

Autumn Dreams

on

Sunflower Street



RACHEL GRIFFITHS



AUTUMN DREAMS ON SUNFLOWER STREET

A DELIGHTFULLY COSY ROMANCE

SUNFLOWER STREET

Book 12

Rachel Griffiths



Contents

AUTUMN DREAMS ON SUNFLOWER STREET

1. [Ellie](#)
2. [Finn](#)
3. [Ellie](#)
4. [Ellie](#)
5. [Finn](#)
6. [Ellie](#)
7. [Finn](#)
8. [Ellie](#)
9. [Finn](#)
10. [Ellie](#)
11. [Ellie](#)
12. [Finn](#)
13. [Ellie](#)
14. [Finn](#)
15. [Ellie](#)
16. [Finn](#)
17. [Ellie](#)
18. [Ellie](#)
19. [Finn](#)
20. [Ellie](#)
21. [Finn](#)
22. [Ellie](#)
23. [Ellie](#)
24. [Finn](#)
25. [Ellie](#)
26. [Finn](#)

EPILOGUE – ELLIE

[Dear Reader,](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[What To Read Next...](#)

For my family, with love always. XXX

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AUTUMN DREAMS ON SUNFLOWER STREET

Ellie Porter returns to the village of Wisteria Hollow to sort out her late aunt's cottage. She's recently divorced and in need of a place to stay, so the cottage provides a welcome sanctuary.

Finn Harman has no time for love. After being betrayed by his ex-wife, he's focused on growing his gardening business and spending quality time with his sister and her family.

But when childhood friends Ellie and Finn meet again, it's clear to both of them that they still have feelings for each other that haven't been diminished by the passing of time.

Can these two forty-somethings rekindle their spark or will true love only ever be an autumn dream on Sunflower Street?

Chapter 1

Ellie

‘**W**here would you like this, Mrs Porter?’ the giant man, with a shaved head so shiny she wondered if he polished it every morning, asked.

Ellie peered at the box. ‘Kitchen, please.’ She resisted the urge to roll her eyes because the box was clearly labelled *KITCHEN*.

The man followed her gaze and his cheeks coloured. ‘Sorry. Didn’t see the label there.’ He gave an embarrassed shrug and Ellie smiled.

‘It’s fine, honestly. And it’s *Ms* not Mrs.’

‘Course.’ He bobbed his head then plucked at his *Rodney’s Removals* T-shirt that looked like it had been tumble dried on high and was now three sizes too small for him.

As he lumbered away in the direction of the kitchen, she shifted her position against the doorframe. If she could just reach around and extract the source of her discomfort, then...

‘Everything all right, Mrs Porter?’ The man had returned from the kitchen and was frowning at her.

‘*Ms*... Yes. Fine.’ She gave a quick nod. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘You looked like you were wriggling, Ms Porter. Like you had an itch and you couldn’t get to it.’ He offered a goofy smile and she returned it then waved a hand, hoping he had *not* worked out what her problem was because that would be absolutely mortifying.

‘I’m fine. Just a bit... tired.’

‘We’ll be out of your hair soon,’ he said as he passed her and headed back out to the removals van.

‘Thank goodness for that,’ Ellie muttered, glancing around to check she was alone then reaching around to try to rearrange her underwear. She’d arrived at her late aunt’s cottage on Sunflower Street in the village of Wisteria Hollow the previous afternoon, and to her dismay, when she’d got up this morning she’d found that she hadn’t packed any underwear in her suitcase. All her comfy pants were in the boxes that were in the removals van and so she’d rooted around in the pockets of the suitcase in the hope that she might find something. And she had. A teeny, tiny thong that must have been in there from a holiday she’d taken years ago with her ex-husband and children. Somehow, the thong had been wedged so deeply in the pocket that she’d previously missed it and so, this morning, she’d been forced to don the thong. Now, she was wishing she’d just gone commando because the damn thing was flossing her nether regions in ways that made her eyes water. She couldn’t even recall buying it but then, back in the 90s, she’d fallen prey to some of the fashion trends, wearing low-slung combats and cropped tops like the *Spice Girls* and *All Saints*. It was hard to believe it now but back then, showing off the top of a thong above your trousers was fashionable. Ellie hadn’t been particularly fussy on the trend, nor that of cropped tops, feeling self-conscious when she sat down and her belly concertinaed. Touching a hand to her stomach she chuckled inwardly. There was a lot more belly to fold over these days and back then she’d had no idea how lucky she was to have the high metabolism of youth. These days her metabolism had abandoned her and she only had to look at a biscuit and she put on weight.

Just as she gained hold of the thong, another man entered the cottage holding a large clear plastic container so she released it and it sprang back into place. As the man squeezed past her then climbed the stairs, she pretended she’d been scratching her lower back. Sighing, she accepted that the thong was going to have to stay where it was for now and she’d have to endure the discomfort. Unless, that was, she was prepared to

do what she'd once heard a comedian suggest and she didn't know if she could bear to shout out, 'Oh my goodness, my bum is incredibly itchy!' His theory had been that if you shouted this out, people would automatically look away in embarrassment and you'd be able to have a good scratch.

'What is my world coming to?' Ellie asked herself as she shuffled through to the kitchen, trying to pretend that she felt just fine and not like her bottom was sliding along a tightrope.

She filled the kettle and turned it on, dropped teabags into mugs and got the milk from the fridge then opened the back door and stepped out into the garden.

Memories washed over her as she gazed at the garden, already transitioning from summer to autumn as the leaves on the trees that bordered the garden changed from green to yellow, to brown and red. The lawn was covered with fallen leaves and a robin hopped around on the bird table, singing his heart out. She could have been a child again, visiting with her aunt after a day at school, looking forward to blackberry picking followed by one of her aunt's delicious crumbles with creamy custard. She'd spent a lot of time with her maternal aunt after moving to the village when she was twelve. Her dad had been in the army and so most of her childhood had been spent moving around but they'd lived in the village for five years and it had been the only place that had ever felt like home. Then, when she was seventeen, her dad had said they were moving again and so Ellie had been uprooted and had to leave her friends and beloved Aunt Iris behind.

As she walked further into the garden, passing the small shed to her left and the large oak tree, Ellie admired the chaotic flower beds, inspired by her aunt's love of colour and vibrance, and the large bug hotel, one of several that were placed around the garden.

Near the end of the garden was a pond surrounded by flat stones and reeds and off to the right was the greenhouse and the raised beds where her aunt had grown an abundance of fruit and vegetables. Ellie could recall coming to this part of the garden with her aunt to select produce for their dinner. She'd enjoyed the time her aunt spent with her, the way she'd

always had time for Ellie's questions and how she'd allowed Ellie to have a sense of responsibility even when she was just a girl. Her parents had been lovely but her dad worked long hours and her mum was busy running her home and trying to recover from her latest miscarriage, of which there had been many during Ellie's childhood. Ellie's mum, Rose, had been sweet and kind but often looked so unwell that Ellie hadn't liked to trouble her for anything and so, while her mum had napped through the afternoons, Ellie had spent time with Iris.

Now, Ellie rose onto her tiptoes and peered over the rear hedge at the seemingly endless fields beyond the garden. Sunflower Street was in a beautiful spot and she loved the sense of freedom that the cottage and garden offered while also having the advantage of being in a pretty village with good transport links. Over the years, Ellie had visited her aunt a few times a year and Iris had come to stay with her in Watford too, but they'd both led busy lives and so they never seemed to have enough time together. After she'd passed away six months ago, Iris had left Ellie this perfect cottage in her will. Ellie had come back for the funeral but hadn't had a chance to visit again until now. She'd been going through her own challenges with her divorce and house sale, but now everything was sorted and her time was her own once more. Seeing as how the family home had sold, Ellie had decided to return to Wisteria Hollow and live here for while, possibly for good, because she had nowhere else to be and the thought of growing old in a delightful village where she'd been happy as a child seemed like a pretty good plan indeed.

'Mrs Porter!' She turned to see one of the removals team waving at her from the doorway. 'All right if I pour the water on the tea bags?'

'Of course!' she replied then she made her way back to the cottage. 'And for the umpteenth time, it's *Ms!*'

Soon, Rodney's Removals would be gone and she'd be able to settle in and to work out what she was going to do with her life now that she was newly divorced and her two children had flown the proverbial nest.

It was, Ellie told herself, her time to start again.

Chapter 2

Finn

‘Something smells great!’ Finn Harman said as he closed the back door to his sister’s house behind him then toed off his shoes, leaving them on the mat.

‘Hey Uncle Finn.’ His fifteen-year-old nephew, Cole, smiled at him across the kitchen. ‘I’m making chilli.’

‘Yum!’ Finn went to the sink and washed his hands then dried them before pulling out a stool at the kitchen island. ‘Anything I can help with?’

‘You can chop the tomatoes for the salsa.’ Cole gestured at the bowl of tomatoes on the island, so Finn pushed his sleeves up and got to work.

‘Did you have a good day at school?’ he asked Cole.

‘I did thanks. Apart from English. I can’t get the hang of speech writing.’

Cole had always been good at practical subjects but struggled with reading and writing. He was happiest when he was creating in the kitchen and Finn suspected that his nephew was going to end up being a chef.

‘I was the same at your age,’ Finn said. He’d found a lot of school challenging and was glad to leave as soon as his GCSEs were done. He’d got work with a local landscaping company and had gone on to start his own gardening business in his early twenties, after the man he’d worked for had moved abroad. There was, in Finn’s opinion, nothing like getting your hands dirty outdoors and he didn’t mind what the weather was

doing, he just enjoyed the feel of the sun and the wind on his face and the sense of freedom it gave him. He'd never have been happy cooped up in an office or travelling to work on the tube every day. He needed to be outside in the fresh air, or he got antsy. 'But speech writing... What's your topic?'

'Climate change,' Cole replied with a grimace.

'Let me think.' While he chopped the tomatoes, he thought about the speeches he'd heard over the years and about those he'd been required to make from time to time. 'OK. First off, you need an engaging introduction.'

Cole raised his eyebrows. 'Like what?'

'You could try using a rhetorical question.'

'One people know the answer to?'

'That's right. Like... *Do we really want our planet to last?*'

'I like that.' Cole grinned then set the lid on top of the large pan of chilli and came to the kitchen island. 'What else?'

'You need some words to... uhhhh... persuade the audience. By that, I mean words they feel they can't argue with.'

'Such as?' Cole fixed his green eyes on Finn's face.

'Undeniably, surely, obviously... words like that.'

'You're good at this, Uncle Finn.'

'Shame I wasn't good at it when I was at school. I think this has just come with experience.'

'I wish I could leave school now.'

'No you don't. Your mum would have a fit. You need to get your qualifications then you can do whatever you want in this life.'

'Like you?' Cole tilted his head.

'I am doing what I want.'

'But you don't have great qualifications.'

‘Noooo... but I do have some qualifications. And anyway, it was different when I was your age. Don’t forget I’m not far off fifty. It’s all changed. You need qualifications in order to get on. And *then* you can choose what you want to do.’

Cole leant his elbows on the island and rested his chin on his hands. ‘I just want to cook delicious food in my own restaurant.’

‘Then you will do. You can do whatever you want, Cole. You’re a talented young man. I can just imagine you opening a chain of restaurants and your mum and dad eating proudly at every one. Me too for that matter.’

‘Thanks, Uncle Finn.’

Finn smiled then set the knife down on the chopping board. ‘Tomatoes done. What’s next?’

Cole handed him a red onion.

‘Uncle Finn!’ Slim arms wrapped around his neck from behind and he coughed jokingly.

‘Millie. Can’t breathe.’

‘Yes you can!’ His niece released him and came to stand at his side. ‘You’re teasing me.’

‘I wasn’t teasing, Millie. You’re very strong. You could take a grown man down with those biceps.’

Millie giggled. ‘I’m only ten.’

‘And strong for your age.’ He nudged her gently with his arm, unable to give her a hug because he had onion on his hands.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ she asked.

‘That would be great.’

‘And a cookie to go with it?’ Cole asked.

‘You two spoil your old uncle.’ He laughed.

‘You’re not old.’ Millie shook her head as she filled the kettle. ‘You must stop saying that.’

‘OK, princess.’ He nodded. ‘I will.’

He finished chopping the onion and added it to the bowl, washed his hands and placed the chopping board and knife in the dishwasher then followed his niece and nephew through to the lounge where they'd turned the TV on.

‘What shall we watch?’ Millie asked.

‘Whatever you like,’ he replied.

While she scrolled through the channels, he sat back and sipped his tea. He often came to his sister's house after work to spend time with his nephew and niece. His sister, Darcie Harman-Jones, and her husband, Ross, worked long hours and Finn liked to be there to help whenever he could. It also meant that he got to eat Cole's delicious meals and to help Cole and Millie with homework, and he knew Darcie appreciated having an adult home with her children after school. Of course, Finn couldn't be there every day but whenever he had an early finish, he headed straight there.

That was one of the advantages of living in the same village as his sister and her family; they got to spend plenty of quality time together and he didn't have far to travel home afterwards.

He might have been through some challenging times in recent years, but he had plenty to be grateful for and spending time with his family was right up there with his good health.

Chapter 3

Ellie

The next day, Ellie woke from the best sleep she'd had in years. It helped that she had her new double bed in the cottage with its brand-new memory foam mattress and Egyptian cotton sheets that she'd washed and dried on the line in the garden. There was nothing quite like freshly laundered sheets to slide between, especially when you got to have the bed all to yourself as Ellie did these days.

After she'd made herself a mug of tea, she took it back to bed and sat against the headboard, gazing out of the window at the trees in the back garden. The breeze shook them gently and some of the leaves drifted to the ground or spiralled through the air like mini helicopter blades. Her aunt used to sleep in the front bedroom, but Ellie had always liked this back room with its view of the garden and the sloping ceiling that gave the room a cosy cottage feel. The front room and the other smaller bedroom, she'd prepare for when her children came to stay, which wouldn't be as often as she'd like, she suspected, but they were grown up now and had their own lives to lead. Part of parenting was knowing when to let go and as hard as it could be, Ellie had done her best to let her children find their wings and fly when they were ready. She hoped she'd done a good enough job so that they had the confidence to follow their dreams while knowing that she'd always be there when they needed her.

She sipped her tea and stretched her legs out, savouring the feel of the cool sheets and the sheer decadence of space. Not that she didn't occasionally miss having a body to snuggle up to in bed but then it had been a long time since she'd really

done that. Her ex-husband, Cooper, had been away a lot towards the end of their marriage, citing work commitments and golfing trips with his friends. Ellie knew now that he'd *chosen* to go away whenever he could and that the golfing trips had, in fact, been with a female colleague. A female colleague he'd become rather close to. Even now, after a year of coming to terms with the knowledge that he'd been having an affair, she still felt a flicker of nausea. By that point in their marriage, they rarely slept together in the same bed and their sex life was basically non-existent, but even so, his betrayal had stung. She suspected she'd always thought they might find their way back to each other at some point, perhaps when the children had left home, but it turned out that when they had left, Cooper had asked her for a divorce. At least then, he'd been honest with her, and she'd been able to face up to what had gone wrong between them. Some marriages just fizzled out. Theirs had never been a great love affair in the first place, more a *right time, right person* scenario in that the right person had been the *one who'd do for now*. And *now* had become months and years and before she knew it, they'd been together for twenty-six years and they had a home, two children and a history. A history of acceptance and companionship but no grand passion. Yet she'd been happy to accept that as it was because who got to fall head over heels in love, anyway? Wasn't that just for the movies and the romance books? Although, always in the back of her mind, she'd known that when she'd been younger, much younger, and lived in Wisteria Hollow, there had been a young man who'd made her tummy flutter, who'd made her heart beat faster and a blush rise into her cheeks. But one night had changed everything between them and before she'd known it, her dad had moved them away again and she'd left the village behind. Along with her first love. A love that never was despite her wishing it had been otherwise.

Over the years, Ellie had tried not to think about how she'd felt back then because it would only lead to unhappiness and what was the point in making herself unhappy? She'd been little more than a child and the man in question hadn't been much older, so they were young and immature and what she'd felt was probably just hormones. Or that was what she told

herself. And so she'd packed away the feelings and the dreams and focused on being a good mum and wife and making a home for her family. When the children had gone to school she'd got a job at her local library and she'd loved it, working surrounded by books all day every day and then spending the evenings with her family at home. They'd had holidays once and sometimes twice a year. She had attended school events and stood religiously at the side-lines of every sporting event her children had participated in as well as at every school play and concert. But, as they had a tendency to do, the years had flown and now here she was: forty-six, divorced, and living in her dream cottage in her dream village at last. If only her aunt was still around too then how much fun they might have had together. Sadly, it wasn't to be as her aunt had passed away after a short illness and so, Ellie was alone. But, it didn't mean that she had to feel lonely and she hoped to immerse herself in village life and to feel that she was a part of something again.

She finished her tea and flung back the duvet then slid her feet into her slippers. She'd have some breakfast then get dressed and go for a walk around the village to get her bearings. It would be nice to catch up with what had changed over the years and to see if she bumped into anyone she knew from the past.



Ellie left the cottage and walked along Sunflower Street, admiring the houses and cottages as well as the well-kept green. Some things were familiar and others seemed like they had changed and she wondered how many people from her past would still live here. Over the years, some would have moved away and some would have stayed, others would have married and had families and some would have decided to leave. Ellie thought that if she'd been given the option when she was younger, she would have stayed in the village. Her parents had been renting a property in Wisteria Hollow back

then, not wanting to buy because of her dad's military commitments but even so, it had felt like home.

Time brought so many changes and no-one was immune to its passing. It felt like just yesterday that her children were babies and she'd been desperate for some sleep and an hour to herself to sit and read or watch a movie. Now though, she had all the time in the world. Everything was temporary and that was something she tried to accept and to remember, especially when things were difficult. Nothing lasted forever. Well, perhaps only love.

She reached the end of the street where the big house that belonged to Roxie and Fletcher Walker stood and then followed the road around. Leaves crunched beneath her boots and a cold breeze slipped icy fingers beneath her collar, so she pulled her fleece jacket tighter around her and tucked her hands deep into her pockets.

She passed the pub, the garage and the primary school, crossed the road and reached the village shops. There was a bookshop she hadn't noticed before, the library and a café, as well as a bakery, a fish and chip shop and a clothing boutique.

'Dragonfly Dreams,' she read, looking at the sign that hung from the front of the building, swaying in the breeze. It featured a vibrant blue dragonfly above the name of the shop and she realised it reminded her of something. 'Darcie's tattoo!' she said with a laugh at the memory of the tattoo her friend had done on her thigh when she was just sixteen. Darcie Harman, her best friend when she'd lived here as a child, had the tattoo done secretly and in a place her parents wouldn't see it. Ellie and Darcie had been close in the way that teenagers could be, going everywhere and doing everything together and she'd missed Darcie terribly when they'd moved. They'd stayed in touch for a while but then they'd both met men and got married and life had taken over. Ellie felt sure that if she'd stayed in the village then she would have still been friends with Darcie today but as it was, they'd lost touch. She thought they were friends on Facebook, but as with many Facebook friends, unless you interacted regularly, they didn't show up in

your feed and so it was only when you thought to look for them that you saw what they were doing.

Ellie went up to the window and admired the display. A lot of it looked vintage and that would make sense if this was Darcie's shop because she'd always been mad about vintage clothing and furniture and about doing whatever she could to help the environment. Darcie had been a beautiful person inside and out and Ellie realised that she'd love to see her old friend again and to catch up, maybe take up where they left off. That last thought made her shake her head. Ridiculous to hope that Darcie might feel the same. People moved on with their lives and perhaps it was only her, with her surplus of time, who thought about the past and felt nostalgia for the life she'd once had, as well as for the life she'd once thought she might have.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and went inside, holding her breath as she looked around, daring to hope that she might find her old friend inside.

Chapter 4

Ellie

The walls of the shop were painted dark blue while features like the cornicing and the woodwork were painted gold. Old-fashioned lanterns hung from fixtures on the walls, creating a warm glow inside the shop. It smelt of incense and furniture polish, a pleasant aroma that reminded Ellie of how Darcie's bedroom used to smell. Darcie had loved burning incense sticks and using essential oils, much to her father's irritation because he'd been convinced that she'd burn the house down one day. It was amazing how powerful scents could be, casting you back in time to when you'd first smelt them. Ellie remembered then that Darcie had also worn a leather jacket with tassels on the arms that she doused in patchouli oil and suede knee-high boots with leggings. Even back then, when many people had been wearing whatever was in fashion, Darcie had been happy to be herself and to wear what she liked. She'd been fiercely independent and comfortable in her own skin and that was a wonderful thing to have as a woman, especially as a teenager, because it was hard to be confident in yourself when you were being bombarded with images of what the media considered perfection. Ellie knew that it was far worse now than it had been when they were growing up because today's teenagers had no escape from the media; it could reach them via their televisions, computers and smart phones, as well as at school, college and via their peers. Ellie had seen it with her own children and done what she could to protect them from it and to help them to understand what mattered and what didn't, but it was still an

ongoing battle and some days she worried that it would continue to get worse.

She wandered around the shop, brushing a hand over the rails of clothes, feeling the soft buttery leather of jackets and coats, then the prickly textures of sequined dresses and blouses and the cool, smooth denim of worn jeans.

At the far end of the shop was a squishy red leather sofa and to either side of that were changing rooms. The counter was at the rear of the shop next to a door with a sign that said *Staff Only*. Behind the counter were shelves adorned with hats, sunglasses and fascinators in a range of colours and styles then to the right of the counter was a shelving unit of shoes, trainers and boots. There was plenty to look at and Ellie knew her daughter would love it, being a vintage magpie as she was.

The door next to the counter opened and a woman emerged carrying a steaming mug and a paperback. She looked up and gasped when she saw Ellie.

‘Goodness! I didn’t hear you come in. I’m so sorry. Let me put these down.’ She set the mug and the book down then came out from behind the counter. ‘Can I help you with anything?’ she asked.

Ellie smiled. ‘Hello, Darcie.’

Darcie’s light-brown brows knitted above her nose then recognition dawned on her face and she smiled. ‘Ellie!’

Darcie opened her arms and swept Ellie into a hug. When she finally released her, they were both laughing and Ellie found that her vision had blurred so she swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘Ellie, it’s so good to see you.’

‘You too.’

‘Are you back to sort your aunt’s cottage?’

‘I am.’

‘Are you going to put it up for sale?’

‘Actually, I’m here to move in.’

‘What?’ Darcie clapped her hands and her numerous silver rings glinted under the shop lights. ‘Really?’

Ellie nodded. ‘See, it’s a long story, but I got divorced recently and we sold the family home so I’ve come back to live here.’

‘That’s amazing,’ Darcie said. ‘Sorry, not the divorce bit, I’m very sorry to hear that, but the rest of it. Wow! Gosh it’s been years. Did you come back for the funeral?’

‘I did.’

‘I’m so sorry I didn’t make it. I had the flu and I was holed up in bed for two weeks. I felt dreadful.’

‘That’s OK. Completely understandable. To be honest, there were so many people there that I might not have noticed anyway. It was a hectic and emotional day and then it was over and I had to get back to Watford for an appointment. Finding out that Aunt Iris left the cottage to me was overwhelming. I wasn’t sure what to do with it for a while but then, with having nowhere else to go and loving the village so much, I decided that I might as well come back and live here for a bit. Perhaps permanently.’

‘I’m so happy to hear that. We have years to catch up on, don’t we?’ Darcie grinned and Ellie had to blink hard to clear her vision again. ‘Do you fancy a cuppa?’

‘Well... I don’t want to disturb you.’ Ellie looked around at the quiet shop.

‘Honey, it’s early on a Saturday. It will be quiet for hours yet. That’s why I brought my book.’ Darcie gestured at the counter. ‘The advantage of being my own boss is that I can give myself an hour off when I feel like it.’

‘Go on then, I’d love a cuppa.’

‘Fabulous! Take a seat or have a browse and I’ll be back in a bit.’ Darcie touched Ellie’s arm and gazed at her for a long moment as if she couldn’t believe she’d come back, then she gave a brief nod and disappeared through the door behind the counter.

Ellie sauntered over to the sofa and sank onto the comfortable seat, feeling it squish up around her like a hug. Darcie had seemed so pleased to see her and it was a wonderful feeling. Moving back to Sunflower Street could prove to be one of the best decisions she'd ever made.

Chapter 5

Finn

Finn reached for the brown envelope on the mat by the front door and eyed it suspiciously. Another one from HMRC probably about what expenses he could or couldn't claim. He tossed it onto the hallway table, intending on reading it later. He'd popped back to his rental house to grab a clean fleece after he'd managed to tip a bucket of dirty water over his other one while clearing out the garden of an elderly couple. The water must have been in there for months and it stank so his fleece needed to go straight into the wash.

As he looked up, he caught sight of himself in the hallway mirror and did a double take. It always shocked him when he saw himself like this in his uniform of green fleece over green polo shirt and with hardwearing black trousers and black boots. But it wasn't his clothing that made him start, it was his hair, his beard, his face.

When had he got so old?

That thought made him laugh.

Time waits for no man or woman, right?

His once black hair was now grey, his beard matching. He had lines around his eyes and some on his forehead and there were even greys in his thick eyebrows. His nephew often joked that Finn looked like the actor Jeffrey Dean Morgan and apart from his blue eyes, there were times when Finn could see the resemblance. Unlike the actor though, he didn't have a happy marriage or millions in the bank. He wasn't struggling financially but didn't have money to burn and part of that was

due to his divorce two years ago when, despite his lawyer's advice, he'd let his ex-wife take the lion's share of the money from the house sale and the majority of their belongings. After they'd split, he hadn't wanted any of it, not even the money really, which he knew was in some ways silly because everyone needed money, but it all felt so tainted. Tainted by what she'd done and by how she'd thrown their marriage away for another man, a colleague she'd apparently fallen for. Now, if he had been Jeffrey Dean Morgan he doubted she'd have let him for another man. But then, that was the wrong way to think because celebs didn't always have great relationships. They were human beings like the rest of us and so wishing to be like that was pointless because everyone had their own pain to bear. Their own disappointments to come to terms with. Their own broken dreams.

He rubbed a hand over his beard and sighed then frowned at his reflection. No point in standing here wallowing in self-pity. His marriage was well and truly over and life was moving on. He had his business, his sister and her family and plenty of friends in the lovely little village of Wisteria Hollow. That was a lot more than many people had and so he needed to count his blessings and get on with life.

He sucked in a deep breath, opened the front door and stepped back out into the autumnal morning, wondering what else the day had in store for him.

Chapter 6

Ellie

Curled up in the corner of the sofa in Darcie's shop, Ellie cradled her mug of tea between both hands and smiled at her old friend. They'd already started catching up and she'd found out that Darcie had opened the shop a few years back, starting with just a few bits and bobs, but over time she'd added to her stock and now sourced it from a variety of suppliers.

The shop was warm and cosy and had so many things to look at. Ellie thought it must be lovely to have your own shop, although she wasn't naïve and knew that it would come with a lot of responsibilities like rent, energy bills, taxes and so on. Darcie employed several part time staff and said one of them would be in later for her Saturday shift.

'So you have two children, right?' Ellie asked.

'Yes. Cole who's fifteen and Millie who's thirteen.'

'And are you still married?'

Darcie nodded then pushed a few strands of her brown hair behind her right ear. 'Yes, to Ross. He works as a mechanic at the garage. We've been together since our early twenties. He drives me mad some days, but I love him to bits.'

'That's nice.'

'What about you?' Darcie's eyes widened. 'Sorry, I just remembered that you said you were divorced.'

'Don't be sorry. It's fine. I was married. Cooper and I got together when I was nineteen, which is very young, I now

think too young, and we separated and got divorced recently. You know how these things are, it can take time to process it all. But yes, I am divorced and I'm footloose and fancy free.' She blinked as the reality of it hit her again. She wondered if she'd ever get used to being single after so many years in a relationship.

'Is it scary?' Darcie asked. 'I mean, being alone after so long. It must take some getting used to. Even if your marriage wasn't great.' Darcie had always been very open and frank and she didn't shy away from the difficult questions. Ellie was pleased to find that hadn't changed.

'It is a bit scary. I've had my wobbly moments... But then everything can be scary. Seeing my kids suddenly grown up felt scary. Finding out that Cooper was cheating was scary. Accepting that it was time to call it a day was scary but... also... kind of liberating. I'm finally in a place where I can please myself. I don't have to worry about looking after anyone else, not doing their washing or cooking their meals or asking what they want to watch on TV. I can do whatever I want and so I'm trying to focus on those things rather than what I've lost. People lose things all the time, don't they, but life is short and so I'm not going to waste my time wishing for what I don't have.'

'You sound like my brother.'

Ellie froze. She hadn't asked after him yet because she'd been busy finding out about Darcie but now Darcie had brought him up and she found she wanted to know more. 'How is Finn?'

'He's good, thank you. Same old Finn.'

Ellie waited, keen to know more but afraid she'd blush if she asked.

'He got divorced himself a while back and he was pretty low about it but he's getting there. He lives in the village in a rental property because they sold the marital home after they split but he has his own gardening business and he's always busy. Between you and me, I think a lot of the jobs he gets are because women think he's hot but I'd never tell him that. He

wants it to be because of his good reputation and his excellent work. Which it is, mainly, but I think the way he looks helps. Cole jokes that Finn looks like Jeffrey Dean Morgan these days.'

Really?' Ellie's mouth had gone dry. Finn had always been gorgeous with his dark hair, intense eyes and deep voice but to hear that he'd aged well and that he was single was... well... interesting news.

'He's a fantastic uncle and he's great with Cole and Millie. He comes over most days to spend time with them and they love him to bits.'

'Didn't he have children of his own?'

Darcie shook her head. 'He wanted them but his ex didn't and then she had an affair with a colleague and Finn realised she'd never wanted to have a family with him. He was gutted but he'd never have left her over it. Then she left him with nothing.'

'That's rough.' Ellie's heart ached for the man she'd once adored. Her clichéd best friend's older brother crush.

'Yeah. It wasn't nice. But, as I said, he's OK now. Hey... You should come to dinner tomorrow and you can meet my family and catch up with Finn.'

'Really?' Ellie's heart skipped a beat. Of course she'd love to meet Darcie's family but to see Finn too, after all these years. Well, that would be just wonderful. And terrifying. 'Are you sure?'

'Absolutely. Look give me your number and I'll let you know what time we'll be eating. It tends to change based on the kids' commitments that range from sporting to educational to social, so I never know what time I'm going to be putting dinner on the table. Or should I say, I never know what time Cole's going to be putting dinner on the table because he's a whizz in the kitchen.'

'Cole cooks?'

Darcie nodded. 'He's amazing. Makes the best Yorkshire pudding I've ever tasted and don't get me started on his fudge

chocolate brownies.’

‘Yum! I’m hungry already.’ Ellie giggled.

‘It will be lovely to have you over. Right...’ Darcie drained her tea. ‘Another?’

‘Oh go on then.’ She handed Darcie her mug then sank back against the cushions. It was only her third day in the village and she was already having a great time, and now she had an invite to Sunday lunch.

Could it get any better than this?

Chapter 7

Finn

‘**Y**ou have to coat them well with oil to make them nice and tasty,’ Cole said as he tossed the roast potatoes around in the tin as expertly as a celebrity chef on a Saturday morning cookery show. He placed the tin on the kitchen island and picked up the pepper grinder.

‘He’ll be on Strictly next,’ Finn said to his brother-in-law, Ross, who was peeling carrots at the kitchen island.

‘Tell me about it,’ Ross said. ‘I can’t wait to sit in that audience and tell everyone he’s my son.’

‘I hope I’ll get an invite too,’ Finn said.

Cole rolled his eyes at them both then laughed. ‘I am *never* going on a TV show like that. I can’t dance for starters so why would I want the nation to see my lack of coordination.’

‘They teach you,’ Finn replied.

‘Teach me what?’ Cole raised an eyebrow.

‘How to dance.’

‘Yeah but not straight away or before the cameras start rolling. I couldn’t stand to be humiliated like that in public.’

‘They pay you to do it,’ Ross said.

‘How much?’ Cole ground pepper then sprinkled salt over the potatoes in the tin, wiped his hands on a tea towel, put the oven gloves on and placed the baking tray back in the oven.

‘Thousands, I should think,’ Ross said. ‘Probably enough for a deposit on a car or a house.’

‘That’s a big difference, Dad.’ Cole put the salt and pepper away then folded his arms across his chest.

‘I think it depends who you are and how famous you are as to how much they pay,’ Finn said. ‘But it’s money and in this world you can’t turn money down.’

Cole shook his head. ‘I still don’t think I’d want to do it.’

‘I’d be on Strictly!’ Millie pirouetted into the kitchen then sank into the splits on the tiled floor. ‘I’d probably win.’

‘You probably would,’ Cole said, smiling down at his sister. ‘So you carry on and be a celebrity and I’ll live my life in peace.’

‘Got to hand it to him,’ Ross said to Finn, ‘He’s got his head screwed on the right way.’

‘Of course I have, Dad. I want to be a chef not a celeb and I want a private life. I don’t want the media poking its nose into my business all the time.’

‘I don’t blame you on that.’ Finn nodded. ‘Right then, Chef, what’s next?’

‘You can peel some more spuds for mash.’

‘We’re having mash as well today?’ Finn frowned. They usually only had one type of potato with Sunday lunch, unless it was Christmas, in which case Cole spoilt them with a variety.

‘Well we are having a guest,’ Cole said and Finn looked at Ross who looked over at Darcie. She was sitting on the corner sofa folding fabric she’d bought online to turn into waistcoats to sell at the shop. As well as being a businesswoman, Darcie was pretty nifty with a sewing machine and had been making her own clothes since they were children.

‘Darcie?’ Finn said and she looked up.

‘Yes?’

‘Cole said we’re having a guest.’

‘We are.’ She smiled.

‘Anyone I know?’

‘Yes.’ Her smile broadened and Finn widened his eyes at her in warning. She was winding him up like she used to do when they were younger.

‘Are you deliberately withholding this information or is there a reason why you don’t want to tell me?’

‘What? No.’ She laughed. ‘I just thought it would be a nice surprise for you.’

At that moment, the doorbell rang and they all froze.

‘I’ll get it, shall I?’ Finn asked, already making his way to the front door.

He straightened his shirt, took a deep breath then plastered a smile on his face. After all, it had to be someone important if Darcie was playing games with him. And while his sister might still wind him up sometimes, he would never want to be rude to a guest so he’d be as polite as if he was about to greet royalty.

He opened the door, about to make a joke along the lines of expecting King Charles, but when he saw who was there, his voice died in his throat. Instead, he made a strange noise deep in his throat before choking out, ‘Oh, hello... I didn’t know you were coming.’

The woman on the doorstep blinked back at him before offering a shaky smile in return.

‘Hello, Finn.’

Finn stood back to let her inside but as he closed the door behind her, he had to take a moment to lean against the wall because suddenly he felt like his legs didn’t have the strength to hold him up. He probably would have been less surprised if it had been the King.

Chapter 8

Ellie

Ellie stalked through to the kitchen-diner on wobbly legs. She'd known Finn would be here, of course she had as Darcie had told her he would, but seeing him again was a different matter. He was... simply breath-taking. Although decades had passed since she'd last seen him and since, well, that fateful night when she'd made things awkward between them, he was still gorgeous. In fact, if she was being completely honest with herself, he was bloody delicious. Age had not ruined him or faded him, it had simply refined him, made him a finer version of the young man he'd been. At nineteen, he'd been tall, handsome and slim but now... Now he was a man. With his greying hair and beard, his sparkling blue eyes and lightly tanned skin — that she presumed was from all the time he spent outdoors with his job — he had aged like a fine wine.

Wow! Just wow!

And she knew from Darcie that Finn was single. A man *like that* was single. It seemed crazy.

Would he like what he saw when he looked at her?

Her heart sank like a balloon deflating. Finn might have aged but so had she and she didn't think she'd grown finer with age. There were bits of her that no longer defied gravity, her hair was no longer thick and lustrous as it had once been and she had lines around her mouth and eyes. She was happy with herself and who she was, but it didn't mean that Finn would look at her and find her attractive. Of course it didn't.

Her attention was soon called to being greeted by her hosts and to a glass of wine that Darcie pressed into her hand.

‘This is my son, Cole and my daughter, Millie.’ Darcie gestured at her children and Ellie smiled at them and said hello.

It was strange meeting her friend’s children, especially when they were so grown up and she’d missed their childhood, their infancy. She had not seen Darcie when she was pregnant and waiting for labour to begin, or when she’d been sleep deprived in those early days after the birth and later when her babies were teething and restless. She had missed so much.

‘And this is my husband, Ross.’ Darcie placed a hand on the man’s arm.

He was tall with thinning sandy hair and kind hazel eyes and he shook Ellie’s hand firmly. ‘Nice to meet you.’

‘You too,’ she said. He seemed familiar but then she’d probably seen him around the village over the years during her visits to her aunt and on Facebook when she’d seen Darcie’s photos now and then. Not that she’d seen them for quite some time but she must have at some point, even if she hadn’t taken much notice because she was scrolling through her feed in the distracted way she often did when she had things on her mind. The only things that did seem to catch her attention then were parrots singing and dancing, dogs skateboarding or those young people who liked to run and jump onto the most precarious ledges and walls, often missing and falling into water or making it by the skin of their teeth. Just thinking about those acrobatics and the risks they took made her palms clammy but she had to admit that it could be addictive viewing.

‘Shall we have a seat?’ Darcie gestured at a corner sofa near bifold doors.

‘Is there anything you need help with?’ Ellie asked as they sat down.

‘It’s fine. Cole has it all under control.’ Darcie smiled, looking over at her son who was currently instructing his dad how to stir the gravy.

‘It smells incredible,’ Ellie said.

‘Cole is amazing in the kitchen and he loves cooking, which is even better. It’s made our lives a lot easier.’ She smiled. ‘I still do things around the house, of course I do, but having help in the kitchen is wonderful. Ross has always been brilliant, mind, and we used to take it in turns cooking but now Cole does the lion’s share, so we get to focus on other things.’

‘Neither of my children were keen on cooking,’ Ellie said. ‘But they were good around the house so I couldn’t complain.’

‘What about your ex?’

Ellie grimaced. ‘Not so much.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It’s OK. I was home more than him, so I used to take care of things. It would’ve been nice to have more help but it doesn’t matter now. We’ve both moved on.’

Her eyes flickered over to the kitchen where Finn was helping Cole and Ross, the three of them filling the kitchen with their tall frames. They looked so relaxed, like they did this all the time and knew how to work well together.

‘It must be strange seeing Finn again,’ Darcie said before taking a sip of her wine.

Heat rushed to Ellie’s cheeks at the comment but then she told herself that Darcie didn’t know about *that* night, so she couldn’t possibly mean what she’d said in *that* way.

‘It is.’ After all, he’d rejected her and she knew he didn’t find her attractive. Then she’d moved away with her parents and so that had been that.

‘Time flies, right?’ Darcie said.

‘I can’t believe how quickly it passes. Doesn’t seem five minutes since we were Cole’s age and life was ahead of us filled with possibilities.’

‘I wouldn’t go back though,’ Darcie said. ‘It’s tough being a teen and trying to find your way in the world.’

‘Too true.’ Ellie sighed. ‘Be nice to have a few more years to play with though.’

Darcie laughed. ‘Hey, Grandma, you’ve got a few years left in you yet.’

They both laughed at that and Ellie felt some of the tension that had crept into her shoulders dissipate.

‘Gosh I hope so.’

‘Mum!’ Cole called from the kitchen area.

‘Yes, love.’

‘This is nearly ready so do you want to go to the table?’

‘Absolutely.’ Darcie placed a hand on Ellie’s arm. ‘I’ll just grab us some more wine.’

Chapter 9

Finn

Finn enjoyed the dinner cooked by Cole, as he always did, but today was even better because Ellie was sitting across from him at the table. It was strange seeing her after so long and yet, really nice. He found his eyes drawn to her pretty face over and over again, and he wanted to ask her questions about her life and what she'd been doing since they'd last spoken, but he held back for fear of seeming overly interested. He found the way her face hadn't changed fascinating. Yes, she had some fine lines around her eyes, but they merely added character. He could see some greys glinting in her red-brown hair but they were like nature's highlights. And her figure, that he'd noticed when she'd removed her coat, was stunning. She'd been a slim teenager back then but now she had a woman's curves. She'd born children, he knew that much, and her figure had changed but it was the type of figure that a red-blooded man would want to snuggle up to at night, a figure a man could... well... best not to think about that right now. Suffice it to say that Ellie was an even more attractive version of herself than the one he'd known years ago.

Over the course of dinner, he did find out that she had two grown children and that she was divorced, now single, and something about that made him want to punch the air. Why, he wasn't sure because there was no way that he wanted to get involved again with anyone and he had no way of knowing if she found him attractive. But there was something about the way she looked at him when their eyes met, about the softening of her expression when their hands touched when he

passed her the potatoes, that made him wonder if there could still be a spark between them. But surely that was too much to hope for? She had almost been his first love, *almost*, and he wondered if first loves could reunite after nearly three decades. Older, more experienced and, hopefully, wiser?

‘Finn?’ Darcie was staring at him.

‘Sorry?’ He shook himself to break the spell his thoughts had cast over him.

‘I asked if you wanted to help me get the dessert?’

‘Oh. Yes, of course.’

He stood up and helped his sister to clear the table then load the dishwasher. Darcie opened the fridge and gestured at him to join her. Behind the fridge door that screened them from the dining area, she touched his arm. ‘You OK?’

‘What? Why?’

‘You looked lost in thought at the table and I was worried about you.’

‘Oh... yes, I’m fine.’

‘What is it then?’

‘I think it’s just seeing Ellie again. It brought back a lot of memories.’

‘I found that yesterday when she came into the shop. It was like being thrown back in time.’

‘Yes, exactly that.’ He took the bowl of trifle from her and she got the pot of cream then closed the fridge door. ‘She looks good though.’

Darcie poured the cream into a glass jug and when she looked up at him, she was smiling. ‘You think so, huh?’

‘Well... you know... she’s aged well.’

‘She’s gorgeous! And so are you. Do you... do you think you might still fancy her?’ Darcie raised her brows and Finn shrugged.

‘Still?’

‘Oh come on, Finn. I know you used to fancy her.’

‘Well... uhhh... I don’t know.’

‘Ha ha! Big brother, who’d have thought it. You still have a crush on my old bestie.’

‘No I don’t. Anyway, I didn’t have a crush on her.’

‘Oh please... pull the other one, it plays jingle bells. You do so have a crush on her and you definitely did when we were kids. As she did on you. I could never understand why you two didn’t get together with all the pining you both did.’

‘She was younger than me.’

‘What by two years?’ Darcie rolled her eyes. ‘Big deal.’

‘Back then it seemed to matter. I felt kind of responsible for her because she was your best friend and I wanted to look out for you both.’

‘And you did but that didn’t mean you couldn’t date her.’

‘It did because what if I’d hurt her?’

Darcie pursed her lips then nodded. ‘OK, I’ll give you that. But hey, now you’re both fully grown adults so you can put all those fears aside and see how things go.’

‘Darcie, you don’t know if she’d even want to date me. Besides... I don’t know if I want to date again. After Aaliyah, I’m not sure I can face going through all that again.’

‘Honey, you get one life. I appreciate your fears and understand them completely but as you’ve told me often, time waits for no one and so you have to grab happiness where you can.’

‘I guess so.’

‘I know so.’

Darcie put the cream down and opened her arms and gave him a hug. ‘I love you, Finn, and I’ve always got your back.’

‘I know. Thank you.’ He squeezed her back.

‘Right... let’s get this trifle to the table, shall we?’

He nodded and picked up the cut glass bowl that used to belong to their mum and they went over to the table. As Finn set the bowl down, he met Ellie's gaze and smiled. Whatever may or may not happen, it was extremely nice to see her again.

Chapter 10

Ellie

Two weeks passed in the blink of an eye. Ellie was enjoying life in the village. She'd started painting the rooms in the cottage to freshen them up, was using the fresh produce from the garden in her baking and making the most of taking walks in the fresh autumnal air. Life in Wisteria Hollow was different from life in Watford. She had liked it there, but she preferred the quieter pace of life in the village, the rural surroundings and the cosy cottage that felt like home already.

Since she'd had lunch with Darcie and her family she'd seen her friend again several times. They'd met in the café and Darcie had also come to the cottage to see how Ellie was settling in. But she hadn't seen Finn again. Well, only from a distance as he'd driven past and she'd realised it was him because of the sign on the side of the green van. She told herself that he was busy, she was busy and the nights were drawing in, so by the time she imagined Finn finished for the day, she was usually tucked up in front of the TV or reading a good book in front of the log fire. She didn't mind because it gave her time to think, to relax and to focus on herself. She'd felt a bit discombobulated after she'd seen Finn at Darcie's. He was lovely, she'd had that confirmed for her, but she didn't really know him anymore. Not like she had done when they were younger. Back then, he'd been her best friend's older brother but also her friend. They'd spent a lot of time together when she'd been at Darcie's and she'd talked to him about all sorts of things, had watched endless movies with him as well as nineties shows like *Shooting Stars* and *Eurotrash*, to name a

few. There had been times when Darcie had fallen asleep and it had just been Ellie and Finn left awake, laughing at the TV and casting shy glances at each other in the darkness of the family lounge. There had been times when they'd cooked pizza together and made popcorn, when they'd accidentally brushed hands in the kitchen as they'd reached for the same glass or pizza slice, times when they'd sat close on the sofa, their legs almost touching. But then there had also been the time when Ellie had been drunk and craving intimacy and she'd made a move on Finn and he had rejected her. It had stung so hard she could feel it even now like a slap to her cheek.

So time without seeing Finn again was a good thing. It gave her the chance to think about where she was in her life and what she wanted. And if she indulged in the occasional fantasy about what it would be like if she spent more time with Finn now, then that was all right too because it was harmless and what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Or her.

She shook her head at herself, laughing softly. What was she, seventeen again?

She picked up her clippers and the large wicker basket she'd found under the stairs and headed out into the back garden. Some of the trees and the blackberry bushes were heavy with fruit and she wanted to pick some and use it up before it fell to the ground and rotted. There was no sense in wasting it.

In the garden, the morning sun was weak but nonetheless, it warmed her face. She was wearing a baggy old maroon jumper and worn boyfriend jeans that had been her daughter's but that her daughter had left behind when she moved out. Ellie had found them in the drawer and tried them on, marvelling at how comfy they were and she'd decided to keep them for herself. They sat lower on her waist than some of her jeans but they were looser around the bum and thighs and they made her feel younger and slimmer, which was never a bad thing.

She walked along the path, watching as a robin hopped over the grass, pausing to shake his tail and to perform a funny

little jig as if he could hear music. What was it that some people said? *Robins appear when loved ones are near...*

Was this a sign from her aunt that she was nearby? That would be nice. It was lovely having the cottage but she did miss her aunt's presence. Iris had been a wonderful woman with a talent for baking delicious pies, crocheting just about anything out of scraps of wool and a whizz with a crossword. Ellie found crossword puzzles confusing, unless they were pretty basic that was, but her aunt had been able to work out the clues like she was Sherlock Holmes and Ellie had been fascinated by the skill. She felt sure that not many people could be that good at crosswords and yet her aunt was. It seemed such a waste then of her aunt's intelligence and knowledge that it was all gone now. All that wisdom and learning stored up over the years had been lost along with her warm and compassionate heart and her numerous other skills. The human condition seemed so tragic when she thought about it like that and so it was one of the things that made her hope that there was something after death. There had to be even if it was just an energy that remained because otherwise, where did everything go? Everything that made people who they were with hearts and minds and hopes and dreams and love. So much love.

When she reached the end of the garden where the fruit trees were, she placed the basket on the ground and stood up and stretched. She used to do yoga regularly and thought she should take it up again now that she had more time. It would be good for her, especially now that her joints were starting to creak more and some mornings she felt stiff all over when she got out of bed.

She stood still for a moment and breathed in deeply then exhaled slowly. She did that a few more times then raised her arms above her head and looked up into the sky.

Blue. Perfectly blue. Not a cloud to be seen.

The air was fresh and clean.

The sun was a hazy orb in the east.

It would get warmer later but thankfully not summer warmth, just enough to take the chill off the air and to make the perfect autumnal day.

She brought her hands down to her chest and placed her palms together then raised her right foot and pressed it to the inside of her left leg. She wobbled a bit, out of practice, so she breathed slowly, focusing on pressing her weight into the grass.

There. That was better.

She swapped legs and found her balance again then stood that way for a few moments and closed her eyes, becoming aware of her body, feeling where her limbs were tight and where they felt looser, aiming to become more relaxed in the way she wanted to be.

Yes, she was out of practice, but she could definitely get back into this again. The breathing alone was a sure way to release stress and lower blood pressure and everyone needed to lower their blood pressure these days.

She planted both feet firmly on the grass, shook herself out then went to the apple tree and started gathering fruit. She was humming to herself, an Ed Sheeran medley, when something high up in the tree caught her eye.

What was that? A squirrel?

She stepped back to get a better look and gasped as a pair of eyes stared back at her. That wasn't a squirrel, it was a black and white cat.

'Hello,' she said. 'Where did you come from?'

The cat blinked at her for a moment then jumped down the branches until it reached the trunk and slid expertly down it. When it reached the grass, it waved its tail then sauntered over to her and started winding around her legs.

Ellie reached down and ran a hand over the cat's soft fur and it purred in pleasure.

She noticed that it was wearing a collar so she reached for the name tag.

‘Oh hello, Mr Shakespaw.’

Meow

‘*William Shakespaw*. What a fantastic name for a cat!’

Meow

‘So you live around here then, William? Or is it Willy?’

Meow

‘Willy it is then. I don’t suppose you’re hungry, are you?’

At that, Willy stopped winding himself around her legs and ran towards the cottage as if he did this every day. Ellie had left the back door open so she chased after him, not sure if he would go inside alone. She didn’t have to wonder for long because by the time she got there, the cat had already gone indoors and was waiting for her by the fridge.

‘Did my aunt used to feed you?’ she asked, and Willy let out another *meow*. ‘I see. Well, I can’t blame her because you are adorable.’

Ellie opened the fridge and peered inside, not sure what she could give the cat. She had some cooked salmon in there, a block of butter, some cheese that looked a bit dry (so she decided to dispose of it) and a bag of mixed salad leaves. She could give him some salmon, she supposed. She placed the cheese that was wrapped in brown paper on the table behind her for a moment, and got the salmon out, but when she turned back, the block of cheese had gone.

She looked around, wondering if she’d dropped it or left it on a different surface but no, it was gone and so was the cat.

She closed the fridge and hurried to the back door and there, on the grass, was Willy with the block of cheese in front of him. He’d already got the paper off and was munching away on the corner of the block.

‘Willy! You can’t eat all that. You’ll be sick and... though I hate to say it, obese.’

The cat looked up at her for a moment then wrapped his mouth around the cheese and jogged off along the garden with

it. She chased after him but he shot up a tree and disappeared among the yellow and orange leaves.

Ellie stood there with her hands on her hips, feeling like a helpless idiot.

Something bubbled in her stomach like gas and she placed a hand there, wondering if she was hungry herself. But soon a giggle escaped her mouth and more followed it. Before she knew what was happening, she was bent over her knees, laughing harder than she'd laughed in a long, long time.

'A cat... that likes... likes... cheese!'

She laughed until tears ran down her face and she had to cross her legs to stop something running down her legs.

'Ah well, best go to the loo then,' she said, shuffling back along the garden towards the cottage. 'Oh dear, oh dear. If that was a sign from you Aunty Iris then thanks very much. You have absolutely made my day. Who knew a cat could like cheese enough to steal a whole block and then drag it up a tree. What *a boil* and *a plague sore* that rascal William Shakespaw is.' Saying his name out loud along with some Shakespearian insults she'd learnt a long time ago for a library event made her laugh all over again. She found that she was hoping the cat would make a return visit soon because she couldn't wait to find out what he might end up doing next.

As she closed the washroom door behind her, she said out loud, 'I think I'm really going to enjoy living here. So far it seems like there's never a dull moment. I wonder who Willy belongs to, or in his case, who belongs to Willy.'

Chapter II

Ellie

The week passed blissfully for Ellie as she made apple and tomato chutney, apple and blackberry jam and apple and blackberry pies. On the Friday morning, she packed up some of the jars and pies ready to take them to Darcie's. Her friend had told her that she had the day off work to prepare for a fashion show the following evening at the village hall and she'd said Ellie was welcome to join her for a coffee break at eleven if she fancied it.

When she reached Darcie's home, she knocked on the door and waited. It was Friday morning so she knew the children would be at school and Ross would be at work.

When the door opened, Darcie stood there looking stressed. Her brown bob was sticking up at the back and she had dark shadows under her blue eyes. She gestured at the mobile phone tucked under her chin then waved Ellie inside.

In the kitchen, Ellie set her bags down on the table then waited while Darcie finished her phone call in the hallway.

'Sorry about that,' Darcie said as she came to Ellie's side. 'I'm having one of those days.'

'Anything I can help with?'

Darcie chewed at her bottom lip. 'Oh... I don't like to ask.'

'Try me.' Ellie smiled. 'I'm happy to help if I can.'

'You don't have a job yet, do you?' Darcie asked. 'Sorry, I shouldn't say *yet* because perhaps you don't intend on getting

one. I mean, you said that you're OK financially.'

Ellie nodded. 'I have money from the sale of the family home and don't need to pay a mortgage or rent now because my aunt left me the cottage. I'm in a very lucky position. I did have my job in Watford at a library and I loved it but I didn't fancy the commute from here.' She grinned to show she was joking. 'To be honest, there were memories there too from my time as a married woman and I wanted a completely fresh start so gave the job up. There was a waiting list of people who wanted a job there and so I figured it was a positive thing to do for other people. Who wouldn't want to work at a library, right?'

'Of course.' Darcie inclined her head but she looked like she was far away, lost in her own thoughts.

'So what can I help you with?' she asked, realising that she'd digressed.

'I don't suppose you fancy working at *Dragonfly Dreams*, do you? At least temporarily even if you don't fancy it permanently.'

'Wow! I'd love to work with you. What's happened then?'

Darcie sighed and pulled out a chair and sank onto it. 'One of my part timers has quit. I thought it was on the cards but she's fallen in love and has decided to leave the village so she asked how much notice I need. I know she wants to go asap so I told her not to worry about working her notice. See, she's also pregnant and not feeling well and she does need to look after herself. That's part of the problem with me. I love having the shop but I do think I can be a bit of a soft employer. I can't say no when people need some consideration.'

'You have a good heart and there's nothing wrong with that.'

'I'd never cut it in corporate though. I don't see how people can ever be *just numbers*.'

'Nor should they be.'

'You're right, you're right.' Darcie smiled and her expression softened.

‘When do you need me to start?’ Ellie asked.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Wonderful.’ Ellie pointed at the kettle. ‘Shall I make us a cuppa?’

‘That would be amazing, sweetheart, thank you. I feel absolutely beat today. We have the fashion show at the village hall tomorrow and I still have things to sort for that.’

‘Well let’s have a cuppa and some blackberry and apple tart and see if I can help with that too.’

‘You know, Ellie, I’m so glad you’ve come back to the village.’

‘Me too.’ Ellie smiled at Darcie and her heart swelled with love and affection. Sometimes in life, things happened at just the right time, and it seemed to her that this was the case with her moving back to Sunflower Street.

Chapter 12

Finn

Finn let himself in the backdoor at Darcie and Ross's house and closed it behind him. He walked into the kitchen and called out, 'Hello?' He knew Darcie would be here today but didn't want to scare her by coming in unannounced.

'Hi, Finn.' Darcie was sitting at the table with her iPad in front of her as well as a bowl and a mug. Ellie was at her side and she smiled at Finn in a way that made his stomach flutter.

'Hi Finn,' Ellie said, and he smiled back at her.

'Hi both. You look busy.'

'We're putting the finishing touches to the plans for the show tomorrow evening as well as stuffing our faces with Ellie's delicious apple and blackberry tart.'

'Oh.' He raised his eyebrows. 'I can actually smell the pie... and it smells really good.'

'Help yourself,' Ellie said. 'I brought plenty. There's a spare pie there if you want to take it home afterwards and plenty of jars of chutney, although I'd recommend giving the chutney a few weeks or so to mellow.'

'Wow. Thanks, that's great.' Finn bobbed his head. 'Love a good pie or a crumble. I actually popped in for a cuppa, but pie too is a much better deal.'

He set the kettle to boil then got a bowl from the cupboard and spooned some pie into it along with a dollop of vanilla custard from the carton on the counter. While he made tea, he

took a bite of the pie and almost moaned out loud. The fruit was perfectly sweet and zingy, the pastry light and buttery and the custard smooth and creamy. He could easily eat two or three bowls of this and still have room for more. But that would be greedy and the last thing he wanted was for Ellie to think he was letting himself go. Not that it should matter what she thought of him really, but he found that it did matter. He cared about her opinion and that was interesting to him.

‘Here you go.’ He placed fresh mugs of tea in front of the women then went back for his mug and bowl and he joined them at the table. ‘This pie is amazing, Ellie.’

‘I’m glad you think so.’ She smiled at him. ‘Thanks for the tea.’

‘My pleasure,’ he said. ‘So what’s the plan for tomorrow, Darcie?’

She sipped her tea then patted her iPad screen. ‘I’m two models short.’

‘Nightmare!’ He sat back and spooned some more pie into his mouth.

‘One female and one male.’

‘Oh dear.’ Finn shook his head and ate some more pie but when he looked up, his sister was grinning at him with her head tilted to one side.

‘Fii—iiin...’

‘Nope.’ He shook his head vigorously.

‘Pleeease.’

‘Nope. I can’t model vintage clothing, Darcie. I’ll do anything else.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Ellie said suddenly, and Finn and Darcie looked at her.

‘Are you sure?’ Darcie asked.

‘Absolutely. I mean... I don’t have a model figure or anything but—’

‘Looks pretty good to me!’ Finn said, cutting Ellie off and then he realised what he’d done when Darcie and Ellie gaped at him. ‘I mean uhhh... You look good to me.’ *Not getting better.* ‘You have a gorgeous figure.’ *Digging yourself in deeper.* ‘I mean... you look good, Ellie, and have nothing to worry about at all.’

‘Thanks, Finn, that’s very kind.’ Ellie seemed to sit up a bit straighter in her seat and a flush touched her cheeks in a way that made Finn think once again how beautiful she was. Didn’t she get many compliments? He felt certain that she should be told every single day exactly how beautiful she was.

‘OK then... If Ellie’s going to do it, I will too.’

‘Whoop!’ Darcie pushed her chair back and rushed at Finn and hugged him tight. ‘You’re the best big brother.’

Finn laughed and Darcie planted a kiss on his forehead. ‘I know exactly what I’m going to dress you in.’

‘It better not be too sexy is all I can say because we don’t want the local population getting all worked up now do we?’ He was only teasing but when he met his sister’s eyes he started to wonder exactly what she had planned to dress him in.

‘There will be a few changes of clothes but I have some outfits that go well together so if you two are all right with it, I’ll partner you up.’

Darcie looked back down at her iPad but Finn met Ellie’s eyes across the table and raised his brows.

She smiled, albeit nervously, so he responded with a shrug as if to say *What have we got to lose?* It looked like Saturday evening at the village hall was going to be a lot more fun than he’d anticipated. And it was all because Ellie was back in Wisteria Hollow.

Chapter 13

Ellie

Ellie stood in front of the bedroom mirror and assessed herself. She'd had a good old Saturday afternoon pampering session. It wasn't something she usually did because these days she rarely made time for all that malarkey. When she was a teenager, she'd spend ages in the bathroom, shaving, plucking, exfoliating, conditioning and moisturising while singing along to various rock bands and anticipating the evening ahead. Then she got married and had children and Cooper barely seemed to notice she existed let alone whether or not her legs were shaved and her bikini line waxed, so she stopped bothering. He didn't notice if her skin was well moisturised or her hair shiny and blow-dried and so it mattered less to her than getting some extra sleep or relaxing with the latest book she'd picked up from the library or added to the shopping trolley at the supermarket. Yes, she could have made more effort for herself, but she was often so tired and worn down that more sleep or an extra hour on the sofa seemed preferable to shaving legs that no one would see or touch. But today, knowing that she was going to be in her underwear at various points during the evening while getting changed for the fashion show, she made an effort and found that she enjoyed it. A good buffing with the body brush was followed by a long soak in the clawfoot tub with some essential oils, accompanied by a conditioning oil pack on her hair. When she got out, she wrapped her hair in a towel and rubbed a rich indulgent moisturiser into her skin until it felt baby smooth. Earlier that morning she'd attended to her unruly *lady garden* (as she'd once heard it called on TV) and tidied up a bit with a

scissors then whipped off the sides with some wax strips she found in the drawer of the bathroom cabinet. They were still in date which made her chuckle because it meant that her aunt had clearly bought them and used them previously, a thought she didn't dwell on for long because her aunt had been in her seventies. Did women in their seventies still wax their bikini line or had Iris used them for something else, like her upper lip? Now she thought about it, she did recall Iris telling her that she had some whiskers that popped through on her upper lip and her chin from time to time, so perhaps the strips had been used for that. Better to believe that than imagine her aunt trying to contort herself to remove her bikini line. Though why not, if that was what she liked to do? People should always take the best care of themselves that they could, after all, and she would never be one to judge.

And now, dressed in new lacy black underwear, Ellie felt good. Admittedly, the bra was like a hammock holding two beachballs and the knickers were more like shorts that came to mid-thigh and rose above her belly button, but they were made of the softest satin and lace and looked, she thought, quite good. She'd never be twenty-one again and she would never have been Miss World, not even back then, so she didn't ever have unrealistic expectations about her appearance. But in this underwear and after her pampering session, she felt good. Good enough, that was, and that was fine with her. So now, even if someone did cop a glance at her in her undies, she wouldn't feel completely mortified.

She pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt and slid her feet into her trainers then grabbed her bag. She'd promised Darcie she'd get to the village hall nice and early so they could run through the itinerary for the evening. Apparently, there was to be an auction too, so that would be interesting. It was to raise funds for the local primary school so they could get some new books for the library and that was a cause Ellie would happily back all the way. She wondered what sort of things people would be auctioning and doublechecked her bag to make sure her purse was inside.

As she closed the door behind her, she breathed deeply of the late September air that was delicately laced with

woodsmoke and almost skipped along the path. She was really looking forward to having some fun and knowing that Finn would be there too made her belly flutter in ways it hadn't done since she was a teenager. It hit her then that for the first time in a very long time, she felt alive.

Chapter 14

Finn

Finn had worked through the morning then finished early so he could go home to prepare for the evening.

Although he wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, he'd wanted to have a bit of a pamper before the evening. It wasn't that he didn't take care of himself. His job was very physical and he was lean and muscular from it but he also had rough skin on his hands and feet and his hair could get a bit unruly after a day in the wind, so he'd left his second in command in charge and gone to work on himself. He'd worked out, had a shower and buffed all the hard skin off his feet and hands then moisturised before popping to the local salon to get a haircut and his beard trimmed. Now, he felt ready to model at the fashion show, or as ready as he'd ever be, that was.

On his way to the village hall, he couldn't help wondering how Ellie was feeling and if she was nervous too, although Darcie had told him that there was no pressure with this. She wanted real people to model her ranges not images of perfection. After all, how could real people identify with models? She wanted people to see how good the clothes she sold could look on a normal person with bulges, scars, wrinkles and so on. That had made Finn wonder if she was telling him something about his appearance, but then she'd laughed and told him she thought he was lovely and so did a lot of the female population of the village. Not that it should matter to Finn what anyone thought, and he certainly wasn't vain, but after being dumped by his wife for another man, his self-confidence wasn't exactly brimming over. Finn had never been the kind of person to obsess about his looks, but didn't

everyone want to feel like someone who mattered found them attractive? At least found their heart and mind attractive anyway because at the end of the day, people got older and physical appearances altered. It was all about finding a connection with someone and if you found that, well, Finn thought that was as precious as gold and diamonds, more so in fact. As he got older, he thought that being loved and accepted for who he was would be the best thing ever. As for that happening, well, he doubted it ever would. But there was always hope.

When he reached the village hall, he went inside and removed his coat then headed for the back room where he knew Darcie would be setting up. He pushed open the door and nearly walked straight back out to head for home again. The room was full of people of all ages, sizes and shapes getting changed, pushing rails of clothes along or helping others to get dressed. God, he hadn't signed up for this!

He stood there, looking around and yet trying not to see anything, because there were people in various stages of undress and yet no one seemed to care.

'Finn!' A familiar voice, thank god.

Ellie was walking towards him. 'You OK?' she asked.

He couldn't help noticing that she was in a floral satin robe tied at the waist with Crocs on her feet. Her hair was pinned up into curls and she seemed to have grown extra-long eyelashes overnight. When she blinked, they reminded him of cartoon characters and it took him a moment to realise they were false and that it wasn't his mind playing tricks on him.

'I'm not sure,' he said.

'It's a bit overwhelming, right?' She peered up at him from behind those giant lashes and he nodded, chewing at his bottom lip.

'Come with me.' She held out a hand and he took it then she led him across the room. He raised a hand to shade his eyes, not wanting to accidentally look at something he

shouldn't, and when they reached the other side of the room Ellie said, 'You can lower your hand now.'

He did, slowly, and found that she was grinning at him.

'You're so cute, Finn.'

'Cute?'

'Were you just hiding your eyes so you wouldn't see anyone's wobbly bits?'

'Yeah,' he admitted. 'There's a lot of flesh around here.'

'There is. Too much. But most people are wearing massive undies so it's kind of like going to the beach and seeing people in their swimming costumes. To be fair, they're actually wearing more than they would at the beach.'

'Really?' he asked.

'Yes. Darcie told them to wear substantial pants and bras or even vests as well if they wanted. There are privacy screens for the shy and those who are very self-conscious can change in the toilets.'

'OK.' He looked around for the sign for the toilets and spotted it off to their right.

'You can change in the toilets too if you like,' she said softly.

'Where are you changing?' he asked.

'Here.' She pointed at her feet. 'Right here.'

'Oh, OK. I'll stay here with you.'

'There you are, Finn and Ellie!' Darcie marched towards them with garments hanging from her arms. 'My stars of the show.'

She handed them the garments then stepped back. 'If you can both get dressed, I can do any final tweaks to the outfits.'

'Right. OK.' Finn held up the outfit. 'Uhhhh... Do I really have to wear this?'

Darcie gave him the withering look she'd been able to silence him with since they were children, so he nodded and

started removing his clothes. He glanced around when he came to removing his jeans but no one else seemed to care so he slid them off and stood in front of his sister and Ellie in just his boxers. Ellie though, was already pulling her sweatshirt over her head and as she changed, he caught glimpses of black lace and milky white skin, of curves that could make a grown man weep. Damn, she was beautiful. But he did try very hard not to stare because he didn't want to make her uncomfortable. He couldn't help occasionally seeing things though because, after all, he did have eyes in his head.

When they were dressed, Darcie moved around them, making them raise arms and suck in breaths as she made some adjustments, and then they were ready.

'Brilliant. You both look fabulous.' She smiled and clapped her hands. 'Now let's practise your walk.'

'Oh man,' he said, pulling a face at Ellie, but she was laughing and it made him feel more relaxed. If she could see the funny side of this, then he could too.

Chapter 15

Ellie

Back stage, Darcie hugged everyone involved in the fashion show then lined them up. They were to walk onto the stage from the left then down the steps that led from the stage into the centre of the hall. From there, they were to head right to the end of the hall and out the double doors then to the back room where they would change for the next round. Darcie had shown them their three changes of clothes and Ellie had bit the inside of her cheek as Finn's expression had changed from mild distaste to sheer horror. He really didn't want to be parading around in front of the villagers but he didn't complain, he simply nodded at his sister and then looked to Ellie and she gave him what she hoped was her most reassuring smile.

While they'd been changing, she'd caught glimpses of his incredible physique and although she'd tried not to allow her eyes to linger, she couldn't avoid seeing his broad shoulders and muscular arms and thighs. He had a body that was naturally honed from hard physical labour and not from hours spent in a gym. Finn had always been physically fit but over the years his shoulders had broadened and his muscles from years of working outdoors, climbing trees and carrying logs, patio slabs and garden debris bulged when he tensed.

Lining up, she glanced at Finn. His arm brushed hers, sending sparks of electricity through her, and when she peered up at him, she found he was gazing at her.

'You look incredible, Ellie. Like, really amazing.'

'You do too,' she said, feeling shy.

‘But like, you remind me of... who was it in that movie?’ His brows met above his nose for a moment then a smile graced his full lips. ‘You look like Sophia Lauren. No, not her, Raquel Welch in that prehistoric movie.’

‘*One Million Years B.C.?*’

‘That’s the one.’ His eyes travelled over her and she felt heat rise over her collar bones and creep into the skin of her neck.

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really. Like... Wow!’

‘Thanks.’ She was extremely flattered. No one had ever compared her to someone like Raquel Welch before. Yes, she had the curves but to have Finn say she looked like that was incredibly flattering. She touched a hand to the flimsy skirt of the outfit that was made from some faux suede material and then to the top that barely covered her bra. She’d thought she’d be incredibly self-conscious in the skimpy outfit but now she found it liberating. She was a forty-six-year-old mother of two and she had the curves, stretchmarks and cellulite to prove it.

Next to her, Finn was wearing what was basically a loin cloth made of the same material and that barely covered his boxers. Darcie had though, given him a long, black wig that fell over his chest, offering him some coverage, and she’d had their hairdresser pin extensions into Ellie’s hair so it fell to her waist front and back. On their feet they wore Birkenstocks that had barely been worn and that were, she had to admit, very comfortable indeed.

‘Are you ready?’ Darcie asked her models from the side of the line.

‘Yes!’ they all replied.

‘And it’s three, two, one...’ Darcie waved a hand and the door to the stage opened and the first couple climbed the stairs.

As they waited, Finn fidgeted next to her, and she knew he was nervous. He’d always been a kind and sensitive soul and

she could imagine that this was hard for him. For her, it wasn't exactly a doddle, but she hadn't lived in the village for most of her life. For Finn, living and working here, it must be harder, so she touched the back of his hand. He slid his fingers through hers so they were linked and she found his touch both reassuring and exciting.

When they got closer to the steps, his grip tightened, and when it was their turn to climb the stairs, she turned to him and rose on her tiptoes.

'Finn?'

'Yes?' She could see the panic in his eyes and she wanted to wrap him in a hug and hold him to her, but then she knew that wearing very little as they were, she might find she wanted to do more than hug him. Not here, obviously, but if she could go somewhere quiet with him...

Cut it out, Ellie!

He was gazing at her, his eyes scanning her face, so she offered him a smile then stroked his cheek gently before pressing a gentle kiss there. He exhaled as her lips met his skin and his breath tickled her cheek, moved the hair near her ear sending a delicious shiver down her spine.

'Finn, it will all be OK, I promise. Keep holding my hand and we'll do this together. It's just a bit of fun anyway, right?'

'Right,' he said. 'Just a bit of fun and for a good cause.'

Then he did something she hadn't expected. He leant forwards and brushed his lips against hers and it was her turn to gasp. When he moved away, she saw mischief in his eyes and something else. Something she hadn't seen in a man's eyes in a long time.

She saw desire. Finn desired her!

'Next couple!' Darcie's voice came from behind them so they ascended the steps together, hand-in-hand. Connected in more ways than one for the first time in decades.

Ellie practically floated up the steps and along the stage and she didn't come back down to earth until they reached the

back room again.

Chapter 16

Finn

The back room of the village hall was buzzing with energy following the fashion show. It was a brilliant atmosphere and Finn was glad to be a part of it, especially after having spent the evening in Ellie's company. She was an amazing person. He'd forgotten how amazing, but then when they'd last spent time together, they'd been much younger. This evening, he'd felt nervous and self-conscious, but Ellie had taken his hand and it had boosted him, made him feel like he could do anything with her support. He was glad for Darcie and glad for himself that Ellie had chosen to return to Sunflower Street.

'Thank you so much, you two. You were both wonderful,' Darcie said as she crossed the room and hugged them in turn.

'It was a pleasure,' Ellie replied and Finn smiled.

'Yeah it wasn't so bad after all,' he said. 'But why are you looking worried now?'

Darcie rubbed at her forehead then sighed. 'We're meant to be having a post fashion show auction but I'm one item down.'

'What is it?' Ellie asked. She'd just pulled her sweatshirt over her head and her hair was all ruffled. She looked, Finn thought, very cute.

'I'm a human being down.'

'What? You're auctioning a human being?' Ellie laughed as she smoothed a hand over her hair.

‘Just a date actually. It’s part of the fundraiser for the primary school library. My employee was going to do it because she’s... well, she *was* single but when she pulled out I thought I’d find a replacement but sadly, it hasn’t happened.’

‘I could do it,’ Ellie said. ‘I’m single.’

Finn’s mouth went dry and his hands flexed at his sides. Ellie was offering herself up for the auction. Well, a date with her anyway and someone would win and get to take her out.

Darcie looked from Ellie to Finn and back again. ‘Are you sure? It is just dinner with someone so wouldn’t involve anything else and you can leave as early as you like, really. But hey... you might go on a date with someone you like and who knows where it could lead?’

As his sister shrugged, Finn felt something inside him shifting like sand under the tide. He did not like this idea at all. Not one bit.

‘Perhaps it’s not a good idea, Darcie. I mean, Ellie is new to the village and she doesn’t know the locals. She could end up dating someone with a reputation and... well... things could go wrong and...’ He rubbed at the back of his neck.

‘Finn, it’s a date. It could be with anyone who wins the bidding. Anyone at all. And if I don’t think it’s going well, I’ll bid on the date.’

Finn nodded slowly.

‘What do you think, Ellie?’ Darcie asked.

‘I’m happy to do it.’ Ellie nodded. ‘But should I change?’ She looked down at her comfy clothes.

‘I have just the thing,’ Darcie said and she hurried away.

‘You sure about this?’ Finn asked her, watching her carefully.

‘It’s for a good cause and people do these charity type auctions all the time. It’s just a date so it’ll be fun. Besides which, it’s been ages since I’ve been on a date so at least this way I get to go on one without seeming desperate.’ She

laughed but Finn thought there was something beneath the laughter that suggested that she wasn't 100% sure.

'Here you go.' Darcie had returned with a black dress that she held up in front of Ellie. 'This will look wonderful on you.'

'The date isn't tonight though?' Finn asked.

'No. At a time and day of their choosing.' Darcie helped Ellie to remove her sweatshirt again then she helped her to get the dress over her head.

Finn averted his gaze until Ellie said, 'What do you think?'

He turned to look at her and his breath caught in his throat.

'I think... Wow!' he said, struggling to close his mouth. The black dress was made of some stretchy material that clung to Ellie's curves. It had lace sleeves that came to her wrists, a fitted bodice with a low neckline that showed off her slightly flushed décolletage and significant cleavage and the rest of the dress accentuated her hourglass figure. The skirt fell to the floor at the back and came to just below her knees at the front and he wondered if it would float around her legs when she moved or even danced. She looked spectacular.

'Really?' Ellie said as she ran her hands over her hips.

'Really,' he replied, wishing he could trace his hands over the curves where hers had just been.

'Ellie, it could have been made for you,' Darcie said. 'You look stunning.'

'Thanks, guys.' Ellie smiled. 'I'll just tidy up my hair then I'll be ready.'

Ellie walked over to one of the long mirrors in the room and Finn turned to Darcie.

'She's pretty special, right?'

'She's very special. I missed her so much over the years and I can hardly believe that she's back. It's amazing and feels like hundreds of years since we were kids and yet, it also feels like no time at all has passed. Does that make sense?'

‘Absolutely.’ He nodded.

‘Right then... the auction should be kicking off soon, so we’d better go and get ready. You taking a seat in the audience?’

‘Yep.’ He needed to see how the bidding on Ellie went because in that dress, he was certain she’d have some high bids. Some lucky person would get to spend an evening with her. ‘See you later,’ he said to his sister then he made his way through to the main hall.

Items on the auction list included a trip to the Tower of London, a meal at one of a celebrity chef’s restaurants, a weekend at a cottage in the Cotswolds and a year’s supply of air-dried dog treats. Then it was time for the final lot — the date with Ellie.

She came onto the stage nervously, holding her hands together in front of her, but Darcie was by her side and she wrapped an arm around Ellie’s waist.

‘Our final auction item is a date with my beautiful friend, Ellie. You get the pleasure of her company for a whole evening and can go to dinner, the cinema or out dancing. Obviously, you’ll need to agree this with Ellie first, but she has kindly agreed to donate an evening of her time.’

Darcie looked at Ellie and she smiled.

‘Please remember, folks, that this auction is for a good cause so dig deep in your pockets. I’d like to start the bidding at fifty pounds.’

Finn sat on his hands while the bids started and kept on climbing. Soon the bids were up to three hundred pounds, and he looked around to see two men from the village competing with each other. They were both nice enough, both divorced and he knew they both played for the village football team. Something about seeing them vying with each other to get the date with Ellie made his blood boil and before he could stop himself, he raised his hand and shouted, ‘Four hundred!’

Darcie’s eyes widened. ‘We have four hundred from Finn Harman. Do we have anything higher?’

The men in the audience continued to bid and soon, the bids had reached five hundred. Ellie was looking distinctly uncomfortable on the stage and it was all Finn could do not to climb right up there, scoop her up in his arms and carry her away from it all. He wasn't quite sure what was going on inside him as he never got all cavemanlike but something about this process, as well as being around Ellie again all evening, had made him feel different. Then it hit him. He didn't want anyone else taking Ellie out on a date. He wanted to be the one to take her.

'Six hundred!' he said and there were some gasps around the hall. He grinned inwardly because to some people this would be mere peanuts. But to him and many of the villagers, six hundred pounds was a lot of money. But he had it there in his savings account, had a bit more actually, that he'd been saving for a rainy day. And now, it seemed, that rainy day had arrived. It was time to whisk Ellie out on a date and to spend the money he'd been saving on a good cause. Right now, he couldn't imagine any other way he wanted to spend it. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone else taking Ellie on this date.

'Do I have anything higher?' Darcie said, scanning the hall. 'Any bids above six hundred pounds?'

There were a few murmurs and some heads shaking.

Finn rubbed a fist against his chest, hoping that no one outbid him because he didn't know if he'd be able to stop.

Darcie said, 'Last chance? Nope? I'm closing the bidding on a date with Ellie then. Going. Going. Gone! The date with Ellie goes to Finn! Congratulations.'

Finn almost patted himself on the back. He'd done the right thing. There was no way he could have let her go out with someone else. Not that it was up to him who she went out with but he'd have hated to know she was dating someone who might not treat her the way she deserved to be treated.

Ellie met his eyes across the hall and he felt something leap in his chest. He had won a date with her and he was delighted. He just hoped she'd feel the same.

Chapter 17

Ellie

‘**A**nd that is how you take payment,’ Darcie said as she closed the drawer of the till.

‘I think I’ve got it,’ Ellie said. ‘And most people pay by card now, right?’

‘Yes. We rarely take cash now unless it’s for smaller items. Card is so convenient.’

‘It is.’ Ellie gave a small nod. ‘I don’t tend to carry cash these days. I remember Aunt Iris giving me pocket money when I lived here.’

‘How much?’

‘Three pounds a week. It seemed like a fortune back then.’

‘Three pounds used to get you a lot.’ Darcie smiled.

‘I used to save it to buy music cassette tapes.’

‘Those were the days!’

‘It’s so nice to speak to someone who understands what it was like to have to rewind a cassette to hear a song again.’

They laughed at the memory.

‘Are you’re sure you’re happy to do this?’ Darcie asked.

‘I’m delighted to have the chance to work with you. I need to learn about the stock and to get some fashion tips from you about how to add on items when people are shopping but I think I can do this. I mean... the stock is wonderful so it probably sells itself, right?’

‘It does.’ Darcie giggled. ‘OK then... trial run. I’m going to go and get us some lunch and you can see how you manage if we get any customers. Any problems though, ring me, and I’ll come straight back.’

‘Sure thing, boss.’ Ellie grinned.

‘You’ll be fine.’

Darcie gave her a quick hug then she grabbed her bag and jacket from the back room and left the shop.

Ellie walked around, admiring the ranges that were colour coded and in size order then she ran her hands over the leather and suede jackets that came in a vast array of colours and styles. There were some beautiful vintage items in the shop and Darcie had done an amazing job of setting things up so shoppers could come in and browse or even come in with something in mind that they would probably find in the shop. It was, she thought, a proper vintage boutique. Excitement rushed through her as she realised that she was going to be working here, even if temporarily. She’d have to be careful not to spend all her wages in the shop because there was plenty here to tempt her.

Twenty minutes later, Darcie was back with a paper bag and a tray holding two takeaway coffees. She set them on the counter and looked around. ‘It’s been quiet then?’

‘Very. One lady came in and she looked at the boots but then she left again. I did try to help her but she said she was looking for something very specific and hadn’t seen it.’

‘You’ll find that we get customers like that who’re just looking to have a browse but then you’ll get some who come in with no intention of spending but then they get carried away when they see what we’ve got. The thing is, with it being vintage, a lot of it is one of a kind, so sometimes reminding shoppers of that can encourage a sale if they’ve been wavering about whether to buy an item.’

‘Ooh! That’s a useful sales technique,’ Ellie said.

‘Very.’ Darcie laughed. ‘Right, I got us bacon rolls and custard slices.’

Ellie placed a hand on her belly. ‘I’m not sure I should eat all that.’

‘Nonsense, Ellie, you look fabulous. Besides which, it’s your first day here so I’m welcoming you in. You can take the cake home with you if you don’t want it now.’

‘OK, thanks, I’ll see how I go.’

They ate the bacon rolls sitting on the sofa in the shop then washed them down with the coffees. Ellie found that she did fancy her custard slice so she ate that too then sat back on the sofa and smiled. ‘Thank you. That was yummy.’

‘You’re welcome. It’s nice to have some company in here.’

‘It’s nice to be here.’

Darcie sat upright and wiped her hands on a napkin. ‘So do you know when you’ll be going on your date yet?’

Ellie’s stomach did a loop the loop. She’d been trying not to think about it too much because it made her feel nervous. If she could go back in time and tell the seventeen-year-old her that she’d be going on a date with Finn Harman, she knew her younger self would run around the village screaming with joy. It was funny how things worked out because now Finn had paid six hundred pounds for the privilege of her company for the evening.

‘I don’t know yet. Finn said for me to give him some dates that would work and I said, pretty much any evening would be fine so he said he’d get back to me.’

‘It’s quite exciting though, right? You two going out on a date. Not that it’s real date, I know, but... well...’ Darcie nibbled at a fingernail. ‘I don’t know if you’ve noticed but Finn seems to like you. A lot. And I haven’t seen him like this in years.’

‘You think he likes me... a lot?’ Ellie took a slow, deep breath.

‘I do. But he was badly hurt by his ex-wife and I know you’ve been hurt and so it’s difficult for you both to trust again. I get that. But... well... growing up I thought there was

something between you and at one point I thought you might get together. In fact, I was kind of disappointed when you didn't.'

'Me too,' Ellie said then she bit her lip. She hadn't meant to admit that then but what did she have to lose?

'You were? Oh Ellie, just imagine if you had got together. We'd have stayed in contact all that time and life would have been very different. We'd have been able to go through so much together.'

'My parents moving around so much was exhausting. I really didn't want to leave Wisteria Hollow but what could I do? I was just a child.'

'You had no choice in that.' Darcie sighed then drained her coffee. 'I would have loved for you to be my sister-in-law.'

'Me too.' Ellie said and she reached out and took hold of Darcie's hand. 'But I'm here now and I know we're not children anymore, but we still have time ahead. I'm hoping to stay in the village now.'

'I hope you do. And... if something happens between you and Finn then that would be the icing on the cake.'

'Well, we shall see.' Ellie stood up then she picked up the recyclable cups and packaging from their lunch. 'I'll take these through to the back and put the kettle on, shall I?'

'Ooh yes! That would be perfect.' Darcie slid down on the sofa and stretched out her legs. 'I could quite go for a nap now.'

'Nap away, boss! I'll wake you when I return with the tea.'

Darcie sighed then pushed herself back up. 'I won't nap, much as I'd like to. I have too much to do today and it would be awful if a customer came in and saw me snoring and drooling.'

'You drool in your sleep?' Ellie asked.

'Only sometimes. When I'm very relaxed.' Darcie giggled. 'Drives Ross mad.'

Ellie was still laughing as she carried the debris from their lunch through to the small staffroom. She hadn't liked to say it, but she remembered Darcie drooling in her sleep way back when they were kids and they had sleepovers at each other's homes. Darcie's drooling was not a recent thing. But then Ellie knew that she tended to wake herself up snoring if she fell asleep on her back, so there was always something. Goodness, if she ever spent the night with a man again, she'd have to make sure she fell asleep on her side. All this used to seem so much easier when she was younger but now, it was a minefield.

Chapter 18

Ellie

Three weeks passed with Ellie working at *Dragonfly Dreams*, taking long walks in the countryside, reading and occasionally entertaining William Shakespaw. She felt relaxed and content with life. She'd agreed on a date with Finn for the next day and suspected that they hadn't rushed it because they were both feeling a bit nervous. After all, it was a big deal getting back in the saddle, on the bike or any other euphemisms you wanted to use instead of saying *going on a date after decades of not dating*. She almost spoke to her daughter about it but decided against it because it would only make her more nervous and place more pressure on the occasion. It was the same with her son because she knew he'd worry about her and tell her to be careful, to put an app on her phone so he could track her whereabouts and ensure she hadn't been kidnapped or something equally ridiculous. The thing was, her children didn't know Finn and they did tend to worry about her and had been the same since she'd split from their father. It was as if, as soon as she became single, they became convinced that she'd end up being stolen away by the nearest single male of a certain age. Therefore, confessing to them that she'd allowed herself to be auctioned off for a date would not have sat well with them. It was funny how the tables turned, and parents initially did the worrying then their children took over and worried about the parents.

Today was Friday and the fine weather had given way to rain. It lashed against the windows and the wind rattled the panes in their frames. The wind blew down the chimney and sent ash whispering across the hearth. It was a day for

snuggling under a blanket and reading, but Ellie felt restless. She wasn't working today or over the weekend and had cleaned the cottage from top to bottom already, so now she needed to find something else to occupy her time. Since her arrival, she'd worked her way through the cottage and cleaned, tidied and painted the rooms. She'd kept what she wanted of her aunt's possessions and donated the remainder to charity. The only room she hadn't yet visited was the attic and she knew she'd been putting it off because the last time she'd been up there, many years ago, it had been rammed to the rafters with all the paraphernalia that her Aunt Iris couldn't bear to part with. Her aunt had kept the cottage neat and tidy but the attic was her hoarder space and so over the years that she'd lived in the cottage, she'd filled it with everything she desired but didn't want invading the lower floors.

Ellie took another peek out of the window that overlooked the back garden and seeing that it was still dreadful outside, she decided to go for it. She could at least go up there and have a look around and if it seemed overwhelming then she'd leave it for another day.

She grabbed her phone and stuffed it into her pocket, just in case she got stuck or fell or something equally awful, then climbed the stairs. She had a torch in her bedroom in case of power cuts so she went and got that first. Underneath the hatch to the attic, she reached up and tapped the hatch cover and it sprung open then she pulled the cord and lowered the ladder. She knew there was a light switch just above the hatch so she hoped the bulb was working as it would be easier than trying to hold a torch while looking around.

The air that came down from the attic as she climbed the ladder was musty. She had no idea when the hatch had last been opened and watched as tiny flakes of dust spun through the air and a cobweb fluttered to the side of the opening as if lowering it had broken the gossamer threads.

When she reached the top of the ladder, she reached for the light switch and thankfully, the attic flooded with light. She steadied herself against the hatch while she stepped tentatively

onto a board that had been placed over the joists and looked around.

‘Oh my...’ She sighed in dismay because there were boxes and bags everywhere she could see. The ones at the front were covered in dust so goodness only knew how long they’d been there let alone the ones further away. It looked like the sort of job that could take weeks to do and she suddenly felt tired and lacking in motivation. But, had her aunt known that she was not long for this world, Ellie thought she would have tried to sort some of this out to avoid Ellie having to do so. That was the thing with being single... whatever you left behind had to be sorted by someone who was not your partner and would not know what you wanted them to do with everything. Ellie did not want that to happen to her children and so she would sort out Iris’s belongings and her children would, at least, be spared from that job. She would then tidy the attic and ensure that everything she did store up here was clearly labelled so that when she passed away, whoever came after her didn’t have to face the mountainous job that she was now facing.

‘OK, I can do this,’ she said, pushing up the sleeves of her sweatshirt and taking a step to her left.

An hour later, she’d managed to go through one black bag of paperwork that appeared to be mainly old magazines her aunt had not wanted to throw away. Some of them were from as far back as the 1970s and she found it fascinating to look at the clothing and to read the articles. She could donate them to Darcie’s shop or to the library because magazines like this would be rare. With the advent of online magazines and articles, physical copies would become rarer still, but these were a record of what life had been like, what people had been interested in and the attitudes of the time. She decided to take the bag downstairs and have a good look through it before taking anything to Darcie’s and then she could give whatever Darcie didn’t want for the shop to the local library. Amazingly, the magazines weren’t damp but then the attic space did seem to be well ventilated.

She carefully carried the bag down the ladder and to the kitchen then she made a coffee and drank it before heading

back up. At this rate, she thought, it could take her months to go through everything but then she did have the luxury of time and she thought she would quite enjoy sorting through the bags and boxes if everything was as interesting as the first bag had been.

Back in the attic, she decided to sort the bags closest to the hatch next. Inside them she found lots of clothes and blankets, so she took them to the kitchen and placed them on the floor. Inside were things that she thought Darcie could sell at *Dragonfly Dreams*, so she shook them out and got her airtainer from the cupboard under the stairs then draped them over it. Like the magazines, they weren't damp but they had clearly been packed up for years, so she wanted to ensure that they didn't smell musty and that there were no hidden nasties in them like moths.

When she'd done that, her stomach was rumbling so she thought it was a good point to break for lunch.



Ellie put the kettle on to boil then made herself a cheese sandwich and got an apple from the fruit bowl. She peered out of the window and was pleased to see that the rain had passed and the sun was filtering through the clouds. She opened the back door to let some air in and took her lunch to the kitchen table. Before sitting down, she decided to go and get her phone to check if she had any emails. It took her a moment to remember where she'd left it and she groaned. She recalled removing it from her pocket in the attic and setting it down on a joist while she reached for a bag. She traipsed back upstairs to retrieve the phone then back down again.

In the kitchen, she sat down and was about to reach for her sandwich when she realised that half of it was missing. Had she eaten it before she went upstairs and forgotten? Her

stomach rumbled, letting her know that she hadn't. So where on earth had it gone?

A chill ran down her spine. Was there someone else here? Had they crept in through the back door while she was upstairs? Could they be hiding in the cottage waiting to jump out at her? But then, why would they take half a cheese sandwich? She'd never read a thriller where the murderer stopped for a snack before pouncing on the victim.

A noise from outside the door made her get up to go and look and what she saw made her snort out loud with relief.

'Bloody hell, Willy! You gave me a fright.'

William Shakespaw looked up from the sandwich he was tucking into and gave a *meow*. But he wasn't alone, Ellie noticed. There was a ginger cat sitting further along the grass and it was staring at her. Ellie crouched down and held out a hand. 'Hello. Who're you?'

The cat gazed at her for a moment then stood up and sashayed towards her and sniffed at her fingers before rubbing her head against them. Ellie looked at the cat's collar and found the nametag. 'Hello Cleocatra. Pleased to meet you. Are you and Willy friends?'

Cleocatra meowed in response.

'Do you like cheese sandwiches too?' she asked the ginger cat.

The cat didn't respond to this, so Ellie stood up and walked back towards the cottage. 'Let me see what I've got in the cupboard. There might be something you'd like in there.'

She found the tin of sardines she'd bought the other day and opened them then spooned them onto a small plate before taking them outside. Before she'd even put the plate down, Willy and Cleocatra pounced and gobbled the fish up then spent some time licking the plate clean.

'I guess sardines are a favourite,' Ellie said. 'I'll have to get some more in for you guys.'

She yawned and stretched her arms above her head.

‘But for now, I need to get on. I have some lunch to eat then an attic to tidy.’

As she went back through the kitchen door, both cats dashed past her and went straight through to the lounge. Ellie hurried after them and found them making themselves at home on the sofa. They curled up, one on either side, and Ellie wasn’t sure what to do. She could make them leave but she found that she didn’t want to. Presumably, their owner didn’t mind them going out wandering, or *visiting* more like, so she hoped they wouldn’t be missed for a few hours. She’d leave the back door open so they could exit when they wanted and finish her lunch then get back to work.

As she sat back at the kitchen table and picked up what was left of her sandwich, she realised that she could get a cat of her own now if she wanted. She hadn’t got one before because Cooper was allergic, but she didn’t have to worry about that anymore. It was strange that she hadn’t thought about this before, but then old habits died hard, and she’d been so used to not having pets that it had become a way of life. Thankfully, that could change now. She’d always imagined having a cat or two and perhaps a dog and she was in control of her own life and her own home so she could do whatever the hell she wanted.

Taking a bite of her sandwich, she smiled. Things were certainly looking up.

Chapter 19

Finn

Finn opened his front door and went inside then set the shopping bags down in the hallway. He'd gone to the local retail park today because he wanted to get something new to wear for his date with Ellie tomorrow. He didn't go *out out* much these days, and when he'd looked in his wardrobe for something to wear, he'd found work clothes, old T-shirts, threadbare shirts and jeans. He didn't really have anything suitable for going on a date and so he'd swallowed his reluctance to go shopping and gone this morning. And now he was glad he had, even if he wasn't so happy about the money he'd spent. Still, it would be worth it to feel good when he took Ellie out tomorrow.

He toed off his boots then went through to the kitchen of his rental house and filled the kettle. He'd have a cuppa then head over to Darcie's because Cole was making pizza this evening for dinner and he'd asked Finn to pick him some toppings up as well as some cream to go with the rhubarb tart he was making. Apparently, Cole was also having a guest over this evening, a lad from school called Rajesh who was in his food preparation and nutrition class, and Darcie had told Finn she thought Cole and his friend were quite fond of each other. Then she'd told him not to say anything because Cole hadn't admitted to liking Rajesh in that way, and she didn't want her son feeling under any pressure. He would tell them in his own time, she'd said, if he did end up dating Rajesh.

An hour later, Finn put his boots back on and left the house. He was going to go straight to Darcie's but something led him towards Ellie's cottage instead. Admittedly, he did

want to check that she didn't have any allergies or foods she disliked before their date, and he knew he could have asked her by text but he decided to use it as an excuse to see her. He was feeling pretty nervous now and wanted to see her face to face to gauge how she was feeling too.

When he reached the cottage, he paused for a moment to admire the double-fronted façade with its climbing ivy and the trees in the small garden with their leaves in shades of gold, brown and orange. The path that led up to the door was clear of weeds and the door itself had an old-fashioned brass knocker in the shape of an owl.

He hadn't been inside the cottage in years. He had only been there a handful of times when he was younger, like when he'd gone there to see Ellie or to walk Darcie home if it was getting late. Ellie had primarily been his sister's friend and so he got to see her mainly when she came to their home. Going out of his way to spend time with her would have raised suspicion that there was something more going on between them and he'd been wary of doing that for several reasons. Iris's cottage had always been cosy and he was curious to see if it was the same now that Ellie owned it, although he couldn't imagine it being anything other than perfect with her living there. He raised a hand and lifted the owl, knocked it against the door then stepped back to wait for her to answer.

It seemed like an age before he heard footsteps in the hallway and saw a shadow pass the frosted glass panel in the door above the knocker. He had a horrible thought then, that perhaps he'd disturbed Ellie while she was in the bath or shower or woken her from a nap.

But when she opened the door, it wasn't tiredness on her face and she didn't look like she'd just showered or bathed in warm water. In fact, she looked drained of all colour, and she seemed to be trembling like she was freezing cold or in shock.

‘Ellie? Are you OK?’

She met his eyes and frowned as if she didn't recognise him but then she shook herself and nodded. ‘Hi... Finn. I...

uhhhh. I...' Her frown deepened and concern rushed through Finn. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

'What it is? Are you hurt?' He stepped forwards and held out a hand.

'Hurt?' Ellie snorted. 'Oh... I guess I am. But not in a physical sense. No... I... Oh...' She rubbed a hand over her forehead and sighed. 'Do you want to come inside?'

'Sure.' He nodded. 'I want to make sure you're OK.'

Her features twitched as if she was unsure how to react but she gave a small nod then gestured at him to come inside. He stepped over the threshold and walked through the hallway to the kitchen then put his bags down on the table. Part of him knew that he needed to get the bags to Cole as soon as possible but he also needed to find out what was wrong with Ellie first because he was already very concerned.

Chapter 20

Ellie

‘**E**llie?’ Finn gently placed a hand on her arm. ‘Can you tell me what’s wrong?’

‘What’s wrong? Yes. OK.’ She sank onto a kitchen chair and rested her elbows on the table then steepled her fingers. ‘I’m a bit... shocked.’

‘What about?’ He sat next to her, his body facing her, his hands on his knees.

‘Well... I decided to start sorting through the attic because there’s a lot of Aunt Iris’s belongings still up there and I thought it would be a good idea to see what can be recycled and what needs to be binned. But... now I wish I hadn’t bothered. Sometimes, things are best left alone.’

‘That sounds ominous,’ he said.

‘Yeah... It kind of was. Ugh.’ She rubbed her eyes then lay her head on her arms and groaned. ‘This sucks.’

‘What does?’ He touched her hand and she sat upright again. ‘Can I make you a warm drink?’

Ellie laughed wryly. ‘Yes, because that’s going to make everything all right again.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Well, it’s what we do, isn’t it? A warm beverage will make everything better, won’t it?’

‘Uhhh...’

‘Sorry! Sorry, Finn, I’m being snarky and there’s no excuse for it. You’re being very kind and I would love a cup of tea, please.’

‘No problem.’ While he made tea, Ellie tried to compose herself. She was reeling from what she’d found and had no idea what to do about it but then, who would? And there was no one she could ask about it because everyone else involved was long gone.

When Finn placed a mug of tea in front of her, she wrapped her hands around it and took a deep breath. ‘Thank you. Right... so... I found some great clothes up there that I think Darcie might like for the shop and some that I’d like to keep. I also found useful things like spare jars that I can use for making chutneys and jams and some old photos that must be of family members I never even met. But then... I found a chest buried behind other boxes and so I brought it downstairs and took it out to the garden, then dusted it off and opened it.’

‘What was inside?’

Ellie shook her head. ‘It didn’t look like much at first... some things like birth and death certificates and some letters and then... I found one from my mum.’

‘Your aunt’s sister?’

‘Twin sister. They were identical twins. Iris and Rose.’

‘Of course.’ Finn nodded.

‘But the thing is... according to the letter... my mum was *not* my mum.’

‘What?’ Finn was frowning now. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The letter was from my mum, or the woman I thought was my mum and she was telling the woman I thought was my aunt how I was. Oh... that sounds so confusing. So, basically, my biological mum was actually Iris and my aunt was Rose.’

‘Wow!’ Finn’s eyes were wide and he was scratching at his chin with his thumb and forefinger making a rasping sound on his stubble. ‘Are you sure?’

Ellie shrugged. ‘My whole world has just imploded and all because of a letter. Well, no, actually more than one letter because I went through the chest after finding that one letter and I found more. Apparently, Iris got pregnant by someone... his name wasn’t in there so I have no idea who he was... and she wasn’t married and didn’t have the means to raise a child. But Rose and her husband were desperate for a child but not having any luck conceiving. So... it seemed like a good idea for Rose to raise Iris’s child. *Me!* My whole life is based on a lie. And I can’t even speak to either of them about it because they’re gone. I always wondered about my parents and why they never had more children but now I know. My mum had multiple miscarriages and couldn’t carry a baby to term. And so I was an only child.’

Finn was watching her, nodding slowly and she saw compassion in his eyes. ‘This is a lot to take in,’ he said.

‘I know, right? The man I thought was my dad was nothing to do with me and my mum was actually my biological aunt. Yes, the DNA was the same as Mum and Iris were identical twins but... oh god... So many things make sense now. I thought Iris was just a very loving aunt but in reality, she was my mum and it must have been so hard for her to see me and not be able to tell me. In fact, Rose mentions that in some of the letters.’

‘It must have been very hard for her.’ Finn rubbed a hand over his brow.

‘One letter mentions this and how Rose feels sorry for Iris and will always be grateful for her selfless act of giving me to her and my dad. She describes me as a gift and agrees with Iris that she did a wonderful thing for me too because I got to grow up with two parents.’ Ellie sighed and shook her head. ‘But if I’d known... I could have lived here with Iris and we’d have been happy.’

‘Times were different back then. Attitudes too. It might have been hard for Iris being a single mum, especially in a small village. And I don’t know what her parents, your grandparents, were like but perhaps they’d have disapproved too.’

Ellie nodded. 'I know my grandparents were strict. And apparently the pregnancy was a shock to Iris. She was very innocent and I came along out of the blue. There's not a lot of information about it but I'm wondering if I was a result of a one night stand or a fling. Luckily, Iris was staying with Rose and Jasper when she went into labour and so they came up with a plan together.'

'That's quite a story.'

'It is. And it must have been difficult for all of them. But I guess that Rose and Jasper got what they wanted and Iris was able to get on with her life.'

'And you had a good childhood?'

'I did. My parents were wonderful. The only thing they ever did to upset me was moving me away from here when I was seventeen... but it was as good a time as any to go, I guess.'

To get away from my humiliation over you...

'I'm sorry you're having to deal with this but if there's anything I can do, I'm here for you.'

'Thanks.' She smiled at him. 'There are more letters in the chest, and I'll read them soon, but I needed to let that news sink in first. I have questions and I guess I'll never get the answers.'

'I don't think you will, Ellie, but I do think that everything they did came from a place of love. If you can, try to focus on that. You can't change what they did or what happened but you can frame it positively. And please don't think I'm brushing off the magnitude of this. I completely understand that it's huge. I would be reeling too. Your entire world has shifted. However, they all loved you and wanted the best for you and it sounds like they came up with a plan that worked for them and for you.'

Ellie sipped her tea and thought about what Finn had said. He was right. She had been very loved and she'd had plenty of contact with Iris, had loved her like a second mum. Iris had taught her lots when she was growing up and been there for

her when she'd had difficult times as a teenager. So, Iris had done everything she could for her without actually telling her the truth and then she'd left Ellie this wonderful cottage. The truth would have been good to know, but Ellie could understand why they had kept it from her. She'd never be able to imagine doing the same, but then times were different when she was born and had Iris had her today then she'd probably have been more inclined to keep her. What Iris did back then, she did for Ellie too. It was done out of love and compassion and Ellie had been able to grow up with two parents and in a home filled with love. Many children weren't that lucky. She had basically been adopted by her maternal aunt and her husband but stayed in regular contact with her birth mother.

'I just need some time, I think.'

Finn placed a hand over hers and she found the tenderness of the gesture comforting. He was there for her and she was grateful for that. 'I was heading to Darcie's but decided to come here and check something with you about tomorrow, but I don't like to leave you alone now. Is there anything I can help with?'

Ellie met his gaze and politeness made her want to tell him to carry on with his day as planned but she also didn't want to be alone. She was worried that she might find something else upsetting and it really would be nice to have some company and to talk through it all again.

'Would you like to stay for a bit then and perhaps have some dinner here?'

Finn smiled. 'Of course. Tell you what, I have some things in the bag that Cole asked me to get so why don't I go and drop them off then I'll come straight back? We can tidy up what you want to sort today then open a bottle of wine and make something nice for dinner. How does that sound?'

'That sounds perfect. Thank you so much.'

'It's no trouble at all.'

And as Ellie gazed into Finn's clear blue eyes, she believed that he meant what he said. She wouldn't have to face up to

what she'd found out alone and that was an enormous relief. The thought of being alone this afternoon and evening was unpleasant, and now, knowing that Finn would be here made everything feel a bit better.

Chapter 21

Finn

Finn dropped the bags off for Cole and then he was on his way back to Ellie's cottage when something occurred to him. He didn't want to go in empty handed so he'd pop to the shop first and get something nice for her. Not that he thought anything could make up for what she'd found out but even so, it would make him feel that he was doing something constructive if he took something with him.

In the small village grocery shop, he picked up a basket then put some chocolates, wine and a bouquet of pink roses in it before checking himself. Was it OK to take roses to a friend? Or should he choose a different flower?

'Nice roses there,' a voice from behind him made him turn.

'Oh hello, Lila.'

He smiled at Lila Morris. She lived on Sunflower Street with her husband Ethan and their little boy, Reuben.

'Are you getting them for someone special?' she asked with a teasing glint in her eyes.

'Oh... uh...' he rubbed a finger under his jacket collar. 'For a friend, actually. She's uhhh... a bit upset and so I thought they might cheer her up but now I'm not sure. Is it all right to buy roses for a friend?'

Lila smiled. 'Of course it is. Roses are beautiful flowers and don't have to be given purely in a romantic sense. I'm sure

she'll love them. Whoever she is...' Lila raised an eyebrow and Finn cleared his throat, feeling self-conscious.

'Yeah... uhhh... That's brilliant, thanks. She's just a good friend. But now I know it's OK to give roses, I'll get these for her.'

Lila pursed her lips then tapped a finger against them. 'Hold on... Isn't Ellie Porter back in the village? She's moved into her aunt's cottage, hasn't she?'

Instantly, Finn's cheeks flooded with heat and he wanted to drop the basket and run from the shop. Instead, he coughed again as if he had a frog in his throat then rubbed a hand roughly through his hair. 'Yes. And yes, you're right. The flowers, chocolates and wine are for Ellie. She's an old friend.'

Lila nodded. 'Hey, your secret's safe with me.'

'What secret?'

Lila tapped her nose and winked. 'It is absolutely fine to give roses to a friend but I'm guessing from the way you blushed then that there might be something more between you and Ellie. But hey... It's none of my business and I've already forgotten what you told me.'

'I didn't really tell you anything at all,' he said, confused.

'That's right.' Lila laughed. 'I know nothing. Have a lovely afternoon, Finn.'

'You too,' he replied, then he trudged towards the counter to pay, feeling like he'd just told Lila his deepest, darkest secrets without saying a word. What was it with some people? They could read you like an open book.

He was still shaking his head as he paid for the goods then left the shop, keen to get to Ellie's before he bumped into anyone else.

Chapter 22

Ellie

Ellie opened the door to Finn and he entered the cottage, his large frame making the hallway feel small. She went through to the kitchen and he followed her.

‘Tea?’ she asked.

‘Actually,’ he said, holding out a bag, ‘I got something a bit stronger.’

‘Oh... OK.’ She accepted the bag and opened it. ‘This looks nice,’ she said, holding up a bottle of red wine. There was something else in the bag so she got it out. ‘And Belgian chocolate truffles. Yum.’

‘Also... I got you these,’ Finn pulled a bouquet of pink roses from behind his back and held them out.

‘Wow! Flowers. I can’t remember the last time someone got me flowers.’ She looked up at him as she raised the bouquet to her face and sniffed the roses. ‘They’re beautiful, thank you.’

‘Just like you,’ he said, gruffly. ‘I mean... Goodness, Ellie, I can’t believe no one has bought you flowers in ages. You should have flowers every week to remind you how special you are.’

She felt her jaw drop. What exactly was going on here? Or was she still in so much shock at finding out her aunt was in fact her mum that she was completely misreading the situation?

‘You think I’m special?’ she said, lowering the roses.

‘Of course you are. I can’t believe you don’t know that.’ He rubbed at the back of his neck. ‘Sorry... I don’t mean to overstep the mark here.’

‘No... It’s fine. There’s no overstepping going on. I’m flattered, in fact. It’s very nice to be told that you’re special.’

‘Well you are.’ He looked around the kitchen as if he was feeling a bit awkward and Ellie decided to drop the topic for now. ‘Do you have a corkscrew?’

‘In that drawer.’ Ellie pointed.

Finn opened the drawer and got the corkscrew. ‘I’ll open this shall I, and we can have a glass?’

‘That would be lovely.’

Ellie put the roses in a vase of water that she set on the table then went to the fridge. ‘Are you hungry?’

‘I could eat something.’

‘How about... cheese toasties?’

‘Sounds good to me.’

She grated some cheese then buttered bread and got a heavy frying pan from the cupboard. While the bread toasted and the cheese melted, she poured salted crisps into a bowl then got two wine glasses. When the cheese toasties were done, she piled them on a plate and carried the plate and the bowl of crisps through to the lounge while Finn brought the wine and the truffles.

They sat on the sofa and Ellie reached for her wine. ‘Here’s to friendship. Thanks for being here for me today, Finn. I really am grateful.’

‘You don’t need to be grateful. What are friends for if they can’t be there for you when times are tough?’

They clinked glasses then Ellie took a sip. The wine was rich with dark red fruits and had a spicy kick. ‘This is good.’

Finn nodded. ‘Shiraz is one of my favourites.’

The room was warm and cosy because Ellie had lit the fire earlier and she sat back on the sofa and tucked her feet underneath her. They ate the sandwiches and sipped wine and talked about the village and people they knew, about what Finn was currently working on and what plans he had for the next few weeks. Avoiding discussion of anything heavy was exactly what Ellie needed. She'd always found Finn easy to talk to and had missed their chats when she left the village, but, of course, even if she'd stayed in Wisteria Hollow, she probably wouldn't have been able to face him after what had happened. Now though, it seemed so inconsequential. It was such a long time ago that she thought it could be something she imagined and not something that actually happened. Perhaps she had misread the situation and built it up in her mind over the years.

When they'd finished the toasties and the crisps, Ellie took the plates and the bowl out to the kitchen and washed her hands then returned to the lounge. It was so nice to have Finn sitting on her sofa looking relaxed, almost like he belonged there.

She sat back down and he topped up their wine then he said, 'Do you need a hand with sorting anything? I know you said you were part way through and I hate to think of you having a mess to tidy up.'

'It's fine, honestly. I can't be bothered to go back up in the attic now and there's nothing there that won't wait for another day. I'm too comfortable and relaxed to start working again.'

'And how are you feeling now about what you found out?' There was genuine concern in his eyes and it made her heart flutter.

'I'm OK. I think it was such a shock that it's going to take a while to process it all.'

'I'm sure it will. But remember that I'm here for you, any time you need to talk.'

'Thank you so much.'

‘It’s my pleasure, Ellie.’ He was gazing at her in way that made her hot all over and she shifted on the sofa.

‘Chocolate?’

‘Sorry?’ He frowned.

‘Shall we have a chocolate?’ It was, after all, sometimes described as a substitute for sex and seeing as how Ellie was not going to be getting any of that, chocolate would have to do.

‘Sure.’ He reached for the box and opened it then held it out to her.

Ellie took a chocolate and placed it in her mouth. It was sweet, creamy and delicious and she closed her eyes to savour it, enjoying the cool centre as it melted on her tongue. It was so good she let out a low moan.

When she opened her eyes, Finn was looking at her as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. It made her insides tilt and emotions rushed through her, emotions she’d thought long ago buried or forgotten. She adored this man!

Might as well see what happens...

She took a gulp of wine then set her glass down on the table and moved closer to Finn. She took his glass and placed it on the table then took his hand and held it between both of hers.

‘Ellie,’ he said. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m good.’

He seemed to debate something internally then he raised his free hand and gently stroked her cheek. Tingling swept through her, waking areas of her that had long been asleep. When his fingers slid through her hair and cupped her head at the base of her neck, a sigh escaped her lips. So this was happening. At last.

At last...

They moved closer to each other, not breaking eye contact, and then he was so close she could feel his breath on her lips,

smell the wine and chocolate on him as well as his own delicious scent. She wanted to bury her face in his neck and never come up for air again.

And then they were kissing and It was everything she'd always known it would be. His lips were warm and soft, his tongue was insistent as it explored her, his arms were strong around her and as he pulled her onto his lap, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him with everything she had.

The kiss went on and on and on...

And then it stopped.

Suddenly.

They were both breathless. Hearts racing.

Ellie met Finn's eyes and saw something there that made her want to cry.

'What is it, Finn?' she said even though she didn't want to know.

He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them, they were glassy. 'It's this, Ellie. It's—'

'Oh my god, no. Not this again, Finn. Not again.'

'Ellie.' He took hold of her shoulders but she shrugged out of his grip and slid off his lap then went to stand in front of the fireplace.

'I can't believe this is happening again.' She pushed her hands through her hair and stared at the coffee table. At the wine and the chocolate and then back at Finn.

Was this really happening? How could it be?

'It's not like that, Ellie. I'm just concerned. The last thing I want is to take advantage. You—'

'Please go!' She cut him off then averted her eyes from his and pointed at the doorway. 'Please leave now. I want to be alone.'

'Ellie!' he got up and came towards her but she folded her arms over her chest and shook her head. 'Leave. Please, Finn.'

I want to be alone.'

'Let me explain, at least?' His tone was imploring but Ellie was consumed with humiliation and the sting of rejection and so she couldn't listen, couldn't be placated with more excuses.

She shook her head, darted past him and bolted up the stairs. She barely registered the two cats sitting on the landing as she passed them and charged into her bedroom then flung herself face down on the bed.

She heard the distant sounds of Finn taking the glasses and bottle through to the kitchen then him putting on his boots in the hallway. There was silence for a moment as if he was lingering there, unsure whether to leave, and then the door opened and closed and she knew that she was alone.

The cottage creaked as it settled. The duvet beneath her was soft. Somewhere outside a crow squawked and another answered.

And then, there was a gentle pressure at her side and warm breath on her cheek. She turned her head to find bright green eyes watching her. She wasn't alone. Even though her heart was breaking all over again.

As the tears ran down her cheeks, William Shakespaw snuggled into her side and she buried her hands in his soft, warm fur and let his purring soothe her. It was as if the cat knew that she was hurting and he'd come to offer her comfort. When Cleocatra joined them, Ellie made a fuss of her too and then the three of them lay on the bed together, Ellie crying, the cats purring, as the rain started up again outside and the wind whistled through the trees in the garden.

Chapter 23

Ellie

The next week passed in a blur for Ellie. She'd sent Finn a text the day after their kiss, telling him she didn't feel well enough to go on their date and letting him down as gently as she could. She suspected he probably really didn't want to go on the date either, even though he'd paid a lot for her company. Well, why would he? Last night, he'd pulled away from kissing her and she had felt the rejection like a knife to her guts. It had been truly awful and she never wanted to feel that way again. After all, she was a forty-six-year-old woman now, not a teenager and she didn't have to put herself in situations where she'd be rejected ever again. She felt like a total idiot though for wanting Finn, for kissing him when he quite clearly hadn't wanted to kiss her and for the way she'd behaved afterwards. And since then she hadn't felt up to facing anyone. Not Finn, not Darcie, not a soul. But she was also low on groceries and fed up of drinking her tea black, so she needed to at least go to the grocery shop and get some milk and bread. She could put a hat and sunglasses on, walk there quickly and walk back quickly. There was no need to see a soul. She would then hide away and wait for the shame to pass. And as for the money Finn had paid at the auction for the date, she'd pay it back soon and then her conscience would be clear.

The roses Finn had bought her were still in the vase on the kitchen table. She hadn't had the heart to throw them out and so they'd bloomed through the week and were now starting to fade, their beauty ebbing away like the memories of the beautiful friendship she'd once shared with Finn. And look at

what had happened that time. Things had all gone wrong then and this time too. Finn and Ellie were clearly not meant to be and they never had been. She should have learnt that lesson the first time when she was seventeen. But no, he'd been kind to her and bought her some flowers and chocolates and she'd misread his friendship as romantic interest and kissed him and embarrassed them both.

Her only consolation since last weekend had been Willy and Cleo, her furry buddies as she'd come to call them. The lovely cats visited daily, keen to snuggle with her and to eat whatever she had spare and she found herself looking forward to their visits. She knew they must live on the street, their collars had a mobile number on, but she hadn't phoned it to find out who owned them because she worried their owner might put a stop to them visiting and that would be devastating for her right now. Perhaps she should get a cat of her own to keep her company. Or two cats. It would be nice to have some warm, furry companions of her own. And seeing as how she was clearly destined to grow old without a partner she could at least have some lovely cats to share her home.

Woolly hat, large sunglasses and scarf donned, along with knee-high boots and a tweed coat she found in the cupboard under the stairs, that had once belonged to her aunt — or rather her *mum* — she set off for the shop. She kept her head down to avoid making eye contact with anyone and stared at the pavement ahead of her, the sound of her boots tap-tapping on the pavement reminding her of a heartbeat.

When she got to the shop, she went inside and grabbed a basket then filled it with some necessities. In the chocolate aisle, she grabbed a few bars of her favourite dark chocolate then her gaze landed on the chocolate truffles Finn had bought for her. Her vision blurred and she had to swallow hard. The problem was that she didn't just have romantic feelings for Finn, he was her friend and she missed having him around. But after what she'd done, could she really have him as just a friend? She clearly found him incredibly attractive, but the feeling wasn't mutual and so could she be friends with him or would the lines be destined to forever blur for her?

‘Ellie?’

She gulped and wiped her hand over her eyes before turning around.

‘Hi, Darcie.’

‘I’ve been worried about you. I was going to stop by but Finn said you had the stomach flu and didn’t want to be bothered. And that, of course, worried me even more so that was why I messaged you.’ Darcie grimaced. ‘Sorry, you know this from my messages. But I did want to bring you some soup and some rehydration drinks but when you were so adamant that you just wanted to stay in bed, I thought that you might not want to be bothered. But it’s been over a week and... Oh I’m sorry, Ellie, here I am going on when you look so tired and pale. You grab what you need and let me walk you home.’ Darcie offered a concerned smile and Ellie felt like the worst fraud in the world. Poor Finn had made excuses for her too and that meant he’d had to be untruthful with his sister and his family and she knew that must have been hard for him.

‘I’m feeling a lot better now, Darcie, thanks,’ she said. ‘Stomach has been a bit gripey, but it’s passed and hopefully I’m no longer contagious.’

‘I hope not. Stomach flu is just awful.’ Darcie shook her head. ‘But Finn did say he stopped by with some bits and bobs and that he left them on the doorsteps for you.’

‘Yes, that’s right.’ Ellie nodded. ‘He’s been great.’

‘Good, good.’ Darcie smiled again and Ellie felt even worse. Was she turning into a big, fat liar? This was her friend and she was being dishonest with her.

‘I... uh... better go and pay for this lot.’

‘Of course. I’ll wait for you at the door.’

Ellie took the basket to the counter and while she unloaded it then packed it into bags and paid, she wondered how she was going to deal with this. She loved Darcie and didn’t want to lie to her. But how could she admit to her friend what had really happened? Didn’t it make her sound like a desperate

sex-crazed freak who'd pounced on the first man who'd been truly nice to her since her divorce?

But Finn isn't just a man. He's lovely. You've always liked him. He's a friend and your feelings for him run deeper than friendship.

She sighed, picked up her bags and carried them to the door. Darcie reached for the bags but Ellie shook her head. 'It's fine, honestly. I can manage.'

'Let me take one of them,' Darcie implored so Ellie gave in and handed her the lighter bag.

They walked slowly and Darcie chatted about her family, what Cole had baked that week and how she was excited about some of the items she'd found at a flea market in London.

'Actually, I have some things you might like for the shop,' Ellie said. 'I haven't finished sorting the attic yet but my aunt had plenty there that you could sell, I'm sure.'

'That would be amazing,' Darcie replied. 'As long as you're sure you're OK parting with it.'

'I'm fine. There's so much there and some of it wouldn't fit me even if I lost a stone. Iris was tiny when she was younger but I doubt she fitted into a lot of it as she got older.'

'The curse of the menopause, eh?' Darcie laughed and Ellie joined in, despite her unease. 'Gets us all at some point. I think the worst bits for me are my flattened bum and my thickened waist. Like, I didn't even see that happening and then I tried on a pair of jeans I'd always loved and they were baggy around my bum and I couldn't do the waist up.'

'Time to get out the elastic waistbands then,' Ellie said with a grin.

'It sucks, right?' Darcie shook her head. 'I mean, we're not even fully menopausal yet and our bodies are changing.'

Ellie nodded. 'The years have flown. You look fabulous though, Darcie. I can't see that your waist has thickened or that your bum has disappeared.'

‘Thanks, my darling. I do what I can to dress for the body I’ve got now.’

‘I think it’s the only way,’ Ellie said.

Before she knew it, they’d reached her cottage. ‘Would you like to come in for a cuppa?’ she asked.

‘Oh... Well only if you’re sure?’ Darcie said.

Ellie paused for a moment. ‘What I would like is to go for a walk... if you fancy that instead.’

‘Sure. That would work.’

‘Come in for a minute and I’ll make a flask of tea and we can go for a good walk and have a sit down somewhere.’

‘Great.’ Darcie smiled.

Twenty minutes later, Ellie closed the front door behind her and they set off. She’d packed a flask of tea and a packet of chocolate biscuits into a small rucksack and strapped it to her back. They walked through the village, past houses and cottages, shops, the library, the village hall and the school and towards the far end of the village.

The air was icy with the passing of the afternoon, and she could smell the smoke from people’s wood fires and onions frying for someone’s dinner. They passed through an archway and as they walked along the woodland path, the ground underfoot changed from concrete to hard mud scattered with dry leaves and twigs. In a nearby tree, a robin sang a pretty tune and somewhere a woodpecker’s insistent tapping kept in time with their footsteps. There was just over a week of October left and it felt like autumn had fully arrived and that winter was hovering nearby waiting to step in and bring colder climes and even some snow. Would it snow this winter, she wondered? If so, she would enjoy seeing the thick flakes falling from the sky and covering Wisteria Hollow in a sparkling white blanket. She’d head to that bookshop that had opened in the village not long ago and stock up on some recommended reading ready to hunker down through the winter months. After all, her time was her own and she could spend it however she liked.

They walked briskly, their breath emerging like puffs of smoke, and she sensed that there was something hanging in the air between them like an unbroken cobweb laden with drops of dew.

When they reached the clearing that had a picnic area and playground, she gestured at one of the benches. 'Shall we sit down?'

'Sure,' Darcie said.

Ellie got the flask and biscuits out and set them on the table then put the rucksack on the bench and sat next to it. Darcie sat opposite her.

'So, my lovely friend, do you want to tell me what's on your mind?' Darcie asked. 'I feel kind of rude asking outright like this but we have known each other a long time and I know something is very wrong for you. Obviously, you don't need to tell me, but I am here for you. Please don't feel you can't tell me because I swear to you that I'll keep whatever you say in the strictest confidence.'

Ellie sighed and rubbed her eyes then wrapped her hands around her tin mug.

'It's quite messy and complicated but I could do with speaking about it.'

Darcie waited, steam rising from her tea in front of her, eyes filled with affection. Darcie really did care about her, Ellie realised, and so she could trust her.

'OK... This is what happened...' She told Darcie about what she'd found in Iris's attic. Darcie listened quietly. There was no judgement on her face at all. When Ellie had finished, Darcie expressed surprise but also understanding for the situation Iris and Rose had been in back then. She said that as a mum she could understand how difficult it must have been for Iris giving up her baby and Ellie agreed. She could never have given up one of her children, but then she'd never been in a position where she had to make such an awful decision. Iris had, it seemed, made the decision for Ellie as much as for herself, because she'd known that her sister could give Ellie a

good life with her husband. Although, Ellie thought, she would have liked to know the truth so she could decide for herself as she got older. But people made decisions throughout their lives, often with the best intentions, and sometimes those things didn't go as they'd hoped or planned. Sometimes, there simply was no perfect choice, no perfect path to follow. When she said all this out loud to Darcie, her friend agreed.

'I'm sorry for all that you've found out. It's a terrible blow for you.' Darcie poured them more tea from the flask. 'But you were loved. That much was clear.'

'I was. I had a great childhood. The moving around wasn't always the best but then I did get to see parts of the world I'd otherwise probably not have seen. I mean, not many children stay in places like Germany, Spain and Sicily before they're ten, do they? But despite all that, the happiest years of my childhood were when we lived in Wisteria Hollow, and I had you and Finn as friends.'

'We did have some good times, didn't we?' Darcie agreed. 'And we missed you terribly when you left.'

'I didn't want to go.'

'Ellie... I have to ask. Has something happened between you and Finn? He was so upbeat when you came back to the village and seemed so excited about your date, and I know you've been ill but... since the day before your date when he came to help you with tidying the attic... he's been quite low.'

Ellie's heart lurched. 'Has he?'

'Between us, I haven't seen him this low since... well, since he found out that his wife was cheating on him and had decided to leave him.'

Ellie was filled with a sense of grief so acute that she doubled over and had to hold her stomach. 'Oh my god. That's awful. I never wasn't to be the reason Finn feels like that.'

'Perhaps you two need to talk?' There was hope in Darcie's tone that made Ellie's pain more intense.

'Perhaps we do. I uhhh... I don't want to say much about it because this is about him and me and something that

transpired but... I do care about Finn, Darcie. Deeply. Perhaps too deeply.'

Darcie's eyes searched her face and then she gave a grave nod. 'I think you two are holding back from something that could be so good for you both. You tell me you care about him, and he tells me the same about you. Please talk to him and listen to what he has to say. He doesn't always express himself articulately enough, I know, and like lots of men he finds it hard to speak about his feelings but I know that he has feelings for you. I know that he cares about you. If you can, hear him out and be totally honest with him about what you're feeling. I hate seeing you both sad, especially when I have a feeling that this could be fixed and then you could both find happiness that you never expected to... perhaps in each other.'

Ellie sucked in a deep breath. So Darcie believed that there was something between Ellie and Finn and that they could find a way to fix things.

'I guess it's now or never,' Ellie said. 'And between us, I really don't want to wait another almost thirty years to find out.'

'That would be such a terrible waste of time,' Darcie held up her mug. 'Here's to airing our dirty laundry and making the most of the time we have and the people we care about.'

'To life and love,' Ellie said, and they clinked their mugs together.

'Now, let me tell you all about Cole's boyfriend who we met when he came round for dinner the other day.'

And as Darcie filled Ellie in on the lovely boy Cole was dating and how happy they'd seemed together, Ellie felt herself relaxing. Everything would be all right in the end, she thought. The past was the past, the present was here to grab hold of, and the future was there waiting to unfold. She could make it whatever she wanted it to be.

Chapter 24

Finn

Finn had spent the last twelve days trying to lose himself in work and spending time with Darcie and her family.

But he still found his thoughts straying to Ellie whenever he had five quiet minutes. He was worried about her and for more than one reason. He was concerned about how she was coping with what she'd found out about her parents and also about what had happened between them.

He'd replayed that kiss over and over in his mind, his heart beating hard when he recalled how it felt to hold Ellie in his arms and to have her soft lips against his. It was something he'd thought about in the past, of course it was, but not something he'd thought would ever happen. And then it had and he was overwhelmed by how good it had been.

But... he'd pulled back because the last thing he wanted was to take advantage of Ellie while she was struggling with other issues. She needed a friend not someone confusing her even more. And, ultimately, though he hated to admit it, Finn was scared. He'd been hurt once and he didn't want to risk being hurt again.

If Ellie was confused right now then her behaviour might be down to a reaction to that confusion and not something she would choose to do when thinking rationally. Finn was afraid to trust his instincts because he'd been wrong before and didn't know if he could manage to deal with being wrong again.

Darcie had tried to speak to him about Ellie but he hadn't been able to articulate his feelings, had, instead, shut her down

and asked that she give him some time to think about it all. His sister cared about him, he knew that, but this was something he needed to figure out on his own.

Whatever happened, he still wanted to be Ellie's friend. He was certain about that because he knew he didn't want to lose her from his life again.

Chapter 25

Ellie

Ellie turned from side to side in front of her bedroom mirror. Perhaps a zombie bride wasn't the most original costume she could have chosen but she'd been able to create it with some of the things she'd found in the attic. She was wearing an old cream nightdress that she'd spattered with fake blood, had pinned a piece of net curtain that she'd stained with a used teabag to her hair and underneath the nightdress she was wearing her comfortable knee-high boots. She'd left her hair down and had curled it with the tongs then backcombed it to make it messy, drawn thick black kohl around her eyes and smeared her lips with a purple lipstick. She didn't look like herself at least, and that would have to do. She took a few selfies in the mirror and sent them to her children then padded downstairs to grab her coat.

In the kitchen, Willy and Cleo were finishing off a plate of sardines that she'd put down for them. They looked at her and blinked as if surprised.

'It's all right, guys, it's still me. I'm just dressed up for a Halloween party.'

She opened the back door and gave them both a stroke then they jogged off along the garden, presumably heading for home. She'd decided she would put a cat flap in the back door so the cats could come and go as they pleased because it was getting too cold to leave the door open now and she didn't like the thought of them being trapped. She'd found out by asking in the village shop that they belonged to Lila and Ethan Morris

who lived a few doors down on Sunflower Street, and knowing that the cats didn't live far away was nice.

When she'd put her coat on, she placed the plastic pumpkin of sweets on the doorstep for trick or treaters to help themselves then left the cottage and made her way to the village hall for the fancy dress party.

On the way there, she saw lots of villagers who were also dressed up. There were more zombies, witches, vampires and characters from horror movies. It was a proper village affair with whole families in fancy dress. She didn't even recognise a lot of them and hoped she would recognise Darcie when she saw her because she was meant to be meeting her at the village hall.

Her stomach fluttered with nerves as she got closer. When Darcie had asked her, while they were working at the shop, to come to the party, she'd initially been reluctant. It had been two and a half weeks since she'd seen Finn and while they'd exchanged a few brief text messages — him asking how she was and her replying that she was fine, thank you very much — she hadn't seen him in person. She'd done everything to avoid seeing him because, she kept telling herself, it would be easier to work out exactly what she was feeling and only time and space could help with that. Yes, Darcie had told her that she thought Finn had feelings for Ellie but as the days wore on, she wasn't convinced. Surely Finn would have been knocking on her door if he did regret pulling away from that kiss? Surely he'd be keen to see her to discuss things and to find a way forwards? Perhaps Darcie had got it all wrong and Finn actually didn't have any romantic feelings for Ellie at all.

Outside the village hall, she paused for a moment to admire the decorations. The hall itself was decked out with giant cobwebs that hung over windows and doorways. Pumpkin string lights had been draped around the trees and lamp posts outside and real carved pumpkins sat on the picnic tables, candles glowing at their centres. Music drifted through the doorway and there were two street food vans parked nearby, one selling hot dogs and pizzas and the other selling pumpkin soup and spiced pumpkin lattes. Despite her nerves,

she felt a flicker of excitement at being in the village for this event and vowed to make the most of the evening, come what may.



‘Ellie!’ Darcie flung her arms open and hugged her as soon as she entered the main room of the village hall. ‘You look adorable.’

‘So do you.’ Ellie hugged her friend back then stepped back to look at her outfit.

Darcie was dressed as Morticia Addams, while Ross was Gomez, Cole was Pugsley and Mille was Wednesday. Their costumes were brilliant and she asked if she could take some photos to send to her children. She also thought it would be nice to have a photo printed out for Darcie and her family to keep and that it might make a good Christmas gift for them.

‘Do you want a drink?’ Darcie asked.

‘I’d love one. What are you having?’ Ellie asked.

‘Let’s drop your coat off at the cloakroom then go and see, shall we?’ Darcie took Ellie’s hand and led her to the corner being used as a cloakroom near the door then to far end of the hall where there was a refreshments table. While they waited in line, Ellie read the sign above the table and tried to decide what to have.

‘Any thoughts?’ Darcie asked.

‘I’m kind of torn between a poison apple cocktail, boozy butterbeer punch and a black magic margarita.’

‘Mmm. They all look good.’

‘I think I’ll go for... the black magic margarita.’

‘Good choice. I’ll have the same.’

When they reached the front of the queue, Darcie ordered three cocktails, one for Ross too, then they waited while the scary clown mixed the drinks.

‘That’s Fletcher Walker,’ Darcie said grinning.

‘The clown?’ Ellie asked.

‘Yes. And the grim reaper is Max Jenkins who works at the library.’

‘I don’t know Max,’ Ellie said. ‘But perhaps I should get to know him if and see if there’s any work going.’

‘Don’t forget I have a permanent vacancy at the shop, mind.’ Darcie nudged her and Ellie laughed.

‘I won’t. And I am grateful for that.’

‘When Fletcher handed them their drinks, they left the table and went back to Ross. Ellie sipped her drink and shivered with delight. The combination of the black sanding sugar around the rim of the glass along with the silver tequila, triple sec and lime juice was delicious. It didn’t look as appealing as it tasted because the drink was black, dyed with a mix of food colourings, but it was a perfect Halloween cocktail. And it was strong. The alcohol hit her empty stomach and sent a gentle buzz through her veins.

‘Shall we have a dance?’ Darcie gestured at the space in the middle of the floor where people were gathering. The lights in the hall dimmed and a new song started up from the speakers on the stage.

Ellie looked at the dancers and chewed at her lip. ‘Maybe after another of these.’

‘OK! But I’m going in with Mille.’ Darcie handed her drink to Ross then she grabbed Millie’s hand and they headed for the dance floor.

Watching them, Ellie sipped her drink and swayed gently. Darcie might be closer to fifty than forty but she had the energy of a teenager as she twirled around, laughing and dancing with her daughter.

‘Evening.’ A deep voice at her side made the tiny hairs on her arms stand on end. She’d know that voice anywhere.

Turning, she looked up at the handsome doctor in blue scrubs next to her. The scrubs were covered in blood and there were purple shadows around his eyes and his throat appeared to have been fake slashed, but he was still handsome.

‘Hello, Finn,’ she said. ‘You’ve got something on you.’ She pointed at the fake blood. ‘And something’s happened to your throat.’

‘Really?’ He frowned but his eyes were sparkling. ‘I thought it felt a bit drafty around my top half.’

They laughed and the tension in the air between them dispersed.

‘How’ve you been?’ Ellie asked him.

‘Not great. OK. But not great. You?’

‘Same.’

She went to sip her drink and realised she’d finished it.

‘Another?’ he asked.

‘Go on then.’

‘Back in a few minutes.’ He took her glass then touched her arm gently before crossing the hall, avoiding the dancers that were spreading out across the dance floor as Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* boomed from the speakers.

Ellie waited, hands clasped in front of her, aware that she needed to have a frank conversation with Finn. Whatever they decided going forwards, they needed to be honest about what they were feeling because life was too short to feel this sad and lost.

Chapter 26

Finn

Finn handed Ellie her drink then gestured at the doorway. 'Do you fancy going for a walk?'

'Sure,' she said.

They grabbed their coats from the cloakroom area, left the main room of the hall and went outside. Hay bales had been set up around the exterior so they found one away from the rest and sat down.

'Ellie... I need to tell you how sorry I am for hurting you. I never wanted to do that.'

She watched him, her eyes filled with emotion, her pretty face highlighted by the glow from the pumpkin lights that were hanging from the trees.

'I know, Finn. I know you'd never hurt me deliberately.'

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face then remembered that he was caked in makeup. He glanced at his hand. 'Oops.'

Ellie giggled. 'It's OK. You just look a bit smudged now but still very zombie-like.'

'Ha! That's all right then.'

They gazed at each other for a few silent moments and Finn downed half his drink trying to find some courage.

'Ellie, see... there are a few reasons why I didn't want to take things too far the other week. I like you. A lot. But...

we've both been hurt. You said your ex was unfaithful and mine was too. It makes it hard to trust again, doesn't it?'

She nodded.

'But it's more than that. I uhhh... I feel like I'm not good enough for you.'

'What?'

He exhaled audibly. 'Yeah. I mean, my confidence was shot when Aaliyah walked out on me. What kind of husband must I have been for her to look elsewhere?'

'Oh, Finn, that wasn't on you.' She reached out and took his free hand in hers. 'You're a lovely man. If your wife looked elsewhere then it was because she was looking for something else. The same with my husband.'

'I guess so. But it does leave you doubting yourself, wondering what they had that you don't.'

'But it's not about us, is it? Sometimes relationships just don't work out.'

'I know. And then... there's what you went through with your ex and my worries that I could end up hurting you. It would be unintentional, obviously, but what if I'm not good enough to make you happy? That's why I stopped kissing you and, of course, because you were vulnerable after just finding out that your aunt was your mum. It wasn't because I didn't want to kiss you and more... because believe me, I did. You are so beautiful.' He put his drink down and gently pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, fought the urge to press a kiss there.

Ellie's eyes wandered over his face. 'So you do find me attractive?'

'Of course I do. I'm just not a simple guy. I can't get physically involved without an emotional connection and with you... it would be so much more than physical. Although that part, I am sure, would be amazing.'

'I understand what you mean. But... For me this is hard because you've rejected me twice.'

‘Twice?’ He frowned.

‘Don’t you remember?’

He thought back for a moment. ‘Oh god, yes. But that was different. We were kids back then.’

‘But you still rejected me. I had the biggest crush on you and I wanted you to... take my virginity.’

‘You were seventeen.’

‘Old enough. Older than most of my friends who’d lost theirs.’

‘But I was older and it felt wrong.’

‘Not by much. It was so humiliating. I came to you and asked you to make love to me and you declined.’

‘Ellie, it was only because of the age difference, because you were my sister’s best friend and because you were drunk.’

‘I was drunk. But I had to summon the courage somehow.’

‘We were friends too and the last thing I wanted was to hurt you or to have you feel I’d taken advantage of you.’

‘Like now?’ she asked.

‘Yes. I guess so.’

‘Cards on the table then?’

‘Please.’

‘Finn... I like you. I more than like you. I have feelings for you that span decades. I have always wanted you. But I need to know that you want to be with me too.’

‘How many of those have you had?’ he asked, teasing her.

‘Cut it out!’ She tapped his hand. ‘Tell me the truth.’

‘Ellie, I adore you. I have always adored you and I want to be with you, but... I have to admit that I’m scared.’

‘Well can we be scared together then? I don’t want to waste any more time.’

He smiled as he took her drink from her hand and set it on the hay bale then he cupped her pretty face in his hands and held her gaze.

‘Ellie... I want to be with you.’

She slid her arms around his neck and he lowered his head and kissed her. The kiss was gentle at first but soon his desire rose and Ellie moaned against his mouth. He pulled back for a moment to meet her gaze. ‘I think we’re smudging our makeup.’

‘I don’t care, do you?’

‘Not at all.’

‘Shall we sneak off home? Before anyone sees us like this.’ Ellie giggled.

‘I think that’s a good plan.’

They quickly finished their drinks and Finn set the glasses on a nearby picnic table then he took her hand in his and they hurried to her cottage.

And for the first time in years, Finn had no doubts or fears at all about what he was about to do.

EPILOGUE – ELLIE

Two weeks had passed since the Halloween party and they had been the best two weeks of Ellie's life. Finn had stayed with her every night since Halloween and they'd become incredibly close. The way he made her feel made her realise that her relationship with her ex had been a mere shadow of what she could have had. But that was fine because their marriage had produced two beautiful children and many happy memories, just not in later years, so she had no regrets.

As for what she'd found out about Iris, she was still coming to terms with it but talking to Finn and to Darcie helped. She'd never know who her biological father was but she'd had a dad who loved her and a mum too, and Iris had been everything she could be to Ellie and she knew that. Yes, she had some regrets about the situation and wished she could speak to them all about it, but life was like that; some questions would never be answered and it was about finding peace with that and accepting what you did know and did have. She had wondered if Iris had left the letters there, knowing that Ellie would probably find them one day, but again, she'd never know if that was true or if time had just got away with Iris and she'd never had the chance to throw them away. It could even have been a way of letting the universe take care of the situation because Iris had always wanted to tell Ellie but never felt she could do. All Ellie could do now was learn to accept that it was how it was and move on with her life.

She added some oregano to the pasta sauce she was simmering on the stove then checked the clock on the kitchen

wall. Finn would be here soon and she was looking forward to an evening of snuggling on the sofa with him in front of a movie and the warm glow of the fire.

She heard his key in the door — she'd given him one because it made sense as she planned on asking him to move in permanently — and she went out into the hallway.

'Hello!' he said with a smile. 'Can I ask you to go and sit on the sofa? I have a surprise for you.'

'Oh... OK. Can I have a kiss first?'

'Of course!' He put down the box he was holding and dashed to her, planted a kiss on her lips then ushered her towards the lounge. 'Have to be quick because your surprise won't wait.'

'Righty oh.'

In the lounge, Ellie sat on the sofa. Excitement fizzed in her belly. Whatever had Finn got her now?

He entered the lounge carrying the box, very carefully, she noted, and he set it on the coffee table.

'OK,' he said. 'This is something you've wanted for a long time. I know this because you've told me often enough.' He winked. 'You kept on about a new toaster and...' He laughed. '*Joking!* It's far more special than that. Can you shuffle right back on the sofa and close your eyes?'

Ellie did as he asked and she waited quietly, heart thudding now because she wondered what he was going to put in her lap.

'Here you go.'

Ellie felt something soft and warm placed on her thighs and then Finn took her hands and placed them on the object.

'Can I open my eyes?'

'Of course.'

She opened them slowly and looked down and gasped, because there in her lap was a tiny, fluffy grey kitten. 'Oh my goodness, Finn! Is this baby for me?'

‘Yes! And wait for it...’ He reached into the box and brought out another kitten, this one was black and white, and placed it next to the other one. The kittens meowed as they looked around and Ellie thought she would melt with emotion. ‘They’re rescue kittens from the local cat sanctuary. They were brought in by an elderly gent who found them under a bridge with their poorly mother. The mother is fine now and has been rehomed but there were six kittens all in need of adoption. I know how much you’ve always wanted to have cats and so when I heard about these from a client in the village, I had to go and enquire.’

‘Finn... they’re precious. But I don’t have a litter tray or kitten food and—’ She stopped talking because Finn was smiling.

‘I’ve got it all in the van ready. I’ll go and get it now. I couldn’t leave these two in that box for long but I do have a proper cat carrier in the van too.’

‘Thank you so much.’

Finn sat down next to her and took her hand. ‘I love you, Ellie, and I know we’re a bit past having children at our age but it doesn’t mean we can’t adopt as many cats, and perhaps dogs, as you want. We can have fur babies even if we can’t have real babies.’

‘I don’t need babies, Finn, when I have you.’

‘And these two. Any idea what we can name them?’

Ellie looked at the bundles of fur in her lap and smiled. ‘Are they male or female?’

‘Both male.’

‘How about... Cats—anova and Purr—nest Hemingway, but Purnest for short?’

‘Love it!’ He grinned.

‘So I guess this evening we’re going to be snuggling up on the sofa all four of us?’ Ellie asked.

‘I guess so.’

‘Finn...’ Ellie sniffed as emotion welled inside. ‘I’m so happy. I mean... when I came back to the village I had no idea that this lay ahead for me.’

‘I’m incredibly grateful that you came back. I love you, Ellie, and I’m over the moon to have you in my life. At last!’

He leant forwards and kissed her and the kittens both meowed, making them laugh.

‘I love you too, Finn, and I love our beautiful cat-babies.’

While Finn went out to the van to get the things he’d bought for the cats, Ellie sat back on the sofa and stroked them, enjoying the feel of their soft fur and the warmth of them on her lap. She hoped they’d get on well with her frequent visitors Willy and Cleo but suspected they would and that the older cats would help nurture the kittens.

Back at the start of September she’d had no idea what was about to unfold but she couldn’t be happier. Her autumn dreams on Sunflower Street really had come true.

The End

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading *Autumn Dreams on Sunflower Street*. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

How did the story make you feel? Did you care about the characters? Did you have a favourite?

If you can spare five minutes of your time, I would be so grateful if you could leave a short review. Genuine word of mouth helps other readers decide whether to pick up one of my books too.

With love,

Rachel X

Acknowledgments

Firstly, thanks to my gorgeous family. I love you so much!
XXX

To my friends, for your love and support, huge heartfelt thanks.

To everyone who buys, reads and reviews this book, thank you.

About the Author

Rachel Griffiths is an author, wife, mother, Earl Grey tea drinker, gin enthusiast, dog walker and fan of the afternoon nap. She loves to read, write and spend time with her family.



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