, er, yes, quite,' Will stammered. 'But to be honest, Hat, I'm surprised you're agreeing with your sister.' He didn't add the *because you've been so difficult about it*, to the end of the sentence, but all three of them felt it in the air.

Hattie looked down at her glass, as if summoning the effort to say what she was going to say next.

'It's fine, Dad,' she said softly. 'I'd rather you went with Polly than had to go alone. After all, Mum and Ben will be there, won't they? Isn't it better to have someone in your corner?'

Will seemed at a loss for words, and Polly felt huge relief that the server returned at that point with the first of their food.

'Thank you,' she said as the enormous plate of roast beef with all the trimmings was placed in front of her.

There was a silence around the dinner table as all three of them tucked in, as much to do with avoiding awkward conversation as it was for the tastiness of the food. Eventually, though, Will spoke again.

'So, do you think you might be able to get away for the night and accompany me to this awards thing?' he asked, as he reached for his drink.

Polly's mouth went dry, and she took a sip of her own drink before responding. 'What date is it? I might be able to if it's not too close to

Christmas.'

Will told her, and she nodded. 'That should be fine, if it's just for the one night. And will we be back in time for me to reopen the shop in the afternoon?'

'Should be,' Will replied. 'We can drive back bright and early, so you shouldn't lose too much trade.'

'Then it's a yes, I'd love to.' Polly smiled. She caught Maeve's eye, who beamed back at her, and even Hattie looked mildly pleased. *More progress*, she thought. But she'd better not push it by commenting further.

'I'll fill you in on the details later on,' Will continued, 'but it's another black-tie gig, I'm afraid.'

'I'm sure I can find something in my stock cupboard.' Polly grinned. 'It's one of the perks of my business.'

'Can I help you choose?' Maeve asked. 'Mum and Dad went to loads of these things when they were married, and I know all about the kinds of dresses people wear.'

Polly smiled at Maeve's eagerness. 'Of course,' she replied. Privately, a little part of her felt suddenly nervous about attending such a high-profile event on Will Sutherland's arm. There were bound to be photographers there, and, even worse, lots of well-groomed women who had access to an army of stylists and fashion advisers. Would something out of her pre-loved collection really cut it?

As if he sensed her apprehension, Will reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. 'Don't worry,' he said softly, 'whatever you choose, you're going to look amazing.'

Polly smiled back at him. 'Thank you.' It was nice to know that Will would think so, but it still didn't stop her feeling nervous. At least Hattie finally seemed to be coming to terms with the possibility of Polly being a part of Will's life, though. That, at least, was worthy of a little optimism.

The days running up to the Football Manager of the Year awards seemed to fly by in a flurry of activity. Polly had a steady flow of customers, and was thankful that Roseford Hall's 'Tudor Christmas Experience' was bringing in those winter tourists who also spent some time shopping on the main street. A few years ago, Roseford would have been dead at this time of year except for the locals, and it was lovely to see that, even in the cold weather, the village was buzzing with people.

Polly and Will had shared a couple of cosy evenings since the lunch at the Treloar Arms, although Polly had preferred Will to come to her place rather than to join him at Parson's Grange while the girls were at home. It felt less like they were flaunting things if they were on her turf. While reassuring her that she didn't need to worry, Polly didn't want to risk a return of Hattie's earlier hostility. The young woman hadn't apologised to Polly for her previous behaviour but seemed more quietly accepting of their developing relationship than she had been. Will, being the slightly overprotective father that he was, had always returned to Parson's Grange at the end of the evening. Tonight was the first time he was going to leave his daughters alone for the whole night in the new house, and Polly knew he was feeling nervous about that, too.

A couple of days before the night away, Polly picked out a dress from her stock that had met with Maeve's approval and was trying not to think about what could go wrong – the thought of falling arse over tit in front of Will's ex-wife and a bunch of other WAGs was mortifying. She'd tried to mitigate against this possibility with the same pair of stack heeled shoes she'd worn

for the Yuletide Ball. You couldn't be too careful, she thought.

And now, here they were. Polly huffed out a nervous breath as Will pulled into the underground car park of the world-famous Savoy Hotel. The drive down had been an opportunity to try to acclimatise to the possibilities of the evening, and also a great chance for her to talk to Will. Somehow, being side by side in the car gave them freedom to be more open with each other. In addition, being away from Roseford and the possibility of being interrupted by Hattie or Maeve was especially liberating, although Will had already phoned Maeve to make sure they were both OK.

'So, are you ready for tonight?' Polly asked as he carefully parked the car in the already crowded car park. He'd been offered valet parking, but he preferred to put the car in a space himself.

'I think so.' Will's voice was light, but Polly got the distinct impression he was accustomed to hiding his nerves. After years of post-match interviews, she supposed it became a bit of an art. 'But I'm glad you're with me to hold my hand.' He reached out and squeezed one of hers, which lay in her lap. 'Are *you* ready?'

Polly laughed. 'I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bit nervous. After all, this is your territory and I'm a stranger.' *Not to mention I'm a bit wary of meeting your ex-wife*, she added silently. Hattie was one thing, but coming face to face with Sam Sutherland was a whole other prospect.

'I know it sounds crazy, but don't let it worry you. It's just a bunch of people, after all. And as soon as I've presented this award, we can leave any time you want.' His eyes glimmered mischievously. 'I mean, they've put me up in a suite. Might as well take full advantage of it.'

The nerves in Polly's abdomen turned into liquid tingles at the intensity in Will's eyes.

'Well, let's get this party started, shall we?' Will, clearly pulling himself together, opened the door of the car and strode around to the boot to retrieve their luggage. Polly hurriedly got out too and collected her overnight bag.

When they checked in, they headed straight upstairs to the suite. Polly's eyes grew wider as they crossed the threshold into the most luxurious bedroom she'd ever seen. The size of the bed alone was mind blowing. It was even bigger than Will's. And the tasteful decor was certainly several cuts above anywhere she'd stayed before. She kicked off her shoes and padded across the thick carpet to look at the view, which was, as she'd expected, stunning. London was laid out in front of her: the London Eye on the skyline

to her right and the Shard to the left. The Thames in all its green glory stretched out alongside them like a sleeping mermaid.

‘What time’s kick off?’ Polly asked as she turned back to glance at Will, who’d put his overnight case up on one of the luggage stands along the far wall.

‘Downstairs for drinks by seven,’ Will replied. ‘And, if I have my way, back up here before too long...’ His smile was loaded with suggestion. He crossed the room and joined her by the window. ‘Not bad,’ he said, nuzzling her neck. ‘But I’d be happier to ignore it and look at you for a while.’

Polly laughed. ‘That’s such a corny line!’

‘That’s as may be’ – Will continued to kiss her neck – ‘but it’s the truth.’ They walked hand in hand to the bed and spent the next couple of hours enjoying its quality.

Pre-dinner drinks did nothing to calm Polly’s nerves. The fizz might have been fine champagne, but all she could think about was that sooner or later she was going to catch sight of Sam Sutherland. And the thought of seeing Will’s ex-wife was sending her into a tailspin of anxiety. She didn’t know why; their marriage was long over, and Will had the decree absolute to prove it. He was over Sam, and very much falling for her, if his recent affectionate behaviour was anything to go by. But it was only natural to feel apprehensive, and maybe a little jealous of someone Will had once loved and had two children with. Even more so, because Sam, not Will, had been the one to end things.

Polly tried to focus on the beauty and splendour of the Savoy Hotel’s Lancaster

Ball Room, where the awards were being held. She could well imagine the atmosphere of the place had been electrifying when, as the guidebook in their suite had told her, George Gershwin had premiered *Rhapsody in Blue* in the space, or, even more poignantly, Anna Pavlova, in the autumn of her career, had danced the dying swan on the stage. Its beautiful, pale blue panelled walls and the intricate frescos felt like something out of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and the chandeliers cast everything in an opulent, *fin de siècle* glow.

That all the guests were the assembled great and good of the footballing world, and their respective partners, felt a touch surreal, especially when Polly beheld some of the more out-there fashions on display. But then, if you had access to the bank balance of some of the richest sportsmen on the planet,

why wouldn't you go overboard on your couture? Feeling a tad disloyal to her own sex at that thought, she was relieved when she recognised several of the players' and managers' wives, who were wealthy in their own right. Victoria Beckham had done a lot to enhance the reputation of the WAG by starting her own fashion business, and now these women were successful because they wanted to be, not just because they'd married a footballer.

'It's like nothing I've ever seen before,' Polly breathed. She forgot how nervous she'd been feeling about coming downstairs in a second-hand dress, albeit a designer one, and concentrated on the beauty of her surroundings. 'Please tell me your life isn't like this all the time?'

Will rumbled a self-deprecating laugh. 'Only when there's an R in the month.'

Their progress was impeded by people stopping to shake his hand and enquire after his life, and Polly realised just how many links he'd made in the footballing world after a long career. She also noticed that everyone seemed genuinely pleased to see him. Will was among his peers here, and she was fascinated to see him in his element, even if the surroundings were especially auspicious. Despite the circumstances of his exit from the last manager's job he'd held, it seemed that people in this trade didn't hold it against him.

All around her were ex-players-turned-managers, those who were now pundits for radio and television (my goodness, was that Gary Lineker?) and, even though it was years since she'd last watched a game of club football, the knowledge of the beautiful game seemed to permeate her brain by osmosis. Grandpa had taught her more about football than she'd realised, she thought as familiar faces drifted by.

'Everything all right?' Will asked as he finished his conversation with the latest person to waylay him on their way to the table plan.

'Fine.' Polly gave him a swift smile. 'Just a bit overawed, that's all.'

'Don't be.' Will gave her a grin. 'We're all a bunch of lucky ball jockeys at the end of the day, who happen to do what we love for a living. No reason to feel like that.'

'And is that what you're going to say in your speech?' Polly teased. 'Are your audience in for a Ricky Gervais-style roasting?'

Will continued to smile. 'I didn't say they don't have colossal egos! Well, some of them at least.'

They approached the table plan, and Polly scanned it, looking for where they'd been seated. It took a while to find their names, but as she did, she

couldn't help drawing in a short, shocked breath. There, on a table of eight near the stage were their names, and the names *Sam Sutherland* and *Ben Sanderson*.

Will had clocked it, too. Polly saw his shoulders stiffen and she reflexively stroked a hand along the small of his back. 'Everything OK?' she said gently.

Will glanced away from the seating plan and gave her a brief, slightly strained smile. 'Yes. Just wasn't quite expecting to be sitting quite so close to them.'

'We could ask to move?' Polly, unsure what the protocol was on an occasion like this, suggested.

Shaking his head, Will gave a slightly more convincing smile. 'Not worth rocking the boat for a couple of hours. I'm sure we can all behave ourselves.'

Polly reached for Will's hand. 'I'm here,' she said. 'And you've got your speech to concentrate on, remember? Don't give them a thought.'

Will's expression softened as she said it, and she again felt that unsettling, wonderful sensation of developing love for him. She'd do her best to support him this evening. It felt weird to be the one offering support, since she'd been the one who was so nervous about coming here tonight.

'Well, I suppose we might as well get this over with,' Will murmured to Polly. 'Sorry you're going to have to make polite conversation with my ex and her new squeeze over dinner.'

Polly gave what she hoped was a reassuring smile. 'I guess it has to happen sometime.'

They made their way to their table, just as Sam and Ben were approaching from the other side of the room. Polly's heart sank. Sam was an intensely beautiful, incredibly well-groomed woman in her mid-forties who was clearly well used to these kinds of dinners. Her piled-up dark hair looked glossy and had the sheen of a blackbird's wing. She looked stunning, as Polly had known she would, in a black, fitted evening gown that accentuated her every curve. Emerald-green eyes had fixed on Polly when she'd seen Will by her side, and were now, Polly felt, assessing her every feature. Polly felt a flash of irritation under that gaze. What right did Sam Sutherland have to be observing her so keenly? She was the one who'd left Will, after all.

And there was the reason she'd left, standing right beside her. Much shorter than Will, Ben was still a charismatic presence in his own right, although he'd clearly let some of that honed physique he'd had as a

professional footballer dissipate over the years. Close cropped receding hair peppered with grey gave him a more distinguished air, but, compared to Will, Polly thought, it was like standing a Staffy next to a Greyhound.

‘Will,’ Sam said as they reached them. ‘How are you?’ Not pausing for a reply, Polly got the impression that Sam wanted to get the pleasantries over with as soon as she could. ‘Well, I hope.’

Will nodded. ‘Yes thanks’. He turned to Polly. ‘Sam, Ben, this is Polly Parrott, my, er, my...’ He paused.

‘His date for the evening,’ Polly filled in for him. ‘It’s nice to meet you both,’ she added. She wasn’t sure it *was* nice, but they were in far too lovely a place to make waves.

‘Oh yes,’ Sam said. ‘Maeve’s told me all about you.’

Polly got the distinct impression that every inch of her appearance, now Sam was a little closer, was being assessed. ‘You’re a boutique owner, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Polly replied. ‘I own a shop in Roseford.’

‘I never would have thought that sleepy little place would have called for something like that!’ Sam gave a light, tinkling laugh. ‘But it takes all sorts, I suppose.’

Polly was about to elaborate on exactly how successful her shop was in that ‘sleepy little place’ when she thought better of it. Now wasn’t the time to take offence. ‘It does,’ she replied, trying to match the lightness in Sam’s tone.

‘Well, I hope the speech and presentation goes well,’ Sam replied as she turned her attention back to Will. ‘Maeve said you were finally plucking up the courage to leave her and Hattie alone in the house overnight. She seemed quite pleased about it.’

‘It’s a big place for them to be all alone.’ Will’s rather pointed comment obviously hit its mark, Polly realised, as she saw Sam’s gaze flicker. They might have moved on, but Parson’s Grange was obviously still a controversial issue.

‘I’m sure they’ll love a bit of freedom,’ Sam replied quickly. ‘We’d better sit. Dinner will be served soon.’

The four of them, thankfully separated by two other couples at the table, took their seats and soon Polly was distracted by the exquisite starter and glass of wine that was put in front of her. She kept an eye on Will, though, who, from his outwardly controlled appearance, had managed to take the

unsettling seating arrangements in his stride. Ben's rather raucous laughter kept cutting across the table, getting louder the more he drank, though, and Polly was starting to find it irritating. She glanced over at Sam and Ben a few times, but thankfully the noise from the surrounding tables made much conversation with them impossible. That was something, she thought, even if she was surprised that whoever had done the seating plan had made such a glaring error. At least, she thought, it gave her time to observe Sam at close quarters without actually having to speak to her.

Despite the proximity of Sam and Ben, Polly did eventually relax. She enjoyed talking to the others around the table, including a radio pundit, and an ex-player and his partner. Although the talk was mainly of the beautiful game as far as the male contingent was concerned, she got chatting to one of the wives, Amanda Wellingham, who had her own up and coming fashion brand and seemed very interested in Polly's place in the market. They bonded over their passion for sustainable fashion and Polly was delighted when Amanda took her details.

'I'd love to talk more with you,' Amanda said. 'Let's sort something out in the new year.'

Polly beamed. Even if Amanda didn't get back in touch, it had been a great chance to talk to someone who shared the same values and was in a similar business.

Her pleasure was short lived, though, as Ben's laughter cut across the table once again. She glanced at Will, whose tension seemed to be increasing, the closer he got to his speech.

'He never could hold his booze,' Will muttered as he met Polly's enquiring gaze. 'Nothing much changes.'

Polly reached out to where Will's left hand was clenched on his thigh, hidden by the starched white tablecloth. Prising his fingers apart, she laced hers with his. 'Take no notice. You've got the speech to concentrate on. And I can't wait to see you in action.' She allowed a small, seductive smile to play across her lips. 'Then we can get out of here, if you want.'

Will's eyes widened at the implication behind her words. He gave a

nervous chuckle. ‘Is that a promise?’

‘Definitely...’ Polly wanted to kiss him, right there and then, but made do with just glancing purposefully down at his lips, enjoying the way Will reacted with such pleasure. Now wasn’t the time for kissing, but there would be plenty of opportunities later.

Between the main course and dessert, Polly excused herself to go to the bathroom. The champagne and the different wines, one for each course of dinner, were taking their toll and she needed a breather. Crossing the room to where the toilets were very discreetly signposted, she did the necessary and then paused to look in the mirror to check how she looked. She knew she shouldn’t care too much, but there were some amazingly well-groomed guests, and she wanted to keep trying to look her best.

Thankfully, apart from a flush to her cheeks from the alcohol, the rest of her looked fairly composed. The dress, a crimson velvet number, had been a great choice, and her hair had pretty much stayed put in its up-do. She opened her clutch bag to apply a little more lipstick, and, horror of horrors, pick a bit of spinach out of her front teeth, and conceded that she’d do.

As she turned away from the mirror, she jumped to see Sam Sutherland standing just behind her.

‘Oh, hi,’ she said brightly, trying to counterpoint the sudden racing of her heart. ‘How was your dinner?’

Sam smiled. ‘Great. But then they usually are here.’ The implication was obvious: this was Sam’s world, not Polly’s. ‘How was yours?’

‘Lovely, thanks.’ Polly smiled briefly and turned to leave the bathroom.

‘Polly,’ Sam called after her.

Sighing inwardly, Polly paused in her exodus.

‘Yeah?’ She turned back around to face Sam, who’d been glancing in the mirror, tucking back strands of hair that had drifted from her chignon.

‘It can’t have been easy, sitting at the same table as Ben and me all night. If it helps, I didn’t know that was going to happen.’

‘It was fine,’ Polly said quickly. She realised it wouldn’t have been ideal for Sam, either, and saw no point in causing an issue with the woman.

‘I know you’re prepared to hate me for what I did to Will,’ Sam continued, ‘and I wouldn’t blame you if you did. But can I ask a favour?’

Polly’s face must have registered her surprise at Sam’s honesty. Sam, encouraged, continued.

‘I’m sure Will’s filled you in on why he and I split. He’s come to terms

with my part in it, and I've forgiven him for his. I betrayed him, but I had my reasons. I'm sure he told you that.'

Polly shook her head. 'I'd rather not talk about it, Sam. Whatever he's told me is kind of between the two of us, don't you think?'

Sam smiled tightly. 'Of course. Look, Polly, Will might have had some trouble defining exactly what you are to him when he introduced us, but I speak to my daughters enough to know that it might be getting serious. I know I have no right to ask this... but please, do look after him. He's a one-woman man and he couldn't cope with another betrayal.'

Polly's jaw dropped. Was the woman who'd carried out the betrayal actually asking her to be careful with the man she'd deceived? It wasn't often that she was lost for words, but Sam had rendered her speechless.

'I'll do my best,' she said, when she'd recovered enough to respond. 'But Sam... you do know it isn't really any of your business, don't you?'

Sam held up a hand. 'I know. But my daughters are in the picture, so, to a point, I'd suggest that it is. Hattie... well, I know she's been having a hard time coming to terms with Will having you in his life, on top of everything else she's been through. Maeve seems more settled, but at the end of the day, they still count.'

Polly's ire subsided a little at the mention of the girls' names. She couldn't blame Sam for wanting to look out for them. 'I understand what you're saying,' she said. 'And I'll respect the fact that Hattie and Maeve are your daughters. But as for anything else...well that's between Will and me. I'd ask you to respect that.'

Sam nodded. 'Of course.' There was a pause. 'Well,' she said eventually, 'we'd better get back to the table. Isn't Will due to give his speech soon?'

'During coffee,' Polly replied. 'He's a little nervous.'

'He'll be fine once he gets up there,' Sam said. 'He's always had the big match temperament.' A look of sadness crossed her features. 'It's what made him such an effective player and manager. Sometimes to the detriment of a lot of other things.'

Polly was surprised to feel a stab of something that felt like sympathy as Sam spoke. She knew enough, from what Will had told her, to understand that Sam's life had often been lonely.

'I'm glad I met you tonight,' she said eventually. 'I'm sure I'll see you again.'

Sam gave her a smile. 'I hope so,' she replied. 'I really do. Will seems

happy to be here with you.'

The two women paused, assessing each other for a few seconds longer. Then, as the faint sound of silver cutlery tinkling on glass reached them, they both hurried back to the dining room, where the speeches were due to commence.

Slipping back to her seat, Polly saw Will standing at the side of the stage area, waiting to take his place at the lectern. She took a moment to observe him as he prepared himself to speak to a friendly audience of his peers. It was amazing to her how he seemed to shrug on the 'on' persona as she watched. Chatting amiably to the compere of the evening, a well-known comedian, whose Saturday night shows drew a massive audience, he seemed at ease. Years of facing the media must make this come more naturally, she thought.

As the comedian introduced Will, there was a huge round of applause, and, hazarding a glance at Ben while the audience clapped, Polly was sure she didn't imagine a look of envy crossing the man's features. Too much to drink had made his reactions slower, and Polly surmised that there must still be an essence of rivalry between the former friends.

'Good evening,' Will began, his voice carrying easily and confidently over the PA system. His careful, measured phrasing was so familiar to Polly from seeing him in post-match interviews and press conferences, but she had the added pleasure of having spent time with him, too. Watching him addressing the room where he was clearly still very much respected and liked, Polly felt a rush of affection.

At the conclusion of his speech, Will presented the award for Regional Player of the Year, and, shaking the winner's hand, stepped briskly down from the stage. As he did so, the winner began his speech by giving a glowing account of how much Will had inspired him, and the crowd erupted in applause again. Polly chanced another glance at Ben, whose face, once again, clearly gave away his feelings about the adulation for Will in the room.

‘Well done,’ she whispered as Will took his seat beside her. ‘You were great.’

‘Thanks,’ Will whispered back. ‘It’s actually scarier talking to people you know than a bunch of journalists!’

‘I can believe it,’ Polly replied. ‘There’s added pressure, I suppose.’

‘Well done, mate.’ Ben’s slurred congratulations cut across their conversation. ‘You’ve still got it.’

Will’s head jerked up and he nodded. ‘Thanks,’ he said briefly, before turning his attention back to Polly. His eyes were alight with suggestion as they met hers. ‘Shall we call it a night?’

‘Sure.’ Polly smiled. ‘Unless you want to hang around.’

In the lull between speeches, Will shook his head. ‘I just need to catch an old team mate for a quick word, and then we can escape. I think I saw him heading to the bar. Give me five minutes, and meet me in the hall?’

‘You’re on,’ Polly said. She felt herself beginning to anticipate a long, pleasurable night in the suite, and gave Will’s left hand a squeeze. ‘See you in a bit.’ She sipped the remnants of her glass of wine, and took a few moments to drink in the atmosphere around her. She’d certainly have a lot to tell Grandpa when she next spoke to him. She wondered if it would be OK to ask for a couple of autographs while she was here, but then decided against it. It was probably frowned upon at a gathering like this.

As Will disappeared in the direction of the bar, Polly decided to pop to the loo again, and she saw Ben stand up shortly after she did. Feeling a prickle of unease, she watched as Ben moved slightly unsteadily towards the bar, too. Hurrying to the loos, she then headed back out towards the hall outside the Lancaster Ball Room.

She heard the raised voices before she saw the figures they belonged to.

‘I’ve got nothing to say to you.’

‘Well, I’ve got plenty to say to you, mate,’ the second voice, unmistakably slurred and undoubtedly aggressive, shot back.

‘Now is not the time.’

‘Oh, there you go again. Mister Reasonable. Mister Predictable. Mister Cautious. No wonder your wife left you for someone more exciting!’

‘What, a drunk like you? She must have been out of her mind!’

The retort made Polly’s stomach churn. It sounded so bitter and so out of character. So unlike the man she thought she knew. She dreaded turning the corner and seeing what she knew she was about to, but, inevitably, she felt

drawn to it.

By the time they were in sight, it was too late. Voices were raised further, and, not quite believing what she was seeing, she gasped in horror. There in the hallway outside the Lancaster Ball Room were Will and Ben, shouting and knocking seven bells out of each other, without a referee in sight.

Afterwards, Will kicked himself for losing the plot so spectacularly. He and Ben had maintained a strained civility since Will and Sam's marriage had ended. There was water under the bridge, but it was calm, ish. But there was something about the way the man who used to be his best friend in the world got so easily under his skin with the name-calling that had riled Will far more than it should have. He and Ben had been lifelong friends until Ben's betrayal with Sam, and the man had always known him inside out. But it wasn't just the names Ben had thrown at him, it was the history between them, and the way it all still hurt. Not because he still loved Sam; he knew he didn't, not in the same way any more, but because so much of what had happened was his fault.

He'd been waiting for Polly when Ben had approached him, following him out from the bar with yet another drink in his hand, insults falling from his tongue as he approached.

'You smug, pathetic little bastard.' Will spat out every single word. 'What gives you the right to say anything about me?'

'Every fucking right,' Ben slurred. 'You think you're so perfect, don't you, Will? Well, I can tell you that I know you're not, even if those wankers in there think the sun shines out of your arse. You're still the loser that you always were.'

Will shook his head vehemently. He and Ben had been mates since their early club days, and it still tore at him that their friendship had been ripped apart. 'You're wrong. I'm not the drunken tosser shouting in the corridor.'

'Maybe not, but Sam chose me. And you call *me* pathetic.' Ben took a

swing at Will, and, misjudging how far away he was from the wall, Will tried to step back but couldn't. The punch landed on his cheekbone, and that was when he'd snapped. The careful control that was always his trademark retreated, and he swung for Ben, knocking the man off his feet and onto the carpet before he could think better of it. Pulling the man to his feet, Will rounded on him, slamming him into the wall and holding him there for a long, furious moment. 'Shut your mouth before I shut it for you,' he hissed.

It was then that Will noticed the fear in Ben's eyes. The man had deflated like a bullfrog, and, knowing he was onto a loser, had slumped against the wall in defeat. Will looked down at his arm, tense from holding Ben in a fierce grip, and, returning to his senses, abruptly dropped it.

'Will! What the hell are you doing?' Polly's voice, shocked and appalled, made him turn his head. Seeing her there in the corridor, flanked by Sam, his heart sank.

Sam hurried past him and to Ben's side. 'Are you all right, babe?' She shot Will a look that was pure vitriol. 'Answer her, Will. What the hell are you doing?'

Will looked from her back to Polly, and with devastating speed, the red mist cleared.

'I'm sorry,' he said numbly. 'I'll explain everything later. Too much to drink. Both of us.'

Ben, incapable of speech, couldn't back him up. In the pause, Will realised that, no matter how far he thought he'd come, there was still a long, long way to go. That veneer of civility he'd worn for the sake of his daughters had been ripped away, and the rage he'd felt at everything that had been thrown at him, of which Ben and Sam's affair was no small part, was out there for all to see. But most of all, he knew the rage was directed at himself. For all of the ways he'd failed: failed Sam as a husband by being obsessed with football; failed Marius because he couldn't protect him from the abusive fans and the press; and now failed Polly, because she could see what a messed-up prick he really was.

Polly.

Turning back from Ben, who hurried away with Sam, Will realised he was alone in the corridor. Polly had fled.

Polly shivered on the draughty platform at Paddington Station as she waited for the two minutes past ten train back to the West Country to be ready for passengers. Seeing Will's loss of control had scared her, and the desire to escape the Savoy had been overwhelming. She knew she probably should have stayed to hear him out, but the tenterhooks she'd been on all night, combined with the real anger she'd seen in Will's eyes, had caused a flight reaction that she was powerless to resist. She'd never been great with confrontation, since an ill-judged relationship a few years back had turned toxic. Thankfully, she'd called time on it before she got entrenched in something she couldn't escape, but the fear of finding herself in a similar situation sometimes reared its head. And seeing Will pinning Ben to the wall had frightened her badly. Jumping into a taxi at the front of the hotel, she'd asked immediately which station was the best for a late train to Taunton, and the cabbie had looked it up for her with a swiftness at which she'd been astounded. It was the last train of the night, and if she missed it, she'd be forced to find somewhere to stay until the morning. The thought that she could have been wrapped in Will's arms in the Savoy, and what else that might have entailed, was running vividly through her mind, but she tried to ignore it.

How could Will – calm, sensitive, sensible Will – have lost his shit so spectacularly with Ben, when he'd assured her that it was all water under the bridge?

The honk of the voice on the tannoy announced the train's imminent departure. She'd have to take a chance and pay on board, hoping that the

attendant might take pity on her and not charge her the penalty on top of the fare. After all, she thought, she must cut a pretty pathetic figure, shivering on the platform in an evening dress.

The sound of the diesel engine starting up prompted Polly out of her ruminations. She felt glad that she was soon going to be out of the cold, biting December wind. She wanted nothing more than to collapse into a seat and close her eyes until Taunton. Whether she'd be able to get a taxi from there back to Roseford at well past midnight, she'd worry about when she was safely away from London.

Polly gathered her wrap more tightly around herself and shivered. Her feet felt like ice, and the dress whipped around her legs as the train came to a stop. Taking a deep breath, she waited impatiently for the door to open, so she could scuttle inside.

'Polly!'

The voice, shouted from a hundred yards away, made her stop in her tracks. Without thinking, she glanced back down the platform to see Will, forgetting about the dodgy knees, sprinting at full whack towards her. His long-legged grace was in no way diminished by the fact he was wearing a dinner suit and a winter coat, although the dress shoes seemed to be impeding his progress somewhat. His crimson scarf detached itself from his neck in the draught from the wind tunnel that was the Paddington Station platform, and blew onto the track behind him.

'Oh, for fuck's sake,' Polly muttered. She wasn't ready for this. Taking a step up into the carriage, whose door had, mercifully, opened a few seconds after she'd spotted Will, she hurried into the surprisingly packed carriage, looking for a spare seat. Finding none, she continued through to the next one, but it was the same story.

She glanced out of the window of the carriage and saw that Will had reached her boarding point. Those weren't once called the fastest feet in football for nothing, she thought with a flash of amusement that surprised her, under the circumstances.

'Polly!' his voice came again, this time from inside the carriage.

Polly sighed. There didn't seem much point in hiding, and she didn't really want to be responsible for Will getting chucked off the train. Taking a step out of the alcove between the carriages where she'd been standing, she saw him negotiating his way towards her, past suitcases tucked clumsily between seats and people coming the other way looking in vain for a seat.

‘I’m here,’ she called.

Will’s expression of relief was almost worth all the upset. Almost. The bruise on his cheek from Ben’s right hook was beginning to darken, but it in no way diminished his presence. Weary passengers, not expecting to see a familiar face, had perked up at the sight of one looking quite so dishevelled.

‘Thank God.’ Will stopped about ten feet away and just looked at her. ‘I didn’t think I was going to catch you.’

‘You nearly didn’t.’ Polly’s tone was flat. Mindful, though, of an audience that she really didn’t want to entertain any further, she didn’t elaborate. The camera phones were already out, and the last thing she wanted was to go viral.

‘Can we get off the train?’ Will asked, and she knew he’d seen the same thing.

Polly hesitated. It was just long enough for Will to add, ‘Please, Polly.’

Nodding, Polly turned away towards the door, which the platform attendant was just about to close. ‘Sorry,’ she said, as she stepped back down and out into the open air. ‘There’s one more getting off.’

Will hurried out of the door swiftly after her, looking apologetically at the guard, whose expression of surprise was enough to make Polly give a brief smile. She supposed it was par for the course wherever he went.

‘Well?’ she said, as they stood on the now empty platform. The roar of the diesel engine as the last train to the West Country pulled out of Paddington filled Polly with equal parts hope and dread. She was stranded in London, now, however these next few minutes panned out.

‘Polly,’ Will said softly. ‘I’m so, so sorry.’ He drew closer to her, and, realising how cold she was, he whipped off his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders. ‘I should never have put you in that situation tonight.’

Torn between wanting to refuse the coat, and the fact that she was absolutely frozen stiff, Polly accepted it. ‘No,’ she said quietly. ‘You shouldn’t.’ She huddled into the coat, and, unable to meet Will’s gaze, looked steadfastly down at her feet.

‘Look at me, please, Polly.’ Will’s voice was low, and she caught the tremble in it which she knew wasn’t to do with the cold. ‘I need you to look at me.’

Polly reluctantly raised her eyes to Will’s, and tried to steel herself against the desire just to fall into his arms. It got harder when she saw the regret and the love that was reflected back at her.

‘I never should have reacted to Ben in the way I did,’ Will said softly. ‘It’s not like I haven’t seen him and Sam together before. But something inside me just snapped and I lost control.’ He shook his head. ‘And that’s not even the worst of it. I put you in an awful situation, which was absolutely the last thing I should have done, or that I wanted to do. That’s unforgivable, I know.’

‘I can’t be dragged into any unfinished business between the three of you,’ Polly said firmly. ‘When you and I started seeing each other, you were clear that what happened between you, Sam and Ben was all in the past. It was obvious tonight that’s not true.’

Will shook his head vehemently, and then winced as the movement caused him some discomfort. ‘It is all in the past. I don’t know what happened tonight. I was het up about giving the speech, needled by seeing Sam and Ben together on our table, nervous about balling up in front of you, and when Ben followed me out from the bar, slinging insults and then lamping me, I just lost it, and at the worst possible time. I wish I could take it all back. Polly, please... come back to the hotel with me. We can talk this out.’

Polly felt herself dithering. She desperately wanted to believe Will, and to go back with him to the hotel, but a strong voice in her head counselled against it. It had been bad enough being the object of Hattie’s hostility, although that had thankfully abated since Will had spoken to her. She didn’t want to be at the centre of another set of tangled emotions. She had enough in her life that she was proud of, she didn’t need to take a risk with her heart.

‘Please,’ Will said again. This time, when Polly looked at him, she could see the emotion in his eyes.

She was about to open her mouth and respond, when Will’s phone cheeped. Some weeks ago, Maeve had assigned herself a special ringtone so that her father would know it was her who was calling. As ever, her timing now was impeccable.

With an apologetic half-smile, Will pulled the phone out of his jacket pocket and listened. His face, already serious, drained of all colour and he took a reflexive step backwards as his daughter spoke.

‘Hold on, love, calm down. What are you telling me? Are you sure?’ He shook his head. ‘OK. Look, don’t do anything. Keep trying to reach her. I’ll get over there and see if I can sort it out. No, don’t tell her I’m on my way if you do get through. OK. I’ll talk to you as soon as I know anything.’

Polly watched as Will pressed the end call button with a trembling finger. All worries about the evening temporarily forgotten, she took a step closer to him.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked urgently. ‘What’s happened?’

Will looked up at her with hollow eyes. ‘It’s Hattie,’ he said, the shock thrumming through his words. ‘She’s gone. Left a note to say she’s off on the next flight to Melbourne to go and live with Marius.’ He paused, and shook his head, trying to collect his thoughts. ‘And she says she’s never coming back.’

All thoughts of their confrontation forgotten, Polly and Will headed to the taxi rank outside the station. Pausing at the nearest black cab, he opened the door.

‘Can you take her back to the Savoy, please mate?’ Will asked.

‘Sure thing. Hop in, love,’ the cabby replied.

‘Are you sure you want to go to the airport alone?’ Polly asked. Will wanted nothing more than to keep Polly by his side, but he felt that, even with the recent reconciliation with Hattie under their belt, if, by some miracle, Will did manage to intercept Hattie at the airport, it might not be the most tactful manoeuvre to have Polly in tow.

‘Go back to the hotel and try to get a decent night’s sleep,’ Will said softly. ‘I’ll call you as soon as I know anything.’

‘OK,’ Polly replied. Her gentle kiss calmed him down a fraction. He wished he could just go back to the Savoy and spend the night there with her, but he had to go and catch Hattie, if she was still the right side of airport security. She couldn’t just run away and be with Marius, chucking everything away that she’d worked for at university. Colin’s warning came back to him in a rush, and he kicked himself that he’d not been brave enough to act on it. He’d been so relieved when it had seemed that Hattie was finally beginning to come around to the idea of his and Polly’s relationship, that he’d ducked out of discussing it with her because he’d been afraid to stir things up again. What an idiot he’d been!

Glancing at Polly as she climbed into the taxi, he watched it driving swiftly away. Turning to the next car in the rank, he stooped down to the

window.

‘Can you take me to Heathrow, please mate? Quick as you can.’

‘No problem, guv. Get in. Traffic’s not too bad this time of night so should be about half an hour.’

Will slammed the door and settled back onto the black leather seats of the cab. The London streets flashed by as he tried and tried to get hold of Hattie on her mobile, but each time his calls went straight to voicemail. After leaving a couple of messages, he gave up. She’d clearly switched it off. Or was already in the air.

Fighting the panic and desolation, he rang Sam.

‘What the hell do you want?’ Sam asked. ‘Haven’t you and Ben done enough damage for one evening?’

‘Look, I’m sorry, Sam, but you need to listen to me. Hattie’s run off. She’s on her way to be with Marius on the other side of the world. And if I don’t catch her before she gets on the plane at Heathrow, I’m not sure what will happen.’

Sam’s shocked silence told Will immediately that she, too, hadn’t any idea of Hattie’s plans.

‘Oh God,’ Sam moaned. ‘I had a feeling something like this would happen. She’s not been the same since Marius left the country. Shit, Will. What are we going to do?’

‘I’m on my way to the airport now to try to intercept her. Can you keep calling her, Sam? She might pick up if she sees that it’s you.’

‘Of course.’ Shocked out of her anger with him, Sam was now all concern. ‘I’ll keep you posted.’ She paused, then added, with a sob, ‘Please Will, bring her home.’

‘I’ll try everything I can,’ Will replied. Ending the call, he stared fixedly out of the window, getting his bearings and trying to get a grip on his emotions. If he was fortunate enough to find Hattie, he’d need every ounce of his composure to convince her to come home with him.

The interminable minutes ticked by until the cabbie pulled up at the drop off point at the airport. Fumbling his credit card out of his wallet, Will paid and then shot out of the cab and into the crowded Departures Hall of the UK’s busiest airport. He just didn’t know where to start. There were several flights to Melbourne leaving just after 10 p.m. And Hattie could be about to board any of them.

A wave of desolation washed over him as he stood in the middle of the

cavernous hall. Hattie might as well have been on the other side of the world already, for all the chance he had of finding her at the airport. Had she really been so unhappy with her life that the only way out, as she saw it, was to escape on a plane? He rubbed his eyes in anger and frustration. What a failure he was as a father. He'd lost his daughter when she'd needed him the most. He felt nothing but an impotent shame.

Wearily, he tried to call her again, but once again it went to voicemail. Was there any way to find her? It should be, in this day and age, impossible to hide. And yet, in a place the size of Heathrow, it would be like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. Dashing up to the nearest desk, he made a breathless enquiry.

'I'm sorry, sir,' the attendant at the desk replied. 'We can put a call out but unfortunately that's about the best we can do.'

Will nodded. It was something, he supposed, although he didn't think that Hattie would respond, given that she wasn't answering her phone. 'Thank you,' he said. 'It's a family emergency and I can't get hold of her.'

The attendant made the call, and all Will could do now was wait. If Hattie didn't want to be found, then there wasn't anything he could do. Slumping onto one of the hard metal seats, Will felt absolutely defeated.

Then, through the haze of anger, sorrow and frustration, it occurred to him. Marius. He'd have to know. Hattie wouldn't risk flying to Melbourne, going all that way, and not telling Marius she was coming. Heart thumping, he found Marius' mobile number where it was still stored in his phone and pressed.

'Hello?' The voice on the end of the line sounded out of breath. 'Guv? Is that you?'

Will exhaled in relief that he'd got through. 'Yes, Marius. It's me. Look, I'm so sorry to call you out of the blue but...' He swiftly explained the situation, and from Marius' shocked silence when he'd finished, he had the distinct impression that Hattie's proposed emigration was news to him, too.

'Where is she now?' Marius asked. 'Is she still UK side, or has she got on the plane?'

'I don't know.' Wearily, Will shook his head. 'Look, Marius, I know it's an imposition, but can you try calling her? If she's up in the air, we can deal with it when she gets to you, get her back on a plane home, but if she's still here in the airport, I might have a chance to stop her.'

Will heard Marius sigh. 'Look, guv. Hattie and I have been talking a lot

lately. She's really unhappy. I kept wishing I could be there for her, look after her, you know, but from where I am it's hard. She's my best friend, and she's told me a lot of stuff, about how she's finding it difficult to cope – with your divorce, with her college course, with the house move. Maybe a trip out here would be good for her, you know?'

'I get that, Marius, really, I do, but to just up sticks and threaten to chuck it all in? She's done so much of her university course already. What's she going to do if she stays with you?'

Marius chuckled. 'She'll find work. She's clever and talented. Maybe this is the move she needs to get a little perspective on things.'

Will felt his throat constricting and he swallowed hard. 'I just wish she'd talked this through with me and her mother before trying to jump on a plane, that's all. Doesn't say much for our parenting skills, does it?'

'You've been through a lot, guv,' Marius replied. 'I think you can be forgiven for not seeing this one coming.'

'That, from you?' Will coughed in surprise. 'You went through the worst of it.'

Marius paused just long enough that Will knew he was choosing his next words very carefully. 'But I came out the other end. And I'm happy. Maybe you just need to give Hattie the chance to be the same.'

'From the other side of the world?' As he said it, though, Will knew he'd been defeated. Hattie was legally an adult. If she chose to take time out, to fly to Melbourne to see her best friend, even to stay there for a time, there simply wasn't anything he could do.

'If that's what it takes.'

Both fell silent. Will knew that Marius was waiting for him to make a decision.

'Will you tell – no – ask her to call me when she gets there?' he said eventually. 'I... I just need to know she's safe, Marius.' The last words were choked.

'Of course,' Marius said gently. 'Take care. Speak to you soon.'

As Will ended the call, he dropped back down onto the hard seat. That was it. Hattie had gone. And now all he could do was wait and hope she arrived safely.

Polly let herself in to the suite at the Savoy and slumped down onto the enormous bed. She'd never felt so powerless. The princess, waiting in the tower for the handsome prince to finish his quest and return to her. Only she knew that she wasn't the one who needed rescuing. She only hoped that Will hadn't been too late, and that he'd managed to catch Hattie before she got on the flight. She didn't want to imagine what he'd be like if he hadn't.

Kicking off her shoes, she decided to make the first of what she was sure would be a long line of coffees until Will returned. She really ought to add in a bit of Irish whiskey for Dutch courage from the minibar as well, she thought, if Will was going to be bringing Hattie with him. A nice cosy night with Will's daughter wasn't quite the way she'd anticipated this evening going. But then she hadn't imagined that Will and Ben would end up coming to blows, either. Or, even more surprisingly, that Sam Sutherland had turned out to be a reasonable, likeable human being. All prepared to hate her for what she'd done, Polly had, in fact discovered the opposite. To say this evening had been confusing was an understatement.

She'd always known that, in getting involved with Will, she'd have to take on a lot of baggage. Two teenage daughters and an acrimonious divorce, not to mention the trials and traumas of his career, were a lot to carry. But she'd realised, when she'd got to know him, she was prepared to take it all on. Because she did love him, and it was worth the angst.

Or at least she'd thought it was.

As she was mulling this over, and drinking her coffee, the bedroom door clicked. Tensing, she sat up in the chair by the picture window of the suite.

She'd decided against sitting back on the bed in case, in her tiredness, she drifted off and spilled her coffee. Composing her features into what she hoped was a welcoming expression, she prepared herself to come face to face with Hattie.

But it was only Will who stood, briefly illuminated by the corridor light, in the doorway. At first, because she'd kept the lights low in the room, she couldn't see the expression on his face, but as the door closed behind him and he walked in, there was no mistaking it. He looked shellshocked, blasted to stone by the evening's events. And Polly didn't have the first clue what to say, or how to comfort him.

She stood up and met him halfway across the suite. He was moving like a sleepwalker, as if every step was an effort. She was reminded of how he'd been when he'd told her about Marius Stone the night they were snowed in at Parson's Grange.

'She's gone, Polly,' he said hoarsely. 'I couldn't catch her.'

'Oh my God.' Polly raised a hand and placed it on Will's forearm. 'I'm so sorry Will. Did you manage to get her on the phone?'

Will shook his head. 'She had it switched off. What have I done, Polly? She's gone halfway across the world to get away from me.' At this, his voice broke, but, keeping a grip on himself, he swallowed hard.

'I'm sure that's not true,' Polly replied, but Will didn't acknowledge that he'd heard her.

'Marius is going to call me when she touches down in Melbourne. At least that's something.'

'You spoke to Marius?'

'Yeah. I'm as amazed as you are that he picked up the phone, but he had no clue about what Hattie had planned. He was as shocked as Sam and I were.'

'And is he going to put her on the next plane back?' Polly asked. She felt as though they ought to talk in practicalities, for the sake of Will's sanity.

Again, Will shook his head. 'He, quite sensibly, reminded me that she's nineteen and able to make her own choices. If she wants to stay out there, then there's nothing I can do to stop her.'

At a loss for words, Polly stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. She didn't have any solutions, but she hoped he knew that she was there for him. Maybe, for a little while, until he'd got over the shock, that would be enough.

‘Come on,’ she said as they moved apart again. ‘Have a drink. The minibar is pretty well stocked, and you look like you could do with one.’ She led Will to the end of the bed, and watched as he sagged down onto it. Swiftly, she got one of the miniatures and tipped it into a glass, then handed it to Will. He downed it in one.

‘Thank you,’ he said, holding the glass in both hands. ‘I’m so sorry you got dragged into this. All of this. I haven’t exactly covered myself in glory tonight, have I?’

Polly shrugged. ‘It’s been interesting, I’ll give you that.’

Will, to her surprise, managed a short laugh. ‘You’re not wrong there.’ He reached out a hand and took hers, pulling her in towards him. ‘This wasn’t quite how I expected to spend the night.’

Polly smiled. ‘Me neither, but at least we’re together.’ She reached up her other hand and brushed back his hair. ‘I’m here for you, Will.’ She paused before adding, ‘And I’m sorry I ran out on you earlier. It was a stupid thing to do. I guess I was just freaked out.’

‘As I said, I should never have put you in that position,’ Will replied. ‘I’m sorry, Polly, I really am.’ Will blinked rapidly.

Polly dropped a lingering kiss on his forehead. ‘I think we’d best get some sleep, don’t you?’ she said, suddenly realising how tired she was.

Nodding, Will stood up again. ‘I really am sorry,’ he said. ‘I promise, as soon as all of this is sorted out, I’ll make it up to you.’

Polly smiled at him. ‘I’ll hold you to that.’ As she walked across the suite to use the bathroom, though, she couldn’t ignore the growing sense of unease she felt. Was she really ready to be a part of Will’s life, and all that it entailed? Even if tonight’s drama hadn’t kicked off, the fact that he was who he was, was enough to make her cautious. Throw in the mixed-up family dynamics, and she was beginning to wonder if she was up to the challenge.

The next morning, Will and Polly drove sombrely back to the West Country. They'd spent the night in the same bed, but they might as well have been on separate continents. Polly was pretty sure Will hadn't slept, and the dark circles under his eyes, one accented by the bruise from Ben's right hook on his cheekbone, attested to that. Luckily, the roads were clear, and they were making decent time.

In the car, conversation was limited. A lot of the awkwardness that Polly had felt in the early days of their relationship seemed to have returned, and she felt the distance spanning between them as the miles clocked up. Polly knew Will's thoughts were elsewhere; he hadn't heard yet from Marius, and wouldn't expect to until Hattie's plane touched down in Melbourne. The wait, out of his control, was taking its toll already.

As Will pulled up outside Polly's place, he stopped the engine and turned to her. 'I want to say thank you for a great night, but although the thank you still stands, it wasn't really a great night, was it?'

Polly gave a nervous laugh. 'The bed was comfy, and the Lancaster Ball Room was a treat.'

'You must be one of those people who always looks on the bright side.' Will gave her a rueful smile.

Polly still couldn't shake off the feelings that had begun to irk her in the small hours. She knew she needed time to think about everything that had happened in the past few weeks. Had she got involved with Will too quickly? Was there just too much baggage for them ever to be able to share the load? And, did she really want to? No matter how strongly she was beginning to

feel for him, these questions couldn't be ignored. Like the insistent jackdaws who congregated on her roof at dawn, those thoughts demanded attention.

'See you soon?' Will's voice broke into her reverie.

Polly drew a deep breath and turned to face him, and from the way his expression changed, she knew he'd worked out what she was about to say.

'Will...' she began, then paused as his eyes dropped. 'I've really enjoyed getting to know you, and you need to know that I'm starting to feel strongly about you. And believe me, I don't say that lightly.'

'But...?' Will's voice was soft and had a definite tone of resignation.

'But it's a lot, Will. You, and your family, the job, the past... it's all a lot. I'm here for you, if you need me, but if you need some time to sort all of this out with Hattie, and Sam and Ben... I'll understand.' She swallowed hard, knowing that she was giving him an 'out' if he needed it, but hating herself for it.

The silence that stretched between them seemed like a gulf bigger than the one across the bed last night. Will, Polly noticed, hadn't tried to contradict her.

Finally, Will broke it. 'It is a lot. You're right. And I appreciate you wanting to give me some space to sort it out.' He met her gaze again, and Polly got the distinct impression that the mental shutters were coming down. The vulnerability she'd seen last night was shielded behind his hazel eyes. It was almost as if a switch had flipped and he was the 'public' Will Sutherland, the manager with an answer for everything.

Polly felt a flare of frustration. Was this the version of Will that she was now going to get? The one that everyone else saw?

'I'll message you,' she said weakly, knowing that it was a cop out. 'Thank you for getting me home.'

Will leaned forward, and just before he kissed her cheek, she saw a flicker of emotion behind the carefully constructed facade. She knew it was self-preservation, that shield, but it still hurt that he felt he needed to use it.

'You're welcome,' he replied. 'And Polly?'

'Yes?'

'I really am sorry. For everything. I've loved spending time with you, and I guess I hoped... well, never mind.'

Polly couldn't speak. Instead, giving him a slightly shaky smile, she stepped down from the car and hurried to the back to get her overnight bag. Will, obviously sensing that she didn't want assistance, popped the boot from

behind the driver's side and, hastily, Polly grabbed her stuff. She steeled herself all the way up the path to her door not to look back, but as she dug her keys out of her bag, she chanced a glance. Will was sitting there still, his hands clenched on the steering wheel, looking absolutely desolate.

Don't cave, she told herself sternly. She knew she'd done the right thing. She just had to keep telling herself that. Hurrying through her front door, she closed it firmly behind her. For the first time in twenty-four hours, she had time to think. She knew she probably wouldn't open the shop that afternoon, she felt tired from the near-sleepless night, and just wanted to sink onto her sofa, eat some junk food and mull things over in front of something daft on Netflix. Tomorrow was a new day; today she needed some down time.

After making a cup of tea and reaching for the biscuit tin in her cupboard, she settled down onto the sofa. She didn't want to check her phone but, because her grandfather was in the midst of his cruise, she figured she ought to check in. Firing off a quick message, she was tickled, a few minutes later, to see a reply popping up. Grandpa obviously wasn't too busy to communicate with her, despite the excitement of the cruise, and he was no doubt up early to make the most of the on-board breakfast buffet. Attached to the message was a photo of himself and Susan, enjoying the Caribbean sunshine and sipping cocktails at a bar on one of the islands they'd visited.

Polly looked at the photograph and smiled to see how happy Grandpa seemed. He had his arm around Susan, and they looked as though they'd known each other forever. She wouldn't be surprised if Grandpa's days of playing the field were over, judging from the look in his eyes. The thought was tinged with wistfulness, Polly realised, given that she'd just put the brakes on her own relationship with Will. But right now, there were just too many complications for her to feel truly as though it was worth continuing.

Nonetheless, as she settled down on her sofa, remote in hand, to find something on Netflix to raise her spirits, she couldn't help wondering how Will was doing, and whether he'd managed to get in touch with Hattie. She tried to shrug off the feeling that she should have kept her mouth shut.

The instant Will stopped his car, Maeve came flying out of the front door of Parson's Grange, and into his arms.

'I'm so glad you're back!' She squeezed him tightly enough to make him groan. 'I've been so worried.'

Will's heart contracted at the tone of Maeve's voice. The guilt at having left her alone after the news that Hattie had fled ate away at him, even though there had been little else he could do but hare over to Heathrow. He knew Maeve would understand that, but it must have been hell for her, coping with the news by herself.

'I'm so sorry, sweetheart,' Will murmured into her hair. 'I'm sorry you had to deal with this on your own.'

Maeve disentangled herself from his arms and looked up at him. 'It's OK, Dad. You didn't know what my stupid sister was planning. When she talked about it in the car on the way back from seeing Mum, I had no idea she was actually serious. I thought, until last night, that she was just letting off steam.' Then, she gasped as she saw the bruise on his cheekbone. 'What happened? Did you walk into a door pissed or something?'

Will didn't feel the need to enlighten Maeve about how he'd come by the bruise. She shouldn't have to be worried any more than she was. Avoiding the question, he focussed on the situation with Hattie. 'Not even Marius knew what Hattie was up to,' he said. 'He was as shocked as anyone when I phoned him.'

'How was he?' Maeve asked.

'You mean, after he picked himself up off the floor?' Will surprised

himself by smiling briefly. 'He said he'd call me as soon as he heard from Hattie, so hopefully that'll be soon.'

'What a lousy thing for Hattie to do, when she knew you were off to London with Polly for the night.' Maeve's irritation with her sister, along with her worry, was evident. 'I can't believe she's actually done it.' They walked to the back of the car and Will grabbed his bags.

'She was upset and confused,' Will reasoned. 'She's been through a lot.'

'We all have!' Maeve exclaimed. 'But not everyone feels they have to run halfway around the world to get some attention.' She paused. 'And how did Polly take it, being thrown headfirst into yet another of our family dramas?'

Will's pause obviously alerted Maeve, whose face dropped. 'Don't tell me she broke it off?'

Will didn't want to go into the specifics with Maeve, who'd championed his relationship with Polly, and indeed been a catalyst in its progress, but neither did he want to lie to her.

'We're taking a pause,' he said. It wasn't strictly true, but Maeve didn't need details. 'It was all a bit much.'

Maeve's face registered her disappointment at the news. 'A pause? What is that? Old person speak for she dumped you?'

Will shook his head. 'Not exactly. But I thought it might be better to take up her suggestion of a little space.'

'That's the problem with you, Dad,' Maeve said softly. 'You never want to talk about anything. That's why things like this keep happening to you.'

'I think that's a bit unfair,' Will objected, although his heart wasn't in it. 'It's... complicated.'

'That's your excuse for everything!' Maeve retorted. 'It really isn't, you know.'

Will shook his head. He didn't want to get into this now, when he was already on edge as he waited to hear from Hattie or Marius. 'That's enough, Maeve,' he said wearily. 'It's been a hell of a few hours. Can we leave it for now?'

Maeve opened her mouth to retort, and then closed it again. Will guessed his expression brokered no disagreement.

'All right,' she said eventually. 'But we *will* talk about this. You and Polly are meant to be... I just know it.'

'Your faith in the adults in your life is touching,' Will said, but he gave her a smile. 'I'm not sure I, for one, deserve it, especially after the last couple

of days.'

'You've done OK, Dad,' Maeve replied. 'Despite what Hattie seems to think. Just give it time.'

'Thank you, Miss Maeve,' Will said, putting an arm around her. 'You're more than I deserve right now.'

'Oh, don't get all mushy on me!' Maeve's grin lifted his spirits. 'Save it for talking to Hattie when she finally decides to get in touch.'

Will glanced at the clock on the wall, although he really had no clue when Hattie was likely to touch down. 'That should be any time soon, I hope.'

'I'll get some lunch sorted,' Maeve said. 'You keep your phone on.'

Not for the first time, Will realised how lucky he was to have the level-headed Maeve as his daughter. He only hoped he could convince Hattie to see sense and come home, when she eventually deigned to get in touch.

After choking down a cheese and pickle sandwich, which he ate out of politeness rather than appetite, Will settled into his study, phone on the desk. He tried to pass the time by looking at the details of the Halstead House writers' retreat, which Stella Simpson had sent him after the Yuletide Ball, and noticed that she'd added the Life Writing course to the website. When he was in a better frame of mind, he'd make a booking. There'd certainly been enough to write about in the past few weeks, even if it all seemed too close for comfort now. He cracked open his notes file, where he'd brainstormed some of the key areas of his life that he'd thought would be the most interesting for a memoir, but after fifteen minutes of alternating between staring at the page and switching to doom scroll Twitter, which was something he never normally did, he gave in. He wouldn't be able to concentrate until he'd spoken to Hattie.

Eventually, hours later, a ping from his phone nearly made him leap out of his chair. Hurriedly, he swiped and read the full message. It was from Marius.

Hattie's landed. She rang me five minutes ago. I'm off to the airport to collect her. I'll try to get her to call you when we get back to mine.

As he texted back a quick thank you, Will's stomach began to turn. He had no idea how to handle the, hopefully imminent, call from Hattie. What the hell could he possibly say to her? If he flipped his lid, he would make everything worse. But how could he not?

Jumping up from the desk, he paced over to the bay window. What he wouldn't give to be able to ring Polly for advice. But that was out of the question. She'd made it clear that she needed a breather. He phoned Sam, just to let her know Hattie had got to Melbourne safely, but until he spoke to Hattie that was all he could tell his ex-wife.

His fingers itched to ring Hattie, but he had no idea if she'd pick up. What if Marius couldn't convince her to speak to him? At least Marius was prepared to be the information provider. It was more than Will could have hoped for.

Five minutes had passed. Will had no idea how far the airport was from Marius' place. It could be minutes; it could be hours. There was no point in brooding. Recent events had shown just how little good *that* did.

Another five minutes. Will sat back at his desk and rested his head in his hands, gazing at the phone. Willing it to ring, beep, buzz, *anything*.

And just as Will thought he was going to go mad if the bloody phone didn't ring soon, it did.

‘Hat? Is that you?’ Will snatched the phone up from his desk and put it to his ear.

‘I’m on FaceTime, Dad.’ Hattie’s voice, sounding tired but with a slight trace of amusement, emanated from the phone. It was so clear, she could have been in the same room. ‘I’ve got a lovely view of your right ear.’

Will nearly dropped the phone in his haste to get a look at Hattie on the small phone’s screen. Maeve, who’d clearly had her own ears on stalks as she waited for her sister to ring, burst into the study and looked over Will’s shoulder.

‘What the hell have you done?’ Maeve’s voice erupted from behind Will. ‘You’ve put Dad through a whole world of shit pulling this stunt.’

‘Maeve,’ Will cautioned, terrified that his younger daughter would cause his older one to hang up. ‘Now is not the time.’

Maeve closed her mouth, but the angry, hurt expression remained.

Will took a deep breath. ‘Why are you in Melbourne, Hat?’

Hattie, who was obviously still in the car, presumably the passenger seat of whatever Marius was driving, took a moment before she responded.

‘I wanted to see Marius,’ she said eventually. ‘I missed him.’

‘But why didn’t you tell us you were leaving?’ Will asked. ‘Your mother and I have been worried sick since we found out you’d left the country.’

‘Oh, and how did you find out?’ Hattie’s voice was dripping with sarcasm. ‘Would that have been my stupid little sister, by any chance? You couldn’t keep your mouth shut for one night, could you, Maeve?’

‘Mum and Dad would have found out anyway,’ snapped Maeve. ‘Did you

honestly think you could get on a plane to Australia and no one would notice you'd gone?' Maeve rolled her eyes. 'And you called *me* stupid.'

'Girls, please,' Will interjected. 'Hat. I'm so sorry you felt you had to do this. Please, sweetheart, please come home.'

Hattie's face assumed a range of expressions from sadness to anger to wistfulness. Eventually, she replied, 'I can't, Dad. I need some time out, for me. And I need to be somewhere you won't be breathing down my neck every five seconds, asking me if I'm all right.' She gave a short laugh. 'I think I preferred it when you were away all the time, if I'm being honest.'

Will's throat constricted. Had he, in his attempts to get more involved in his daughters' lives, made them feel too claustrophobic? If that was the case, why had Hattie been so against his relationship with Polly? It didn't make sense. But then, he conceded, what did when it came to teenagers?

'I'm sorry you feel that way,' he said quietly. 'If I'd had any idea you were intending to fly to the other side of the world to get away from me, I'd have tried to sort myself out.'

'It's not about you, Dad!' Hattie's voice trembled. 'It's what I need to do. I need time away from everything, everyone, to sort my head out.'

'Everyone except Marius,' Will observed.

'He always understood me best,' Hattie replied. 'Kind of like you and Ben were, in the old days, before...'

Will was glad she didn't finish that sentence. Last night was still too raw. And the less she knew about it, at this stage, the better.

'So, when will you come home?' he asked.

'Oh, I don't know. I reckon I'll get a job for a few months, something touristy for the summer season if I have to. Then I'll think about what next.'

'And your uni course?'

'I contacted them before the end of term and deferred the year. I can pick it up again next year if I want to.'

'And if you don't?'

'I'm not sure, Dad!' Hattie was getting exasperated by the questions, so Will backed off.

'It doesn't matter.' He gave it his best conciliatory tone. 'You're an adult now. You can make these decisions. I just wish you'd told me about this one before you did it.'

'And if I had, could you honestly say you wouldn't have tried to talk me out of it?' Hattie asked.

Will shook his head. 'Probably not.'

'I'll keep in touch, I promise,' Hattie said. 'And I will be home. I just need space. Please don't be angry at Marius. He had no idea until you spoke to him and he's going to give me his spare room for a while until I can get a place of my own.'

'If you need money...' Will said quickly.

'I'll let you know.' Hattie smiled. 'But this is all about finding my own way. I've got enough saved to keep me going for a while, and when I find a job, I'll be able to look after myself.'

'You've got it all worked out, haven't you?' Will said, impressed despite himself.

'Can you talk to Mum before I call her?' Hattie asked. 'I don't want her going berserk at me down the phone.'

Will paused. But what else could he say to her? 'Of course. But you need to keep in touch. With us both. Can you swear to me that you will?'

'Yes, Dad,' Hattie replied. 'I'll answer the phone whenever you call.'

'That's a start,' Will replied. 'And if you need anything, anything at all.'

Hattie nodded. 'Bye Dad.'

'Bye sweetheart. I love you.'

'I love you too.'

Hattie ended the call and Will slumped back in his chair. 'So that's that, then,' he said.

Maeve leaned forward and wrapped her arms around his neck in a gesture of comfort. 'She'll be OK, Dad. She'll probably get fed up in a month or two and come home. And Marius won't let anything happen to her.'

Will nodded. 'I know. I just wish...' He shook his head. 'No point thinking about that now. What's done is done.' He gave Maeve a smile. 'Now, what are we going to do for dinner tonight? I forgot to get a Waitrose delivery in. Fancy a takeaway?'

'You could always text Polly,' Maeve replied. 'See what she fancies eating. Hattie's not around to get pissy about it any more.'

'Polly suggested we have space,' Will repeated patiently. 'So that's what I'm going to give her. And so are you,' he added firmly. 'No interfering on my behalf, Madam Maeve.'

'How much space?' Maeve asked? 'Days? Weeks? You two are great together, Dad. Don't give up so easily.'

'I mean it, Maeve. Don't do anything daft. If it's meant to be, it'll

happen.'

'I don't know how you can be so calm,' Maeve retorted. 'What if she doesn't know it's meant to be? What if she needs you or me to tell her?'

'You've been watching too many romcoms,' Will chided. 'Just try to stay out of it. If your sister leaving has shown me anything, it's that trying to hold onto something too tightly is a recipe for disaster.'

'Unless you're hanging onto someone on the side of a skyscraper,' Maeve quipped. 'Then you need to hang onto them as tightly as you can.'

Will shook his head. 'You're incorrigible. Let's get a pizza in, shall we?'

Maeve grinned. 'Only if I get choice of film. Maybe watching a few more romcoms will change your mind about Polly!'

'Out!' Will growled. 'I've got emails to read before we stop for dinner.'

'I'm going,' Maeve's sing-song voice called as she walked out of the study.

Will steeled himself to ring Sam now that he'd made contact with Hattie. She'd probably still be pretty pissed off, but at least he had good news. Taking a deep breath, he scrolled to her number and pressed the button.

Polly had always used hard work as a way of dealing with sadness and heartbreak. Now she owned Roseford Reloved, there was constantly something to do, and, thankfully, in the final few shopping days before Christmas, business was brisk. People were popping in for last-minute dresses and garments for the day itself, and there were even a couple of guests for Lucy and Finn's wedding, which was happening on 23 December, who still hadn't found something to wear. It was just as well she was busy. Whereas before the prospect of the Christmas holiday spent alone had been a nice one, now she and Will had gone their separate ways, it felt less appealing. And with Grandpa still on his cruise, all she could look forward to was a Skype call from him, and Roast Turkey for One from Ocado.

She berated herself for the doldrums. She was always going to spend this Christmas solo, even if she hadn't broken up with Will, so it really made no difference. But, somehow, the likelihood of not even receiving an affectionate text from him on Christmas Day made her wistful. That made no sense, either. She'd agreed a pause with him. And they both still needed time to think. Nothing had changed. The situation was tangled like a Gordian Knot, and nothing she could do would change that.

She still felt daunted by the different cross-currents of the relationships in Will's life, and the night away at the Savoy had only served to make them feel stormier. But, after a good night's sleep and a return to the normality of the shop, she was beginning to wonder if they'd done the right thing. Everyone had baggage, surely? Was that a good enough reason to walk away?

But she had enough to do to keep her occupied. She had a final dress fitting to do with Lucy tomorrow, and then the actual wedding to take her mind off it all.

Polly went to bed that night still mulling things over, though. No matter how much she tried to push Will from her mind, she couldn't help her thoughts drifting back to him. She also wondered how things had gone with Hattie. Was it worth sending a quick text to see if they'd made contact? Shaking her head, she refrained.

The next morning, she opened up the shop and was surprised to see a text from an unfamiliar number on her home screen. Realisation dawned when she read the message.

Hi Polly,

It's somehow easier to text this from halfway across the world 😊. I wanted to say sorry for the hassle I was giving you about seeing Dad. I know I was being unfair, but it all felt too close for me to be able to be OK about it. Marius, my best friend, has made me realise how awful it must have been for you to have to deal with me, as well as Dad, who's enough of a challenge 😞. I know it won't make much difference, but I just wanted to say it.

Hattie

If Polly hadn't been sitting on the stool behind the counter, she'd have fallen over. This was the last thing she'd been expecting. She debated for a full five minutes whether or not to reply. Hattie *had* been unreasonable. She *had* made things more difficult than they should have been in the early stages of a relationship. There was still a lot of choppy ocean to cross, and she wasn't really sure she was up for the challenge.

But what was it that Sam Sutherland had said? Will was a one-woman man. He'd taken a risk himself in falling for her. Wasn't that worth doing the same?

This line of thinking wasn't getting her anywhere. She huffed in frustration. And she didn't have time to dwell on it. She'd wait before she acknowledged Hattie's text. She needed to think carefully about how she was going to respond. Something told her that no matter how carefully she worded it, there was the possibility that Hattie would still take things the wrong way, and she didn't want to make those seemingly calmer waters

turbulent again.

As she was mulling this over, Lucy came in the front door of the shop, carrying her wedding dress in its protective cover. Greeting her, Polly flipped the sign to 'Closed' and ushered Lucy through to the back. The light in her living room was better at this time of year, and she wanted to be able to give Lucy and her dress her full attention.

'So, are you all set for tomorrow?' Polly asked as Lucy slipped out of her clothes and into the dress.

'Pretty much,' Lucy replied. 'Finn's flight was delayed last night, which put the frighteners on us both, but he got back home at six this morning and is now getting his head down while Robin and Megan are at my mum's place. Lizzie's texted me to let me know the flowers have all arrived and she's making up the arrangements, ready to take down to the chapel tonight, and the pub's good to go for the reception, so as long as this dress still fits, there's nothing else to worry about.'

'No pressure, then!' Polly laughed. Her spirits lifted, as they always did when she spoke to Lucy. They'd been friends for a couple of years now, and it was wonderful to see her so excited about the wedding. It restored her very shaky faith in love, somewhat.

'Do your worst!' Lucy smiled as she ambled over to the centre of Polly's living room. 'And I'll try not to go overboard on the biscuits between now and tomorrow.'

Polly's expert eye regarded Lucy, who, even without the embellishments tomorrow would bring, looked fabulous in the ivory silk dress. She moved around her, running an index finger down the V-back of the dress to check to see if it needed taking in. Popping in a pin, she paused. Would that make it too tight once Lucy had relaxed a little?

'How does that feel?' Polly asked.

Lucy furrowed her brow. 'Not bad. Bit tight?'

Polly took the pin out again. Moving around so that she was looking at the front of the dress, she ran a hand down Lucy's waist and then across the shoulders to check the line.

'I don't think there's anything else we need to do,' she said, smiling. 'You look beautiful, Lucy.'

Lucy blushed. 'Thank you so much, Polly. I couldn't have asked for a better dress, or a better person to fit it.'

Polly flushed with pleasure. 'You're very welcome. Finn will love you

even more than he does already when he sees you tomorrow.'

'If I can keep Robin's sticky fingers away from it until the wedding's over, that'll be a miracle, too!' Lucy laughed. 'He's obsessed with finger painting, thanks to nursery, and he's not too fussy what he paints on or with. I've had to sponge Nutella and jam off myself and the furniture more times than I can count lately!'

'So long as he waits until after the ceremony, I'd take that as a win!' Polly began to giggle. Robin was adorable, but a whirlwind of toddler-sized destruction when he wanted to be. All children had their challenges, she supposed. Her mind immediately went back to Hattie and her text, and her laughter stopped.

'Everything all right?' Lucy asked.

Polly sighed. 'Yeah. Something just hasn't quite turned out the way I'd hoped, that's all.'

'Anything you want to talk about?'

Lucy's concern made Polly's eyes fill with unwanted tears. She shook her head. 'I just need to get a few things straight in my own head. Stop going around in circles.'

'Well, you know where I am if you need me,' Lucy replied.

'I'll remember that when you're walking up the aisle!' Polly gave her a slightly shaky smile.

Lucy leaned forward and gave her a hug. 'I don't know exactly what's gone on, but if it's any help, try to put faith in the way you feel. Listen to your heart. I for one know how difficult that is, but it's worth it, I promise.'

Polly's smile became stronger. She, as well as most of Roseford, knew exactly how many trials Lucy and Finn had faced before they made their future together, after social media trolls had tried to derail their burgeoning relationship. Polly knew that Lucy would understand, if she confided in her. But it was the day before Lucy's wedding; she had enough to think about.

'Thank you,' she murmured as Lucy released her. 'Now go and enjoy your last day of freedom before you get hitched!'

'If freedom is frantically tidying the house and making sure the kids have clean pants and socks for tomorrow, then count me in!' Lucy laughed. 'And trying not to disturb my husband-to-be's beauty sleep of course.'

'Movie stars need to look their best,' Polly replied. 'I'll see you in the chapel tomorrow.'

They shared a last hug before Lucy hurried back home. As she reopened

the shop, Polly wondered what tomorrow would bring. The wedding, though lower key than last summer's celebrity wedding in Roseford, between Finn's best friend Montana and Lucy's best friend Serena, was sure to be a great day, and would be just the ticket to take her mind off the break-up with Will. At least she hoped it would.

Will knew, logically, that he should leave Polly well alone but when Hattie had checked in with him he was sent into a tailspin. Hattie had made a decision that had surprised him, but he was so glad she had. When she'd explained what she'd wanted to do, he'd taken a risk, hoping that Hattie was on the level. She seemed so much calmer, and far more positive, since she'd landed in Melbourne, and he hoped that requesting Polly's number came from a good place.

'Just bear in mind that I'm probably not her favourite person right now,' Will had said.

'Well, that makes a change.' Hattie had actually smiled. 'I'm glad you've taken over from me.'

'Hat...' Will knew he still had a cautious note in his voice. 'Maevie caused Polly a lot of embarrassment when she sent flowers and pretended they were from me. Can you give me your word that this isn't going to cause Polly any more upset?' He was suddenly, worryingly, reminded of the protagonist from one of the girls' favourite films, *Wild Child* in which the main character had ended up throwing her father's new girlfriend's belongings off a cliff in outrage that she was moving in. He hoped that Hattie really did have good intentions, this time. He wasn't sure what he'd do if she didn't.

'Trust me, Dad,' Hattie said, clearly seeing how conflicted he was. 'I promise I'm not going to be a bitch. Even more of a bitch. I just want to apologise to her, that's all.'

'All right,' Will replied. 'But any notions you've got about trying to get

me back into her good books... I wouldn't go there.'

'Don't worry, Dad.' Hattie smiled through the screen. 'I'll leave that to you.'

'Thanks,' Will said. As they ended the call, he figured it was progress, of a sort, even if Hattie was half a world away.

Later, as he wondered if Hattie had actually gone through with it, Will's fingers inched towards his phone. Surely it wouldn't do any harm to send Polly a quick text and find out? Then, he pulled his hand away. She needed space. She'd made that clear. A text, as simple as it seemed, wasn't that. But that didn't stop him from wanting to.

After a morning spent pottering around, wrapping up a couple of presents for Maeve, to put under the tree on Christmas Eve, and finally making the booking to attend Stella's Life Writing course at Halstead House, he decided to go for a walk.

The day was stunning: clear blue skies and brilliant sunshine, with a scattering of frost on higher ground. It couldn't be a better day for a winter wedding. Heading down into Roseford, he could already see the buzz as the village prepared itself for the celebrations. He hurried past Roseford Reloved, steeling himself not to look through the window in case Polly caught sight of him, and then paused when he got to Roseford Blooms.

Lizzie was inside, and she was clearly sorting everything out before she closed up and attended the wedding. Will fought with his impulse to rush back to Polly's place, just to see her. Then, a vague notion of a plan began to form. It was something that, should she choose to, Polly could easily ignore, but it left the door open, just a little, in case she'd had a change of heart. But he couldn't do it without Lizzie's help. Taking a deep breath, he walked into the shop.

'Hi,' Lizzie said brightly as he entered. 'How can I help?'

Will gestured to a bucket of beautiful, deep crimson roses that were just behind the counter. 'Can I have some of those, please?'

'Of course,' Lizzie replied. 'How many would you like?'

'All of them.'

Lizzie couldn't help but quirk an eyebrow, but she said nothing. Will wondered if she'd been party to what had happened between himself and Polly, but he didn't ask. This place was small, and the community was close knit. It was certainly possible that she'd heard.

'These roses are so gorgeous, even though it's a bad time of year for

them,' Lizzie said as she carefully wrapped the bouquet with the Roseford Blooms paper. 'But you'd better keep them out of the cold, or they won't last very long.'

Will smiled. 'I'll bear that in mind.'

'Are they for anyone I know?' Lizzie asked. Will knew her curiosity had been stirred when he'd asked her for a card to go with them.

'Maybe,' Will said, giving her a smile. 'But I'm not quite sure what the reception will be, so I'm hoping that sending a card with them, rather than just turning up, will give her the chance to make up her own mind.'

'Intriguing.' Lizzie passed Will the contactless machine and he tapped his card.

There was a pause as they both waited for the transaction to register.

'So, are you all set for the wedding?' Will asked. 'I'm guessing it's been a pretty hectic day so far.'

Lizzie nodded. 'It's always busy, but I wouldn't have it any other way.'

'You're lucky to love what you do,' Will observed. 'It makes working life so much easier, doesn't it?'

'Certainly does. And this business gives me a real insight into people, too. Flowers can bring such joy and comfort. It's been a fascinating learning curve since I took over from my Aunt Bee.' Lizzie passed him the bouquet. 'If I can do something small to promote love, ease suffering or make someone's day, then I'm all for it.'

Will raised an eyebrow. 'Promote love, you say?'

Lizzie smiled. 'Yes. That's the best part.'

'With that in mind, would you be able to do something else for me?' he asked, more in hope than expectation.

'Sure, if I can,' Lizzie replied. 'How can I help?'

'Well,' Will said. 'It's like this...'

At two o'clock that afternoon, Polly stood at the back of the church, waiting expectantly for Lucy to make her entrance. Despite everything that had happened to test her own faith in love, she still believed in happily-ever-afters, even if her own love story had been put on hold. Pushing those intrusive thoughts of Will aside, she focussed on the sights and sounds around her.

The pews of Roseford Hall's chapel were packed from end to end with friends and family of the bride and groom. In some ways it felt like a smaller scale rerun of the previous showbiz wedding, which had seen Montana de Santo and Serena Johnson tie the knot, but in other ways it was a lot lower key. While Serena and Montana had been happy to throw open the doors to the film world and some carefully selected press, Finn had been far more reticent to make this event public, and so the guest list had been carefully curated, and although the chapel was full, it was with the people who mattered the most to himself and Lucy.

At the front of the church Finn stood with his best 'men': Mateo Torres, one of the most gifted camera operators in the business, and of course, Montana. Mateo looked effortlessly elegant in his midnight blue suit, which complimented his dark olive skin and his greying dark hair. Montana looked equally stunning in a dress of the same hue, and, Polly thought with a stab of envy, she'd regained her figure beautifully after giving birth to a daughter five months ago. Their spouses sat in the front row with their children.

The organist switched seamlessly into the wedding march, and the congregation stood, all turning as one to see the entrance of the bride. Polly

couldn't keep the smile from her face as she saw ten-year-old Megan, Lucy's daughter, heading solemnly down the aisle, posy in hand, cyclamen pink dress picking up the accents of the flowers, a nervous but excited expression on her face.

Then Lucy appeared. Even though she'd seen Lucy in the dress only yesterday, Polly caught her breath. Lucy looked stunning. She wore no veil, and it was clear to everyone in the congregation that she was glowing with happiness. As Lucy passed Polly's pew, she caught her eye and mouthed 'thank you'.

After that, the ceremony passed in a happy blur. Finn, bowled over by the sight of his bride, welcomed her to the front of the church with a huge smile, and Polly once again marvelled at just how in love they seemed to be. Against some pretty huge odds, they'd made it to this point, and she knew that if any couple was going to go the distance, it was Finn and Lucy.

Funny, she thought as she watched them, she'd been starting to feel that way about herself and Will before it all went south. Despite the odds, and the bumps in the road, she'd loved being with him, getting to know him. Yes, it hadn't been easy, and yes, there were some things she knew they'd need to work through, but had she acted too hastily in asking for a breather? Did Will deserve more of a chance to explain his actions than she'd given him?

On the other hand, she thought ruefully as Lucy and Finn made their wedding vows in front of a delighted congregation, much as she'd found herself falling for Will, she did have to wonder if an excess of Christmas spirit had been to blame. Perhaps it had all been for the best that it had ended when it did. Was she, by continuing the relationship, going to subject herself to more heartbreak and frustration?

Later, when the happy couple were locked in each other's arms on the dance floor of the pub, Polly felt the familiar ache of loneliness. She put down her glass of champagne and, saying goodbye to Finn and Lucy, made her way back home.

The crisp, pale moon shone brightly overhead, making the frost on the rooftops glitter. She should be grateful, she thought. She had a business that was now going forward into the new year in renewed health, the shop had been weatherproofed and the building made safe and warm, and there had been another set of online orders before Christmas that had lifted her takings to almost cover the losses from the rain damage. Roseford Reloved was in better shape than it had been this time last year, that was for sure.

So why was she struggling to feel optimistic? Glancing at her phone, she managed a small smile when she saw that Grandpa had texted her a new series of photos from his New Year, New World cruise. He looked happy, well and content. And she couldn't help noticing that Susan looked lit up, too. Polly was looking forward to when he came home. She missed him terribly, no matter how happy she knew he was when he travelled. Gazing at the photos for a little longer, she smiled sadly. Perhaps love really *was* the missing piece of the puzzle, no matter how old you were.

She tried to shut those thoughts down as she walked back home, but Will's face kept intruding every time. She missed his laugh, his conversation, the feel of his arms around her... She missed everything about him. But what could she do? It had just been a winter fling that had fled as soon as it had arrived, like the flurries of snow that had dispersed as quickly as they'd fallen.

Letting herself into her maisonette, she shrugged off her coat. The heating had been on, so the house felt cosy, which she was grateful for. As she kicked off her shoes, she wondered if there was still a full glass of wine in the bottle in the fridge. Perhaps a nightcap was what she needed. Crossing the small space, she grabbed a glass and was about to open the fridge when her phone pinged. Glancing at it, she saw it was from an unknown number.

Look by your front door.

Polly wrinkled her brow. It was midnight. The last thing she wanted to do was open her door again. Anyone could be lurking in the shadows, even in sleepy old Roseford. She shook her head and deleted the message. Perhaps it was a wrong number...

Ten minutes later, she got another one. The message, like the previous one, had come from an unknown number.

Polly... please. Look by your front door.

This was getting silly. And a bit creepy. She felt like the stupid teenager in *Scream* who got murdered for responding to a phone call. She determinedly turned off her phone and shoved it in a drawer. She was off to bed.

All the same, she couldn't help but take a quick peek through the window as she headed towards the stairs. There seemed to be something on her doorstep: a flash of colour against the glass panel by the door. It certainly hadn't been there when she'd got home.

'I must be an idiot,' she muttered. Heading back to the door, she pulled it open. No one seemed to be about. Looking down, she spotted, tucked to one side of the doorstep, a large bunch of red roses in Roseford Blooms wrapping. Puzzled, she picked it up. There was a card addressed to her.

Dear Polly,

I'm so sorry about the other night, and for being so unable to communicate with you. If you can find it in your heart to come and talk, I'll be standing by the War Memorial for the next half an hour. If not, then please just enjoy the flowers. Lizzie says they shouldn't be out in the cold too long – I hope you won't leave me out here, too!

*Yours, in hope,
Will.*

Polly's heart did a somersault that Lucy's little son Robin would have been proud of. How had Will known when she was going to be back? The answer, in a split second, was staring her in the face. Lizzie must have texted him when she left the wedding reception. Once again, the florist had been the messenger. Polly didn't know whether to thank her or bawl her out. Perhaps she'd save that decision until she'd taken a walk to the war memorial.

Grabbing her coat, she hurried back out of the door, pausing only to wrap her scarf a little tighter. It was bitterly cold outside. She hoped, whatever the outcome of this meeting, that she wouldn't be outside too long.

The moonlight gazed brightly down and glinted off the damp cobbles of the market square. A bench, which had seen many a conversation, had only one inhabitant this time. Polly's heart, already leaping at the prospect of the meeting, sped up.

'Hi,' she called out softly as she approached. Will, who had his back to her, turned and stood abruptly as he caught sight of her. She was reassured to see how nervous he looked. She obviously wasn't the only one feeling that way.

'You came,' he replied. 'I didn't know if you would.'

‘Seemed a bit rude not to,’ Polly said, giving a brief smile. ‘Roses from Lizzie’s place don’t come cheap. Even if you did freak me out with those anonymous texts.’

‘Sorry about that,’ Will replied. ‘I borrowed Maeve’s phone to send them as I didn’t think you’d respond if you knew it was me.’

‘Ah,’ Polly replied. ‘Mystery solved.’

Will smiled back but seemed at a loss as to how to continue the conversation. Polly, who felt the cold air nipping at her fingers and cheeks, shivered.

‘So, what can I do for you?’ she asked.

Will drew closer to her, until he was within a foot or so. ‘This time,’ he said gently, his breath misting in the cold midnight air, ‘I really did send those flowers, and I really do need to apologise harder.’

‘So go on then,’ Polly replied. ‘Apologise. Harder.’

She saw Will gaze up at the stars that looked cold and distant in the bitingly clear night sky, and waited as he took a moment to compose himself.

‘I’m so sorry, Polly. I’m no good at relationships, and I’m pretty shit at expressing myself about anything other than football. I should never have lost my temper with Ben – we had it out years ago when Sam chose him over me. There was no need to get so riled at the awards ceremony. I certainly shouldn’t have allowed myself to get angry on a night that was meant to have been a celebration, and extra special because you were by my side.’ He dropped his gaze to the cobbles beneath their feet, and Polly saw him draw a deep breath, that plumed back out in the freezing air.

‘I know I behaved appallingly, and I’m going to try to do better. I’m sorry for not recognising a good thing, in fact the best thing, when I saw it. For being too scared to allow myself to begin to fall in love with you, and even more terrified to admit that I actually was. For being too cautious, and too uncertain, when all I really wanted to do was throw it all to the wind, allow myself to fall in love and risk that you might make me happier than I’ve been in a long time. I’m sorry for being a blinkered, frightened idiot, and for hurting you because of it. And I’m sorry for dragging you out into the night to say all this when you should be tucked up in the warm at home.’

Polly, who was fairly certain this was the longest speech anyone had ever given for her benefit, gaped at Will. Realising her jaw had actually dropped, and her teeth were getting cold in the midnight air, she closed her mouth again.

‘Well,’ she said, once she’d discovered the power of speech once more. ‘I’m not going to stand here and pretend that everything you’ve just said to me makes all the potential problems go away.’ She paused, answering the last internal question she had, and ensuring that she really wanted to continue. This felt like a pivot point; was she ready to move in the direction her heart was telling her to?

‘There’s so much about your life that should make me want to stay away,’ Polly continued. ‘I don’t need the spotlight of being Will Sutherland’s girlfriend. I’m not, and I never will be WAG material. And I’d be lying if I said that the whole punching out your former love rival thing didn’t freak me out.’

Seeing Will’s face fall, she paused. ‘But dashing off to Paddington like some reverse *Brief Encounter* parody was just stupid of me and the last thing you needed. But still you followed me there. You put up with being seen by the public with a bruise on your face and being filmed begging me to come back with you. I’m grateful you did follow me, despite those risks.’

‘Well, that’s something, I suppose,’ Will said, and Polly was sure she saw a flash of hope in his eyes. ‘I couldn’t have left you on the platform, or let you get on that train alone. It’s not what I do.’

‘I’m grateful for that.’ Polly began to smile. ‘And I’m also grateful that you came into my life. I do love you, Will, and I know that it’s not going to be easy. But, all things considered, and maybe I’m just being sentimental because I’ve just seen two people I adore tying the knot today, I’d like us to try again.’

‘You love me?’ Will asked, his voice shaking slightly, and not just from the cold.

‘I do.’

It was Will’s turn to gape at Polly, now. And it was such a contrast to the composure he usually had, that she couldn’t help but smile at him.

‘Well, it’s a pretty good thing you said that, really,’ Will said, eventually.

‘Why’s that?’

‘Because, in case it’s not obvious already, I really do love you too.’

Polly’s knees began to shake, even though it was exactly what she’d hoped to hear. Before they could give out completely, she drew closer to Will. ‘There’s only one thing I can say to that,’ she said. And, with that, she leaned up on tiptoe and planted a gentle, long anticipated kiss on his lips. As that kiss became less tentative and more passionate, Polly felt Will pulling

her nearer, so that she was standing inside the warm circle of his thick cashmere-wool coat.

‘Does this also mean you accept my apology?’ Will asked, a little while later.

‘It means I’m mostly there.’ Polly couldn’t resist a smile. ‘Now how do you fancy coming back to mine for a nightcap, and you can keep apologising for a little while longer?’

The next morning, Polly rolled over in bed, and flexed her toes in pleasure like a cat who'd swallowed the canary. There, broad back to her, still fast asleep, was Will. She had to admit, his methods of apologising had quite conclusively allowed her to forgive him. He must have felt her moving, as he rolled over towards her, pulling her close to him and leaving her in no doubt that he was more than ready to pick up where they'd left off when they'd crashed out last night. He'd phoned Maeve when he'd realised he wasn't going to be home before dawn, and she'd shrieked in joy down the phone at him, rather ear-splittingly giving them her blessing. He'd reminded her to ring him if she needed anything, before she'd reassured him quite vociferously that the only thing she needed was for her father to 'stop being a prat and make sure Polly's really forgiven you.' To Will, that was all he needed to hear.

'Good morning,' Polly murmured, kissing him warmly. 'Can I get you a cup of tea?'

Will grinned into the kiss. 'I can think of something I'd rather have first.' He pressed against her, and she moved with him, feeling the pleasurable grind of their bodies up close, and deciding that tea could wait a little longer. As she reached below the duvet to caress him, he did the same, and it was a little while before they both came back down to earth.

'So,' Polly said as she rested her head on Will's chest, sated and relaxed. 'Are you planning on staying here all day, or do you have somewhere else to be?'

'Well, it is Christmas Eve,' Will said. 'And much as Maeve was more

than happy I didn't come home last night, I really should get back to the house.'

'Fair enough,' Polly said. 'I've got a few things to sort out before I knock off for Christmas, anyway.'

'Look, Polly.' Will, propping himself up on one elbow, looked suddenly serious. 'Last night... it was more than I ever hoped for. And certainly more than I deserve. If I've put pressure on you in any way, then I want you to know how sorry I am.'

'Will,' Polly said softly, smiling at the uncertainty in his eyes. 'I made the choice to come and find you last night and I've made every single choice since. You're here because we both wanted you to be. If there's one thing I'd ask you to change, if we've got any chance of going any further in this, it's to stop bloody well over thinking everything and talk to me instead.' She leaned forward and kissed him. 'Is that a deal?'

When they broke apart again, Will was smiling widely. 'Personal terms agreed. Let's call it a done deal.'

EPILOGUE

NINE MONTHS LATER

‘Are you sure you want to come with me?’ Will asked Polly as she totted up the takings from another successful day at the shop. ‘I mean, you don’t have to.’

Polly smiled. ‘Hattie said she wanted to see us both. And it’ll be good to see her.’

‘Well, if you’re sure.’ Will checked his watch. ‘We really ought to get going, though. I’ve got a meeting with my publisher before we pick her up.’

Polly smiled. She’d never thought, while Will was in the throes of writing his memoir, that this day would ever come. It had, she knew, been equal parts wonderful and painful for him, but now the manuscript was ready for proposed publication in the spring, excitement was taking over. Pre-orders were already in the high thousands, and the comfortable advance had come in very handy while he’d poured all of his energies into learning how to write. Stella’s Life Writing course had been invaluable, and there was widespread anticipation that *Sutherland: A Life in Football*, would hit the bestseller lists upon its release.

In tandem with this increasing success, Roseford Reloved had also gone from strength to strength. A couple of photos from Lucy and Finn’s wedding last year, with the shop’s Instagram page tagged in them, had done wonders for trade, and Polly now found she was sending out three times as many online purchases as she had formerly. It was hard work, but it had given her a real uptick in income, and it looked as though the trend was going to continue. Amanda Wellingham, the contact she’d made during the ill-fated evening at the Savoy, had come up trumps and had offered Polly a selection

of her previous seasons' clothing range to sell as statement pieces in the shop. With Amanda's help and contacts, there were also other potential suppliers who might offer a few pieces a year, too, which to Polly, seemed like a dream.

And now Hattie was coming home. Ironically, Hattie and Polly's relationship had developed for the better over the time Hattie had been many thousands of miles away. They'd FaceTimed regularly over the nine months she'd been overseas, and Hattie had gradually come to accept Polly's place in Will's life. Polly was, understandably, nervous about what it would be like to have Hattie back, and not just as a face on the screen, but she felt reasonably confident that things would work out. If they didn't, Hattie was restarting her university course in London in a few weeks' time, so wouldn't be around a great deal. Polly had the feeling that the relationship would always involve work, but to her mind it was worth it.

Her rapport with Maeve, however, couldn't have been more different. Maeve had loved working at Roseford Hall and was now raring to start her new course at Bristol University, also in a month's time. She was determined to keep working at the hall, too, and had already secured a place during her vacations and the odd weekend when they needed her.

'Ready to go?' Will asked as Polly secured the takings in the safe.

'Ready when you are,' Polly replied. Locking the door of the shop, she paused before she got into the car.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' she said. 'I found this on an auction site the other day. I was going to put it in the front window of the shop, but I thought you might like it for the book launch. Perhaps you could show it to your publisher, see what they think.' She reached into the backpack she was bringing with her on the journey to London and pulled out a well-worn football shirt, which, by its design, would have been in play for the England national team at the turn of the century. On the back was the distinctive name: Sutherland.

'Wow!' Will said, grinning. 'After the penalty I missed wearing that shirt, I had hoped never to see it again!'

Polly smiled back at him. 'Well, everything comes back into fashion eventually,' she said. 'Maybe it's time to embrace the past.'

Still grinning, Will shook his head. 'Maybe,' he replied. 'But right now, it's the future I'm looking forward to.'

As they drove out of Roseford, Polly was feeling exactly the same way.

MORE FROM FAY KEENAN

We hope you enjoyed reading *Winter Wishes at Roseford Reloved*. If you did, **please leave a review**. If you'd like to gift a copy, this book is available to purchase in paperback, hardback, large print and audio.

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Chapter One

SOLD. The sight of the yellow and blue rectangular sign atop the post in the front garden of Kate Harris's home gave her a jolt. Though the sale had been confirmed some weeks ago, the estate agent had obviously amended the sign while she'd been dropping her three sons off at school. A neat but spacious detached property in the heart of one of Cambridgeshire's most attractive villages, it had been snapped up quickly a few weeks back by a young family desirous of more space.

Kate had been preparing herself, mentally and in more practical terms, for the ordeal of uprooting her sons and herself since the start of the year. It was only logical, now that the divorce had gone through and her ex-husband, Phil, had set up home with his new partner, that the house would have to be sold to release the equity and allow them both to start afresh. When the house had finally gone on the market in February, it had only been for sale for six weeks before an offer had been made and accepted. So now, in late March, knowing all of this, why did Kate's stomach turn at the sight of the sign? Why did her

hand clench convulsively around her car keys as she pressed the key fob to lock it where it stood on the driveway? Why did her face feel hot, and her mind start to race?

Before she could take more than a deep breath, the phone in her other hand pinged. It was a WhatsApp from her friend and next-door neighbour, Lorna.

Saw the guy come to change the sign. Any news about when you have to get out?

Kate grinned. Trust Lorna to take the direct approach. She wasn't exactly renowned for her subtlety. That was probably why they got on so well, though. Kate, with three sons in the house, had discovered that subtle got her absolutely nowhere, especially when it came to getting them to complete their household chores. She valued directness in her friends, too. Turning sideways, she was unsurprised to see Lorna putting her recycling bins out, and obviously waiting to catch her for a chat, and check in.

'Fancy a coffee?' Kate called as Lorna set down the last of her green bins. 'I can fill you in on all of the gory specifics if you like.'

'Thought you'd never ask!' Lorna replied, hurrying over to the low fence that separated the front gardens and hopping over it. 'It's been a while since we had a proper catch-up.'

As Kate made two cups of coffee from the machine that would, most likely, end up in storage in the next few weeks, Lorna filled her in on the latest gossip from the Year 6 parents' WhatsApp group, to which Kate had resolutely refused to belong after she'd been passive aggressively reprimanded for dropping 'the f-bomb' on the forum, as one member had primly named it, with the caveat that, 'I'm sure I'm not the only one who checks her phone in sight of small eyes.' Kate, who had boys of thirteen and sixteen as well as her eleven-year-old, had merely rolled her eyes and refrained from pointing out that she was sure most modern parents had said a lot worse in front of their kids, and if they hadn't, then their siblings certainly had. She encouraged her sons not to swear in the house, but she was pretty sure that once the front door closed on them, all bets were off. Fortunately, Lorna, who had a higher tolerance for the playground pecking order, kept her up to date with anything of significance.

'I cannot wait to delete that bloody group from my phone, the second the gates close on the kids in the summer,' Lorna said. 'I mean, don't get me wrong, most of them are great but it's starting to feel more and more like some high school movie as the kids hit puberty. And it's only going to get worse.'

'You're a braver woman than I am for staying on there.' Kate laughed. 'And I'm grateful, so you can give me a heads-up on anything I'm likely to have forgotten for school.'

'Happy to take one for the team for a mate.' Lorna grinned. 'Inside, I'm counting the days, too. But enough of that crap. How's the packing coming?'

Kate sighed. 'Slowly. Much as I hate to admit it, Phil was right when he said that most of the stuff in this house is mine. He wasn't just being noble. I mean, apart from a hideous sideboard that I insisted he took with him when he bugged off, a wardrobe full of clothes and then the usual splitting of the CD and DVD collections and the pots and pans, the rest of it really does belong to me and the boys.' She shook her head. 'I never realised I was such a hoarder!'

'Well, you were married for sixteen years, and three kids will fill your house faster than teenage girls to the O2 Arena to watch Harry Styles, so it's hardly surprising.' Lorna took a sip of her coffee. 'So, when's the completion date?'

'The first Monday of May half term,' Kate replied.

'Jesus! That's about ten weeks away. You'd better get your act together, then.'

'You're not kidding.' Kate sat back on the padded bar seat that had been 'hers' for the duration of her marriage. Phil had been a creature of habit, and would never dream of sitting in it, far preferring the other side of the table. That rigid sense of routine was what had made his sudden declaration, just over

two years ago, that he'd fallen in love with a fellow architect at his firm, all the more shocking. Within two weeks of telling her, he'd moved out of the family home and into his new love nest one village over, and set up home with alarming speed. While she couldn't complain about his financial support of her and the boys over the past two years, and he'd been more than helpful in terms of his access to the boys at weekends and in the school holidays, now that the time had come to actually move out of the family home, Kate's sadness and grief was creeping back up on her.

'It's all right to feel miserable, you know,' Lorna said, obviously sensing that behind the jokes about WhatsApp, Kate was struggling. 'You've been through so much over the past couple of years. And I know you don't like it when I call Phil "that shit of an ex-husband", but you didn't deserve any of it.'

'I'm fine.' Kate swallowed a mouthful of still scalding coffee to try to get rid of the lump in her throat. 'It's not like I didn't know this was coming.'

'Still doesn't make it any easier,' Lorna said stoutly. 'I know when Dan finally moved out, I kept finding his stuff for months afterwards. I couldn't look at the hook on the back of the bathroom door without imagining his dressing gown on it. It takes time.'

'Well, I've got a couple of months to pack everything up,' Kate said, 'and Mum's offered me the annexe at the bottom of her garden for the time being – although God knows how all four of us are going to fit in there – it's only got two bedrooms and a sofa bed in the lounge. Guess where I'll be sleeping!'

'Sounds like it'll be, er, cosy,' Lorna said. 'I'd offer you my spare rooms, but something tells me the last thing you'll need is to witness the new people setting up home in your old house.' She looked thoughtful for a moment. 'Although, now you come to mention it...'

'What?' Kate looked at her friend, who smiled enigmatically.

'Is the annexe your absolute last resort?' Lorna said. 'As in, if something better, but with a teeny, tiny string attached came along, you'd snap it up?'

'Yeah, I suppose,' Kate said. 'What are you thinking?'

'Leave it with me,' Lorna said, finishing up her coffee. 'It might not be what you want, but I'm pretty sure I can find you something better than the bottom of your mum's garden, for a few months at least.' She stood up. 'I'll text you later. Don't say yes to your mum just yet.'

'Okay,' Kate said dubiously. 'But you do know that I've got three sons, right? And they're often not the most careful of people. If what you've got in mind involves anywhere expensive, with breakables, it's a non-starter.'

'Oh, your lot aren't that bad,' Lorna said. 'I'll be in touch. Now get on with that packing. Or at least thinking about what to put in boxes first!'

Wondering, as she often had over the years that she'd known Lorna, whether her proposed 'solution' would actually lead to more complications, Kate still couldn't help feeling intrigued. Anything that meant she didn't have to squish into the annexe with her mum's beady, disappointed eye on her from the other end of the garden had, surely, to be a good thing. Didn't it?

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FAY KEENAN

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I can't believe this is my tenth novel! As such, so many of these thank yous have been said many times before, but they all still stand. Firstly, to my agent Sara Keane – thank you so much for the help and support. Secondly, to my brilliant editor Sarah Ritherdon and all at Team Boldwood – you allow me to keep telling these stories, and reaching new readers, and I couldn't be happier working with you all. Thanks to all at Ulverscroft, too, who produce such wonderful audio versions, and to Harriett Hare, who has the most glorious voice for the audio. Thanks so much, also, to Candida Bradford for the brilliant copy editing skills and Debra Newhouse for the equally brilliant proofread.

This novel has been a bit of a passion project. Ever since the 2018 Men's Football World Cup, I've been fascinated with the world of the England national football teams, both male and female, and although the footballing element of this book is light touch, my respect, admiration, and a level of exasperation with what I've researched about the beautiful game hopefully shines through. One man in particular, the calm and authoritative Gareth Southgate, became the style model for Will Sutherland in this book, and while Will's struggles, personal and professional, are purely a work of fiction, I definitely had Gareth and his presence (as well as his impeccable dress sense!) in my mind as I wrote. I hope he doesn't mind a writer's indulgence!

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Finally, thank you to all of the readers who keep coming back to the worlds and the characters I create. It means so much to me that you do! I hope you've enjoyed another trip to Roseford, and I hope you'll stay with me wherever our next journey takes us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fay Keenan is the author of the bestselling *Little Somerby* series of novels. She has led writing workshops with Bristol University and has been a visiting speaker in schools. She is a full-time teacher and lives in Somerset.

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