

'Atkins packs a huge emotional punch.'
Heat

ALWAYS YOU AND ME



You promised
me forever.

What if
forever ends?

DANI ATKINS

**ALWAYS
YOU AND
ME**

ALSO BY DANI ATKINS

Fractured (US title: *Then and Always*)

The Story of Us

Our Song

This Love

While I Was Sleeping

A Million Dreams

A Sky Full of Stars (US title: *Gone Too Soon*)

The Wedding Dress

Six Days

The Memory of Us

Perfect Strangers (a novella)

When I Awake (a novella)

ALWAYS YOU AND ME

DANI ATKINS

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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To Cassidy
Welcome, little one

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Prologue

The bell announcing the end of visiting hours had long since been rung. I'd ignored it. I almost wished someone would come and challenge me about it, because I was spoiling for a fight. I was filled with red-hot rage, the kind that keeps threatening to erupt like lava from an unstable volcano.

'I hate you for this,' I told a God I didn't believe in, just in case – against all odds – he happened to be lurking on the other side of the water-marked mirror in the ladies' toilets.

He chose not to reply, and all I saw in the mirror was a woman who looked about a decade older than the thirty years on her birth certificate. I looked even worse than my passport photograph, which I'd always thought was physically impossible.

My eyes were no longer red-rimmed because there comes a point when you've cried yourself dry. All I could see in them was an aching sadness for something that hadn't even happened yet.

But it would tonight.

My hair was freshly washed, not because I cared how I looked, but because Adam had always liked to burrow his face in the long chestnut strands and inhale my apple-scented shampoo. We could at least still do that, although it had been weeks since he'd been able to pull me into his arms and kiss me until I was breathless, and even longer since he'd been able to lift me off my feet and carry me to our bedroom and lay me down on the cool crisp sheets and—

'Enough,' I told my reflection fiercely. 'Do *not* go there, Lily.'

The door behind me swung open and I immediately dropped my eyes when I recognised another regular visitor at the hospice. The woman was older than me, and we were on nodding terms in the lift or in the corridor, two refugees in a country we'd never wanted to visit. I didn't imagine I'd ever see her again after today.

I grabbed a handful of paper towels, in too much of a hurry to squander the twenty seconds or so the Dyson fan needed to dry my hands. As I slipped back into Adam's room my eyes automatically went to the clock on the wall. I'd been gone for six minutes. Six minutes I'd never be able to claw back.

Adam's eyes were closed, but they flickered open when he heard the

scrape of my chair as I pulled it closer to the bed. He turned his head slowly towards me, as though the bones were fragile and the sinews rusty. When he winced, I felt the pain as though it was mine.

‘Hey, beautiful,’ he said in a voice that sounded about a hundred years old.

I smiled sadly. ‘Only in your eyes.’

He swallowed uncomfortably and I was on my feet in an instant, reaching for the water glass and straw. I slipped my hand beneath his neck and lifted his head from the pillow because he no longer had the strength to do it himself. He’d carried an eight-foot Christmas tree up three flights of stairs to our flat just three months ago, and today something as simple as raising his head to sip from a damn plastic beaker was beyond him.

I turned to look out of the window for a moment, because I didn’t want him to see the anger in my eyes. Adam was the best person I’d ever met – the best person anyone who knew him had ever met – and the fact that no one was going to get the chance to know just how totally incredible he was after today was nothing less than an outrage.

His eyes told me he’d drunk enough, and I lowered him back on the pillows.

‘Are you in pain? Shall I get someone?’ My hand was already hovering by the Call button.

He shook his head. The drugs made him drowsy, and over the last few days, since we were told that the sand in the hourglass was finally running out, he’d refused to take them at all.

‘I’m not wasting a single second being spaced out. If this is all the time we have—’ I’d sobbed then, I couldn’t help it, and he’d taken hold of my hand before continuing. *‘If this is it, then I want to be here in the moment with you, right up until I draw my very last breath.’*

‘You’re going to be with me for longer than that. We said forever, remember? We wrote it into our vows. You don’t get to wriggle out of it now, buster.’

‘I’m not sure dying is wriggling out of it,’ he’d said gently. *‘But I am reneging on our deal. And I’m so, so sorry to do that to you, Lily. I think perhaps you should sue.’*

That was Adam, determined to make me smile even when my heart was literally being torn in two.

‘Is Fletcher still here?’ he asked unexpectedly.

I swallowed uncomfortably before answering. Adam's short-term memory had begun to waver, like a radio signal that kept slipping off station into a different frequency.

'No, hon. Raegan took him back to her place a few hours ago. Remember?'

I watched as the man I loved, with a Mensa-level IQ, tried to gather up the fragments of his fractured memory and piece it back together.

Fletcher was Adam's dog. He'd been in Adam's life even longer than I had, and I really didn't know what I would have done if the hospice had denied my request to bring him in for a final visit.

The nurse I'd asked had drawn in her breath before replying, and I was ready to launch in with every persuasive argument I'd spent most of the previous night compiling.

'Yes, of course you can,' she'd said. *'I think maybe you should bring him in tomorrow.'* And instead of thanking her for her kindness I'd immediately burst into tears, because I knew what the concession meant. The clock ticking away the time we had left suddenly got a little louder.

Fletcher was not a particularly intelligent border collie, with a tendency to eat slippers, incoming mail, and even the occasional sock. I'd had no idea how he'd react in an alien environment with so many unfamiliar sounds and smells.

He'd sat beside me on the passenger seat today as I drove to the hospice, for once not fidgeting, pawing at the window, or trying to climb on to my lap. As we pulled into the car park, he sat up higher in his seat and looked directly at the low red-brick building that had been home to his owner for the last four weeks.

He gave a single soulful whine.

'Can you sense him, Fletch? Can you tell that he's in there?'

Fletcher looked at me with eyes that suddenly seemed knowing.

'You have to be good today,' I told him as I clipped the lead to his collar. 'You mustn't upset anyone.'

Adam's dog looked at the tears coursing down my cheeks, as if to say that ship might already have sailed.

'You're here to say goodbye to him, boy,' I whispered brokenly. Fletcher watched me with an almost human expression of empathy. 'But I think you know that, don't you?'

For two hours Adam's dog sat beside the bed, within easy reach of the

hand that fondled his silky ears the way it had done a thousand times before. And would never do again. As much as it broke my heart, I think having his old friend there helped heal something in Adam's.

Towards the end of the visit, I lifted the dog on to the bed. There were intravenous drips and wires everywhere, but Fletcher, who was possibly the clumsiest hound in the world, didn't disturb a single one. He simply lay down on the mattress and stared up at his owner with a devotion that matched mine. We both loved this man with all our heart. And tonight we were both going to lose him.



The hospice staff were invisible angels, slipping unobtrusively in and out of Adam's room throughout the night, checking him, checking me, tweaking machinery, and then silently disappearing back into the shadows. Someone had turned off the harsh overhead lamp, leaving the room bathed in the subdued glow of the panel light behind the bed. It was still bright enough to see every detail of the face I'd planned on waking up beside for the next sixty years or so. The thought caught me unawares, and whatever I had been saying was lost in a broken sob.

'Oh, babe,' Adam said, managing to lift his arm off the mattress with a strength I thought he'd already lost. 'Come here.'

I went to him, negotiating my way through the tangle of wires and tubes to lay my head on his chest. It was my favourite place to sleep, with the reassuring steady thud of his heart beating beneath my ear. Tonight its rhythm was off, like a song being played at the wrong tempo. It came fast in a flurry of beats, and then slow with excruciatingly long gaps before the next reassuring thump.

'Adam will slow down,' they had told me. '*He'll become drowsy and may sleep for long periods of time. He won't want to eat or drink. Gradually his body will begin to shut down.*'

'Will it . . . will it hurt?' I'd asked, my face awash with tears that I hadn't bothered trying to wipe away.

'We won't let it,' the doctor had told me gently. '*We'll give him whatever he needs.*'

Later I would replay those words over and over again. Because what my husband needed was the one thing that no one could give him: a miracle. A

cure for the disease that was stealing him away from us.

‘Climb under the covers,’ Adam said now, his voice low.

‘I’m pretty sure that’s not allowed,’ I whispered, already kicking off my shoes and glancing worriedly towards the door as they hit the floor with a noisy clatter.

‘I don’t think they’ll throw me out for misbehaviour.’

‘Are we going to be misbehaving?’ I asked, trying to make him smile. Adam had the best smile of anyone I’d ever met.

‘I wish,’ he said with regret, his eyes looking deep into mine.

It seemed beyond wrong that even after all these years I could still remember the first time we’d made love and yet I couldn’t recall the last time.

All I knew was that it had fallen somewhere between growing vaguely concerned about Adam’s niggling symptoms, and the day we’d sat, white-faced and terrified, in an oncologist’s office.

‘Can you please just give it to me straight?’ Adam had asked him. ‘I don’t want some dressed-up version of the truth. Just how bad is it?’

The doctor had paused for a long moment. He hadn’t needed to look down at the test results or refer to the X-rays fanned out on the desk before him. He’d locked eyes with Adam.

‘Bad,’ he’d said quietly. ‘It’s bad.’



The minutes slid silently into hours. Staff changed shifts and the corridor outside Adam’s room grew quieter.

‘Talk to me,’ Adam said, as I lay pretzelled against him.

‘What about?’

He gave a ghost of a smile. ‘Anything. I just want to hear your voice. Tell me what you thought of me the first time we met.’

‘That’s easy. I thought you were a bit of a knob. Far too overconfident.’

He gave a low chuckle, which turned into a worrying coughing fit. His lungs were compromised now. His breathing was no longer silent. There was a rasp to it that I knew wasn’t going to go away.

I did as he asked, telling stories that all began with the words *‘Remember when . . .’* They made us smile, they made us cry – but that was okay too, because we were doing it together. And ‘together’ was a luxury we

wouldn't have for much longer.

Almost as if he sensed the dark avenue my thoughts had turned down, Adam's arms tightened around me. It was after midnight and the hospice was silent except for the occasional quietly trodden footsteps travelling the corridor.

'Lily, I have something I need to ask you. Something I want you to promise.'

'More promises?' I said, trying to keep my voice light, but there was something about his tone that made the hair stand up on my arms.

There had been a whole collection of things he had wanted me to promise over the last days and weeks. Most of them were pretty doable.

'Promise me you'll remember to get the car serviced regularly.'

'You're worried about the car?' I'd asked incredulously.

'I'm worried about you. I don't want my time in the afterlife ruined by stressing about you driving around with dodgy brakes.'

Behind the humour in his eyes, I had seen the genuine concern.

'Okay, babe. I promise I'll visit the garage regularly.'

But not every promise was so easy to make.

'Promise me you'll still take that trip to Australia next year like we planned.'

I'd shaken my head sadly at that one. *'I don't want to do that without you. That was our dream.'*

Adam had taken my hand between his and squeezed it gently. *'It's still our dream. And when you stand on the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, I'm going to be right there beside you. That's my promise.'*

I kind of liked that, so I'd said yes to that one too.

'Go on then,' I said to him now in the quiet of his hospice room.

'This one is really a two-part promise, but it's the most important one that I've asked of you.'

He looked so serious as he stared down at me. It was almost as though he already knew how I'd react.

'Okay. Whatever it is, I promise I'll do it,' I said, gently running my fingers over his furrowed brow.

'Good,' Adam said with a slow nod. 'Because I want you to find Josh and fix things with him.'

'No.' The word shot out of me before I had a chance to censor it. 'Absolutely not,' I added for extra emphasis. I struggled in his arms but his

hold on me was surprisingly strong, in every sense of the word.

‘I need to know you’ll be alright when I’m gone, Lily. You need to go to him.’

‘No, I don’t,’ I said, gentler this time but just as firm. ‘I *will* be alright, sweetheart. I’ve told you that. I will be sad, and my heart will be broken for a very long time, maybe forever, but I do *not* need to go and find the man whose last words to me were that he never wanted to see me again.’

‘That was my fault,’ Adam said, his voice cracking.

‘I chose *you*, not Josh,’ I reminded him, pressing a kiss on his lips, which felt as dry as sandpaper. ‘I will always choose you. In this life and the next.’

Adam shook his head and one of the machines he was attached to started to beep alarmingly. He was getting agitated, and that was the last thing I wanted.

‘Please, Lily. For me. Go and see him. Listen to what he has to say. And then, when you’ve heard it . . . forgive him. And then forgive me.’

‘You’re not making any sense,’ I said, my voice wobbling. Was this the beginning of the end? They’d warned me that Adam might become confused, or even delusional, and instructing me to go to the man who I’d turned down to be with him was about as deluded as it got.

‘You don’t have to understand now why I’m asking you to do this, but you do have to promise me you’ll go.’

My sigh was long and heartfelt. ‘Alright. If it means this much to you, I’ll do it.’

‘And don’t wait too long. Go to him soon. Promise me.’

‘I promise.’

There is probably a special place in hell for people who lie to someone who’s dying, and I was already halfway there.



It happened in the dark, middle-of-the-night hours, when so many warriors finally lose their fight. I knew it was getting closer by the worried expression in the eyes of the nurses as they came in to check on him.

I struggled to slip out of the bed but a senior nurse, one I’d never really warmed to, stopped me from getting up by placing a firm hand on my shoulder.

‘You’re fine just where you are,’ she said quietly.

The lump in my throat was almost impossible to swallow past.

‘Would you like someone to stay in the room with you?’ She turned her head and nodded to a shadowy corner. ‘We could sit quietly over there.’

I shook my head. ‘I think I’d like it to be just the two of us.’

Her hand was back on my shoulder, gently squeezing it. ‘That’s okay. I understand. You can buzz if you change your mind.’

Adam fought to keep his eyes open for as long as he could; fought to stay with me for every single second we had left. But his body was struggling, and I was hurting him by wanting him to hold on a little bit longer, just for me.

‘Close your eyes, sweetheart.’

‘I don’t want to. I want to see you.’

I leant up and gently kissed him again. ‘I’m there behind your eyes, whether they’re open or closed.’

‘You are and always will be the love of my life, Lily.’

‘And you are mine.’

His eyes closed briefly. ‘Please remember what I asked tonight.’

‘I remember. I remember everything,’ I said. That much at least was no lie. There were some things that would stay with me for all time.

‘I am going to close my eyes now,’ he said, his voice so weak I could hardly hear it.

‘Good idea.’

‘I’ll see you soon, Lily.’

‘You sure will.’

But that was the second lie I told him that night.

Fifteen minutes later, the gap between his breaths grew longer and longer, and then quietly, with the same dignity and bravery that was uniquely his, Adam Tennant – my husband, my best friend, and the love of my life – simply stopped being.

I stared down at his face which, for the first time in months, looked free from pain. From the corner of his eye a single tear had escaped and sat on his cheekbone like a dropped diamond. I bent down and gently kissed it away.

Chapter One

ONE YEAR LATER

I was awake long before the alarm, watching as the inky February sky finally changed from black to grey. I had thought I was ready for today, but now that it had finally arrived, all I felt was overwhelmed.

The mattress depressed suddenly beside my feet, and I looked down at Fletcher, who seemed to realise that the ‘not allowed on the bed’ rule might possibly be waived today. I patted the empty half of the queen-sized mattress and Adam’s dog – my dog now – wriggled up the divan like a canine commando to settle himself beside me.

It was hard to say what had been worse: waking for months in the middle of the night to find my hand searching for Adam across the cold sheets, or the day when my subconscious finally acknowledged he was never going to be found there.

But he *was* still all around me, even twelve months after his death, and never more so than today, on the anniversary of the day I’d lost him.

‘The first year will be the worst,’ people had told me at the funeral. I think their words were meant to comfort me, to let me know that life would eventually get better, but at the time it felt like being kicked when you were already down.

Those initial three hundred and sixty-five days had been an assault course of firsts. Some stabbed like knife wounds, others had been paper cuts of grief, unexpectedly sharp and painful. You’d expect the first Christmas, first birthday and first anniversary to hurt – and they did. But even worse are the ones that blindside you. The first time a stranger innocently asks, *‘Are you married?’* and you have no idea how to reply, because in your heart you still are, and always will be.

Fletcher must have decided it was a day to push the boundaries, for he’d wriggled even higher up the bed to lay his head on the smooth undented pillow beside mine.

‘Nice try, dog, but you’re not sleeping on the bed.’

A smile flitted across my lips, as I realised that if Adam had been the one left alone, the dog would already have claimed my vacant half of the divan.

It had taken almost six months before I'd summoned up the courage to wash Adam's pillowcase. Each night I'd drag his pillow towards me, inhaling the lingering smell of him like an addict, until there was nothing left. It was a big milestone when I finally bundled it up and placed it in the washing machine. I still remember how I clawed at the glass, changing my mind too late, as the machine whirled into action and flooded the drum with sudsy water. When the linen came out, I'd buried my face in the wet material but all I could smell was fabric conditioner. The product name was wildly misleading because it had given me no comfort at all.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I headed to the bathroom. The shelves there no longer held Adam's toiletries, but his toothbrush still sat beside mine in the glass by the sink. My hand hovered towards it, but I jerked it back, unsure if my intention had been to throw it away or use it. I couldn't decide which option was worse.

Fletcher had abandoned the bed and was waiting patiently beside the worktop when I entered the kitchen. Two bites into a slice of toast and marmalade and I threw the remains into his bowl. It was no wonder my waistline had grown thinner over the last year, while Fletcher's had expanded. I could almost hear Adam chastising me, so I pulled on a thick padded jacket and prepared to take Fletcher on a longer walk than usual to compensate.

'Look after my dog,' Adam had said to me, before solemnly turning to the hound and saying just as earnestly, *'And you, look after my wife.'*

We were trying, Fletcher and me, but some days just putting one foot in front of the other felt like a challenge. I learnt that you can't outrun grief because it always knows where to find you, but you *can* keep yourself so busy that it can only squeeze into the gaps of your life, instead of burying you under an avalanche of sadness.

As a result, my cake decorating business had never been busier or more profitable. Raegan, who I'd initially employed to help me out for just two days a week, was now with me full-time. I was working harder and longer than I'd ever done before, and the results were there in black and white on the spreadsheets. Adam would have been so very proud of me. He'd always believed in me and my dreams, had listened to my plans, and supported me

when I decided it was time to take a leap of faith and move my operation out of the tiny, cramped kitchen in my old flat and into proper premises. It was a decision I'd never regretted, unlike some I'd made.

The thought stirred a memory that refused to be silenced. As usual, the guilt of my broken promise felt like a hundred needles pricking at my conscience. Thankfully Fletcher provided a timely distraction by bounding up with a stick he'd just found. I threw it for him until my arm ached and even *he* grew bored of the game.

Back at the flat I started at least half a dozen chores, only to abandon them all. They weren't the distraction I needed and I couldn't settle. Normally, the feeling that Adam was still with me in the home we'd made together was a huge comfort. I could find him in the vibrant geometric wallpaper he'd picked for the hallway – the paper he'd told me I'd come to love . . . except I never did. And he was there in the ridiculously impractical cream-coloured sofa he'd chosen, that *did* show every single mark, as I'd predicted, and would be totally useless when we eventually had children. I jerked back from that thought as though I'd ventured too close to a flame. The mugs in the cupboard, the paintings on our walls, everything we'd owned came with its own unique history of us. It was a hidden provenance that made it seem as though Adam still walked beside me in the empty apartment.

But today I sensed something else. Not for the first time, I felt that Adam might be disappointed in me.

I pummelled the cream sofa cushions into shape as though they'd personally offended me. I didn't like thinking about Adam's final hours, because that wasn't how he'd want me to remember him. But the memory of the promise he'd extracted from me – the one promise I *still* hadn't kept – refused to be silenced.

I collapsed on to the cushions and Fletcher immediately jumped up to lay his head on my lap, looking at me with reproachful eyes.

'Not you too,' I murmured, scratching his head.

I'd done everything Adam had asked of me. The mechanics at my local garage all knew me by name, and I'd even rescheduled our proposed trip to Australia. But – and it was a big but – I hadn't reached out to Josh like I said I would.

'I wouldn't even know how to,' I told my disinterested dog. 'I've no idea where he's living or how to get in touch with him.'

Which was exactly what Josh had wanted.

'You won't hear from me again, Lily. I think it's best for everyone if we agree to cut all contact.'

Had I really believed him when he'd said that? Or did I think in time the hurtful words we'd flung like knives would be forgotten, and we'd find our way back to being friends again? But Josh had been deadly serious. He'd deleted his social media accounts and even changed his phone number. I had no idea where he lived or worked anymore. And if I was being truthful, that's how I'd like things to stay. Our argument had opened up a sinkhole that had swallowed our friendship whole, as though it had never existed.

Overnight Josh had gone from one of the most important people in my life to *someone I used to know*. And that's how it had remained for the past six years. And it would have stayed that way if my husband hadn't made me promise to find him again.

The walls of the flat felt like they were slowly closing in on me and I jumped impulsively to my feet, almost knocking a startled Fletcher to the ground. I'd had many offers of company for today from both friends and family. I'd even had an invitation from Andie – my best friend from uni – to visit her in New York, but I'd turned them all down. I was beginning to wonder if that had been a mistake.

'How are you planning on spending this Saturday, Lily?'

The question had come two days ago from the other side of a mountain of choux buns and spun sugar. I'd stepped back to admire the finished croquembouche that Raegan and I had spent most of the day constructing, before replying with surprising honesty.

'Eating chocolate, listening to sad songs and looking through old photo albums.'

Raegan emerged from the other side of the French wedding cake, shaking her head sadly. *'Spend it with Polly and me instead,'* she said, tilting her head to one side in a move I could have sworn she'd stolen from my dog. *'You know my kid loves you more than she does me.'*

I smiled sadly and wiped my sticky hands on a cloth. *'The feeling is one hundred per cent mutual, but even your adorable five-year-old won't change my mind. I'd be lousy company, anyway.'*

On paper Raegan and I were unlikely friends. She was eight years my junior, a single mum who'd barely been making ends meet with a collection of part-time jobs. She'd happily admitted she didn't know creme pat from

Postman Pat, and yet five minutes into the interview I'd already decided to give her the job.

'You hired her for her sense of humour?' Adam had asked me incredulously that night.

I'd given a helpless shrug. *'Kind of,'* I'd said, not regretting my decision at all. Four years later, I still didn't.

One of the best things about Raegan was that she knew when to push and when to back off.

'Bugger you, Lily. I knew you'd say no,' she said, releasing the clip from her hair and running her fingers through the mulberry-coloured strands. The only thing more colourful than Raegan's language was her hair, which changed hue practically every month. *'My offer stays open, though,'* she said, pulling me in for quick, hard hug.

As tempting as her invitation had been, as I looked around the home that was so full of Adam and yet so empty without him, there was really only one place I wanted to be.

I hauled down an old carryall from the top of the wardrobe, happy to finally be doing something positive. Finding a forgotten pair of Adam's black socks tucked away in the corner of the bag derailed me for a moment.

'Socks!' I said in disbelief, blowing my nose noisily and then throwing a wodge of damp tissues into the wastebin ten minutes later. I suppose I'd known I wouldn't be able to get through today without sobbing, but I really hadn't expected a pair of old socks to be the thing that took me down.

I threw some clothes into the bag, and then filled a carrier with food bowls and dog food. My parents had no pets of their own but had always referred to Fletcher as their *'granddog'*, which had made Adam laugh and roll his eyes. It had been easy to see that my parents adored Adam, and from the first time I'd brought him home my dad had called him *'son'*, which if you knew my dad, you'd realise was a very big deal. They had grieved for me and with me over the past twelve months, and I really didn't know what I'd been thinking, imagining I'd be able to get through today without them.

I wasn't concerned when there was no reply when I called the house, because since retiring their lives had been busier than ever. *'We're cramming it all in now, so we'll be free for childminding when you and Adam have some kiddies,'* my dad had jokingly told me a few years ago. It was a throwaway line that my brain still refused to discard. *If only we had . . .* I thought sadly, as I slid behind the wheel of my car. It was hard sometimes to

know if the last year would have been better or immeasurably worse if Adam and I hadn't put off our plans for a baby for so long. How stupid we were for thinking we had all the time in the world to make that dream a reality.



The journey was uneventful and the roads busy enough to force me to concentrate only on my driving. The house I'd grown up in was disappointingly in darkness when I pulled into the driveway. Fletcher, who seemed to recognise we'd arrived at the place where he was secretly given biscuits, was already jumping up and down on the rear seat in excitement.

I glanced back at him with a smile. There might not have been children in our lives, but sharing this past year with Fletcher, who had loved Adam just as much as me, had made a totally unbearable twelve months a little less so.

I let myself into the house, and Fletcher shot past me at a hundred miles an hour, doing a totally unnecessary search for my parents. The absence of their car in the driveway had already confirmed they were still out.

I walked into the kitchen, breathing in the familiar smell of home, a fragrance so precious I would have paid a fortune to have it bottled. I filled a water bowl for Fletcher and the kettle for me. As I waited for it to boil, I unlocked the back door so the dog could make use of the garden and followed him out into the fast-fading daylight. As my feet went from the paved patio to the lawn, a vague feeling of unease settled over me. Something was wrong. Something was different. I looked up and gasped so loudly that Fletcher stopped investigating the strange flower beds and bounded back over.

The tree. The tree was gone. The old sycamore in our neighbours' back garden, which I'd climbed a thousand times or more, should have been standing majestically beside the fence, its boughs overhanging our garden, but all I could see was sky.

I pivoted back to look at the neighbours' house. It had changed hands several times since my tree-scaling days. I had no idea who the current owners were, but I already hated them for ruthlessly hacking down my childhood memories.

Fletcher danced excitedly around my feet as I pushed through the undergrowth to the section of fence with the loose boards. But my searching

fingers found no place where younger me had crawled through the panels held aside by my old partner in crime.



‘It blew down in that terrible storm we had last November,’ my mother said as she busied herself pulling ingredients from the fridge for our evening meal.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

Mum paused in her scrutiny of a sell-by date and looked at me sadly for a moment. ‘I figured you had enough things to be thinking about instead of old trees,’ she said kindly.

I nodded slowly. November hadn’t been a good time for me. It was the month of my wedding anniversary. The first I’d had to spend without Adam.

‘Even so,’ I said, aware I was making far too much out of something that really shouldn’t have mattered this much to me. Except that it did.

‘I still think it’s a miracle you never broke your neck falling out of that damn old tree,’ Dad said, ruffling my hair as though I was still that eleven-year-old fearless tomboy. ‘If I’d known what dangerous antics you were getting up to over there, with that young lad the Bakers fostered – what was his name again?’ he asked, turning to my mother, the oracle, for an answer. But I replied first. Why would I not, when his name had been in and out of my thoughts all day.

‘Josh. His name was Josh.’



With culinary wizardry, Mum conjured a dinner for two into a feast for three, which made me wonder if she’d always known I was going to turn up at their door today. It was probably no accident either that the meal was one of my childhood favourites.

The visit did all that I’d hoped it would. I’d been running on empty, and somehow being back in the place where I’d grown up restored and renewed me. Not everyone was lucky enough to have roots like these, which was something I’d learnt at a surprisingly young age. I yanked my thoughts back because I could see where they were heading. And tonight, I wanted only to think about Adam.

The tap was light on my bedroom door. I turned my head but didn’t

move from the window seat where so many of my childhood dreams and plans had been launched. It was the same spot beside the same star-strewn sky, but I was too old now to believe that wishing on them achieved anything.

‘Are you alright, sweetheart?’

I turned away from the glass, feeling like I was eleven years old all over again as my mother walked towards me. If it weren’t for the lines on her face and the grey in her hair, I really would feel as though I had travelled back in time. It certainly seemed that way when her arms came around me and I buried my face in the comfort of her hug.

‘Today was always going to be shit, Lily.’

I smothered a sound that was halfway between a sob and a laugh against her waist. Mum never swore, and it said a lot that she did so now.

‘Do you think I’m always going to miss him this much, Mum? I thought it would get easier in time . . . but it’s still so hard without him.’

She didn’t tell me the pain would ease, or dredge up a well-meaning platitude; she just tightened her hold and dropped her head down until it rested on mine.

‘We still talk about him every day, your dad and I,’ she said, her voice cracking slightly. I pulled back and we shared the same watery smile. There were tears in the eyes that used to be the same shade of green as mine.

‘He would have liked that,’ I said, knowing it to be true.

Mum nodded. ‘But what he *wouldn’t* like is knowing that you’re still so very sad. He’d want you to be happy again. I know he would.’

The promise forced its way back into the forefront of my thoughts, like an arrogant queue jumper that refused to wait their turn. My head felt heavy as I acknowledged her words. Perhaps there was more than one reason why I’d felt the need to return here today. Perhaps it was because I knew that to take the next step forwards I would need to go back to where it had all started.

Chapter Two

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER

‘Go away!’

Lily was still gasping from the climb, and what little air she had left was instantly sucked from her by the stranger’s rude greeting.

‘Well, you’re not very nice, are you?’ she finally wheezed, swinging her leg over the thick branch she’d just hauled herself up on.

‘So they tell me,’ the boy replied mulishly. He glared at her angrily and Lily glared right back. ‘What are you doing here anyway? This is my tree.’

‘Actually, this tree belongs to Mr and Mrs Baker, who are our neighbours. And they let me climb it all the time.’

‘Liar,’ said the boy.

Lily blinked back at him. No one had ever been this rude to her in all of her eleven years, and to be honest she had no idea how to respond. The boy scared her a little.

When it became clear Lily had nothing further to say, the boy found himself unwillingly filling the silence. ‘I always know when people are lying to me.’

‘How?’ Lily asked, forgetting she’d just decided not to speak to the intruder in her neighbours’ garden ever again.

The boy shrugged. He looked tall, although admittedly it was hard to be sure when he was crouched down on the branch of a tree, a good fifteen feet above the ground. She went a little queasy when she thought about that. The boy was right. She’d never climbed a tree before and the danger of being this far above the ground hadn’t really occurred to her until right now.

‘When people lie to you all the time you get good at spotting it. Crap, you’re not going to faint, are you?’

There suddenly seemed to be way too much saliva in Lily’s mouth, and she felt sweaty even though the day was quite cool for the middle of summer.

‘I don’t know. I’ve never fainted before. How would I tell?’

The boy gave another ‘I don’t really know or care’ shrug. ‘Don’t ask

me. I guess we'll find out when you go splat on the ground.'

Lily felt the Frosties she'd eaten for breakfast swirl around in her stomach like it was a whirlpool.

'For fuck's sake, you'd better not puke in my tree.'

'You're the rudest, most annoying boy I've ever met. Why are you so horrible?' Lily asked. Her curiosity was more compelling than the need to throw up.

'I dunno. You'd have to ask my case worker about that. It's probably all there in my file.'

'What file? And what's a case worker?'

The boy gave a long-suffering sigh, as though it was bad enough having to share the tree with a girl, without them being this ignorant.

'It's someone who looks after you.'

'Like a mum or a dad, you mean?'

Lily knew she hadn't imagined the fleeting look of sadness on the young boy's face before it was swept aside by one of contempt.

'Yeah, well. Not everyone gets a great one of those.'

The nausea had thankfully passed, and Lily settled herself a little more comfortably on the thick tree branch, gripping it with her thighs as though riding a pony.

'Is that why you're so angry? Because you don't have any parents?'

'I have parents. Just shitty ones, that's all. That's why I'm with the . . . what did you say the people who live here are called?'

'The Bakers. Janette and Gordon. They're really nice.'

The boy pulled a face. 'I don't suppose I'll be here long enough to know if that's true or not.'

'Why not?'

'They move me around a lot. I'm trouble.'

He said it as though it was a badge of honour that he wore with pride.

'That's sad,' Lily said, her eleven-year-old heart ready to like anyone, even rude boys who swore at her.

'Don't go feeling sorry for me. I'm fine as I am.'

'Liar,' said Lily, shocking herself at the retort. She'd never called anyone one of those before. 'I think you're just lonely. I think you need a friend.'

'Yeah, sure. That's why I chose to climb this big old tree. Because I wanted to find a mate up here.'

‘Well, it worked, didn’t it? You found me. I can be your friend.’

‘Don’t bother. I won’t be here long enough.’

Lily screwed up her face in confusion. He really was the most awkward boy she had ever met. And not at all like the ones in her class at school.

‘How old are you, anyway?’ she asked her fellow tree climber.

‘I’m twelve. I’m going to be thirteen soon.’

‘Oh, when?’ Lily asked.

‘Why do you want to know? Are you going to throw me a party? Bake me a cake?’

Lily gave a broad smile. ‘Maybe I will. I love making cakes with my mum. Fairy cakes are my favourite.’

‘It figures,’ the boy said dourly. ‘You seem like a cupcakes and rainbows sort of girl.’

‘Cupcakes and rainbows. That’s cute.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be,’ the boy said, still determined to be mean, or at least that’s how it seemed to Lily.

‘What were you doing on the tree anyway, when I first climbed up?’

‘Doing? Nothing.’ He had gone straight into defensive mode.

‘Yes, you were,’ Lily said, wriggling further along the tree branch, very glad she’d chosen to wear jeans and not shorts that morning. ‘When I popped up, you spun around and looked really guilty.’

Unconsciously the boy moved his body to one side, obscuring the main trunk of the sycamore tree.

‘What are you hiding?’

‘You really are the nosiest little girl in the world, aren’t you?’

‘I’m not that little. I’m going to be twelve soon.’

‘Twelve and nosy,’ the boy declared.

‘What’s your name anyway? I can’t call you “the boy from the tree”, can I?’

‘There’s no need for you to call me anything. But if you must know, that’s what I was doing when you got here.’ He leant back and Lily saw a dangerously sharp-looking penknife resting by his legs and the first three letters of a name gouged into the tree bark. ‘I like to leave my name wherever they put me.’

‘J . . . O . . . S . . .’ she said out loud, as though she was back in Reception class trying to sound out a new word. ‘Is your name Josh?’

The boy almost gave a flicker of a smile before scowling it away at the

last moment.

‘My name is Lily. Will you carve that into the tree too, when you’ve finished yours?’

The boy gave a non-committal shrug, but Lily already knew that he would do it.

Chapter Three

‘Fletcher! Fletcher!’

Hissing clearly wasn’t working, so I raised my voice as loud as I dared, glancing around anxiously in case someone from the Neighbourhood Watch came out and complained about the early morning disturbance.

Fletcher had either gone conveniently deaf or was having far too much fun to respond to my commands. It was my fault for unclipping his lead at the top of the driveway. Instead of trotting obediently towards my parents’ front door, his ears had suddenly shot up, as though he’d been summoned. Which was kind of ironic, because when I attempted to call him back moments later, all he did was ignore me.

I watched him shoot down the neighbours’ driveway at a speed which belied the many slices of toast he’d enjoyed over the last year. Even the narrow gap beneath the garden gate did little to slow him down. He simply dropped to his belly and wriggled beneath it before disappearing from sight.

I looked around, convinced net curtains must be twitching at every window as I briskly followed my dog into next door’s front garden, glancing at the weather-beaten For Sale sign hammered into the lawn. Mum had mentioned last night that the house was currently empty and had been up for sale for around six months.

For a horrible moment I thought I might have to scale the fence to retrieve my runaway dog, but the gate was stiff rather than locked, and a hefty shove released the latch. The back garden was a suburban jungle and looked nothing like it had done when the Bakers lived there. I’d spent so many hours in this garden between the ages of eleven and fifteen, and yet today I scarcely recognised it.

I caught a fleeting glimpse of Fletcher’s bushy tail as he vanished into the undergrowth and sent up a silent plea that whoever lived here last had kept the fences in good repair. The thought of losing Adam’s dog was too terrible to contemplate.

I moved fast through the dense foliage, scarcely noticing the thorny rose bush that snagged my quilted jacket, or the bite of the stinging nettles as I pushed them aside. What was impossible to ignore however, was the huge, felled sycamore. I’d assumed it had long since been cleared away, but it still

lay exactly where it had fallen in the November storm. Its roots were enormous, reaching into the air like a tangle of tentacles, seeking but never finding the soil they had been ripped from.

I felt a momentary sadness for the tree's ignoble demise, but my attention was more focused on Fletcher, who had somehow managed to scale the fallen tree and got himself caught in its branches. He was barking loud enough to wake any resident in the street who I hadn't already disturbed.

'Shhhh,' I hissed, as I looked for a way through the branches to reach him. 'This is what happens when you don't come when I call you.'

I shrugged out of my jacket before it sustained further damage and scrabbled over the enormous tree trunk to reach my dog, who was now whining and looking very sorry for himself.

There was a weird feeling of serendipity to once again be climbing the old sycamore, something I'd never expected to do twenty years or so after my first journey into its branches. Thankfully it was easier now it was horizontal, and within a minute or two I was close enough to Fletcher to see the relief in his eyes. 'It's meant to be the other way around, dog – you're meant to save *me* from danger,' I muttered as I fought my way through the branches to reach his collar and haul him out.

But then, as I bent towards him, I saw something I'd never imagined I would see again. I pulled aside a few spindly branches, releasing a very excitable Fletcher and fully revealing the section of tree where he'd become ensnared.

Fletcher, his lesson learnt, was trying to climb on to my lap to cover my face with grateful swipes of his tongue, but I scarcely felt them. I shook my head in disbelief as I reached out and traced the grooves in the bark that time had scarcely diminished. Josh's name and mine were just as clearly visible in the tree trunk as they'd been twenty years ago, on the day he'd carved them into the wood.

The tree was vast, easily over twenty metres tall. Fletcher could have got caught anywhere along its length, and yet he had ended up in the exact spot that marked the beginning of my friendship with Josh. Those two etched names would forever hold the memory of the day I'd stood at my bedroom window and watched a boy I'd never seen before climb a tree in our neighbours' garden, and for some inexplicable reason had decided to follow him. They marked the start of a friendship so precious that I'd known my first experience of heartbreak because of it, when four years later the Bakers and

their foster children had moved away. But by then my foolish teenage heart was already his. Not that I'd ever found the courage to tell him that, of course.

And now, two decades later, with all sorts of uncomfortable history between us, with gallons of water – much of it muddy – beneath the bridge, and my late husband's request forever ringing in my ears, fate had put me right back at the spot where it all began.

I raised my eyes towards the sky as though Adam was indeed up there, hidden from sight by the gathering grey clouds.

'Alright, hon. I get it. You've made your point. I'll find him. God knows how, but I'll do it . . . but only because you asked me to.'



'The Bakers? Goodness, I haven't thought about them in ages. Why do you ask?'

'I was just wondering if you had a current address for them, that's all,' I said, trying and failing to sound nonchalant. Mum stopped folding the clothes from the tumble dryer and studied me for a moment, her head tilted to one side. It was a pose I remembered from old.

'You *do* know Mrs Baker – Janette – passed away, don't you?' Mum didn't usually tiptoe around the word 'died' the way so many people did with the recently bereaved. I swear in the last year I must have heard every euphemism going, from 'being called home' to 'crossing the rainbow bridge', which I'm pretty sure is only meant to be for cats and dogs.

Mum was obviously still conscious of yesterday's milestone anniversary. And she had no way of knowing that I was perfectly aware that Josh's foster mother had died. I'd been at the funeral eight years earlier.

'Yes. I knew about that. I was just curious if you still had Gordon Baker's address? You know, from Christmas cards or whatever.'

Mum's interest was piqued, which was exactly what I'd been hoping to avoid. There was also a surprising look of remorse on her face. 'No, Lily. I'm afraid we lost touch over the years. I believe they moved house several times after leaving the area.'

They did. That much I knew.

'Then I heard from a mutual friend that Gordon had gone into a care home a few years ago. Poor man. His dementia got so much worse after he

lost Janette.'

That I wasn't aware of. I felt a sharp pang of sadness for the couple who'd always been incredibly kind to me, which tipped over into a feeling of sorrow for Josh, knowing he'd effectively lost both the people who'd been more like parents to him than his biological ones had ever been.

'You don't know which care home, I suppose?'

Mum stopped trying to wrangle a fitted base sheet into a folded rectangle and leant forward on the kitchen table. All at once I felt like an unreliable witness about to be quizzed by a very experienced barrister.

'What's this all about, Lily?'

I bit my lip, not sure how much I wanted to tell her. Somehow, I'd never found the right moment to explain the events of six years ago to her, and the impossible situation I'd found myself in. When your parents had happily spent thousands of pounds on an enormous wedding, they probably didn't want to hear that forty-eight hours before the big day, something had happened that made you suddenly question whether you were making the right choice.

Luckily, all that chaos and indecision had disappeared during my explosive row with Josh, and I'd never had to tell anyone how close I'd come to breaking two hearts in one fell blow.

And none of that mattered anymore anyway. Because Adam *had* been the right choice. I'd loved him with all my heart and would continue to do so until the day I died. Which made trying to find Josh an even more ridiculous and pointless exercise. But a promise is a promise.

'I think Muriel – that mutual friend I was telling you about – I think she might have the address of the care home. Would you like me to ask her for it next time I go into town?'

I paused for a very long moment. 'Actually, Mum, can you ask her for it now? Today.'

There were a million questions dancing behind my mum's eyes. But she didn't ask any of them. It was one of the things I loved best about her. She knew when to probe, but more importantly, she also knew when to say nothing at all.

Chapter Four

An enormous pile of kibble clattered into Fletcher's bowl, and then, after a moment of hesitation, I added even more. I wasn't sure how long I'd be at the care home, or if Gordon Baker would even be willing to see me.

I guessed it would depend on how much Josh had shared with him about our 'falling out'. I wrinkled my nose at the expression but could think of no other substitute.

I'd looked up the home online as soon as I returned from my parents last weekend. I'm not sure what I'd been expecting, but the luxurious, almost hotel-like accommodation and facilities came as a big surprise. I'd stayed at five-star resorts that weren't so fancy.

As my phone navigated me to my destination, I tried to remember everything I knew about the Bakers. It turned out teenage me had paid very little attention to the family next door. I knew they'd had no children of their own, and had become foster parents quite late in life, choosing only to care for older children, ones with more complex issues or troubled backgrounds. My hands tightened on the wheel, because they'd certainly had their work cut out for them with Josh – or at least they had in the early days. If there was a rule, it was only there to be broken, or so he'd delighted in telling me. I think more than anything, he liked to shock me.

It was only years later that it occurred to me that, although he'd talked the talk, I couldn't actually remember Josh doing *anything* particularly terrible. Unless you counted breaking someone's heart a crime, that is. Because if you did . . . well, then Josh was a repeat offender.



Wrought-iron gates flanked a meandering driveway that led to the main entrance of Redmount Care Home. The main building kept materialising and then disappearing behind an avenue of trees that bordered the driveway. The brief glimpses I got of it looked impressive.

I followed the arrows to an area designated for visitor parking and pulled into a vacant bay. Through the windscreen I studied the building, which looked much like a stately home in a period drama, with its neatly

trimmed ivy clinging to the brickwork. The early afternoon sun hung low in the sky, turning the glass at every window molten orange.

As I climbed out of the car, I immediately regretted the casual black jeans and jumper I'd chosen. Every vehicle in the car park – except mine – looked expensive. I smiled, thinking how close I'd come to driving here in the small white van we used for deliveries. As it was, my five-year-old Fiesta was seriously out of its league.

What I hadn't got wrong, however, was the timing of my visit. The car park was rapidly filling up; Saturday afternoon was clearly a popular time for visitors. I was halfway across the deeply gravelled forecourt when my steps faltered. *What if, out of all the days he could have picked, Josh has chosen today to visit his foster father?* It was a cool day, but that didn't stop a faint sheen of perspiration from suddenly erupting on my top lip.

I was ready to meet my old neighbour again. I'd rehearsed what I would say to him and was confident I could pull off the air of nonchalance I wanted to convey. But bumping into the boy who'd stolen my heart, who'd grown up to be the man who broke it – not just once, but twice – well, that was a different prospect altogether.

The impression that this wasn't a care home at all, but an exclusive country club hotel, the kind you might attend for a wedding, only got stronger when I entered the building. There was nothing cold or clinical about the foyer, with its elegant period furniture and impressive mahogany reception desk. The feeling that I ought to be wearing a fancy hat and carrying a box of confetti was only reinforced.

'Good afternoon. Can I help you?'

I plastered on a smile that almost covered my anxiety.

'Yes. I hope so. I've come to visit one of your residents. A Mr Gordon Baker.'

The woman smiled as she reached for a clipboard on the desk. 'Is he expecting you?'

'Um . . . no. Not exactly.' I wondered if she could tell that actually translated into *not at all*. 'I'm sorry. It's the first time I've been here. I didn't realise I had to make an appointment.'

The receptionist's smile didn't waver. 'You don't. We have an open-door visiting policy for family and friends.' She was looking at me expectantly, and I could see she was waiting for clarification as to which category I fell into. Truthfully the answer was neither.

‘I’m an old neighbour of his,’ I said, which was entirely true. ‘And I happened to be in the area this afternoon.’ Which was a barefaced lie. I’d driven for two hours to get here, but she didn’t need to know that.

‘I thought I would surprise him, but if it’s not convenient, please don’t worry. I can always come back another time,’ I said, already knowing that I would never return. At least I could say I had *tried* to make contact with Josh. I’d given it my best shot.

Mentally I was already halfway back to my car when the young woman passed me the clipboard from the desk. ‘Oh no. *Of course* you must see Mr Baker. It will be a real treat for him. To be honest, he doesn’t get that many visitors.’ She added the last in a half whisper as though spilling secrets.

I took the pen she was holding and the clipboard. It looked as though I was doing this after all.

‘Do all visitors sign in?’ I asked, slowing down how long it took me to write my name so I could scan the list of arrivals who’d filled in the form before me today.

‘Yes. It’s company policy.’

I had neither wanted nor expected to see the name Josh Metcalf on the list of today’s visitors. So there was no reason to feel disappointed as I passed the clipboard back across the desk. But I did.



‘Mr Baker is in our Wintergreen wing,’ advised the young care worker who’d been summoned to accompany me to his room. She swiped the card hanging from a lanyard around her neck across a discreetly positioned pad beside the door. I heard an inner mechanism click to release a lock.

‘Some of the Wintergreen residents have a tendency to go walkabout,’ she explained. ‘They’re not locked in. We just have the doors shut to keep them safe.’

I was still wrestling with the semantics of that statement when we paused at a door. Beside it was a neatly engraved plate bearing the name of Josh’s foster father. No scribbled-on piece of card slotted into a holder here.

‘Most of the residents in Wintergreen feel more comfortable receiving visitors in their own rooms. They find it less unsettling.’

I wasn’t sure about Mr Baker, but I was starting to feel more than a little unsettled myself. Was I doing the wrong thing here?

The door to the room had been left ajar by a few inches. It was too late to back out now because the assistant was already knocking softly on the wooden panels. ‘Gordon? Can we come in? I have a visitor for you.’

There was a mumbled comment from the other side of the door, too low and indistinct to know if he’d said yes or no to that one. The assistant pushed open the door and then stood back, allowing me to enter the room first.

I had become very good at training my face not to express shock or dismay when Adam had been in hospital and then later in the hospice. No one wants their visitors to look horrified when they first set eyes on you. But it took me a moment or two before I could school my features not to react to the frail-looking man seated in a brocade wingback armchair in front of me. He looked nothing like the Mr Baker from my memory. His hands were clenched on the armrests, with thin, claw-like bony fingers, covered with concertinaed wrinkles and age spots. I saw them tighten their hold on the upholstery as he prepared to stand, and a lump unexpectedly rose at the back of my throat. Mr Baker had always had impeccable manners. He would unfailingly get to his feet whenever my mum or I came into a room. How could I have forgotten that?

To be honest, that was one of only a few things I recognised about the elderly gentleman in the bright and spacious room. His hair had been thinning even when I had last seen him, and it was now sparse enough to count the strands. His face was the same, and yet entirely different. It was as though someone had made a latex mask of Mr Baker and then left it out in the sun, where it had somehow melted out of shape.

His eyes were watery, and although I couldn’t remember their original colour, whatever it had been had long since faded. His lips were moving soundlessly in the way that old people’s do.

‘Please don’t get up,’ I urged, holding out a hand as though I was on traffic control, and stepped closer to his chair. ‘I’m not sure if you’ll remember me, Mr Baker – Gordon,’ I corrected, feeling embarrassed at the formality. ‘I’m Lily. Lily . . . *Williams*,’ I said, reverting to the surname I’d not used in six years. ‘You used to live next door to us in Elm Close. My parents are Tony and Barbara.’

That was a lot of information I’d thrown at him in the space of a few seconds, and I could see him trying to process it . . . and failing.

‘Why don’t I go and prepare you a little tea tray?’ the woman who’d brought me to the room suggested. I looked back at her over my shoulder,

suddenly not sure I was ready to be left alone with someone who looked as though a gust from the slightly open window could blow him off his armchair.

‘Please don’t bother on my account,’ I said, but the woman was already halfway out the door.

‘Oh, it’s no bother. We usually bring Gordon a cuppa at around this time of day.’

Then she was gone, and for a moment I felt like a child who’d been dropped off at a party she hadn’t really wanted to attend. I turned slowly back around. Gordon’s lips were still moving as though he’d been given a particularly challenging toffee just before I arrived. He lifted a shaky hand and pointed towards a chair a short distance from his own. I did as I was instructed and perched on the seat, not relaxed enough to sit back against its cushions.

‘Do I know you?’ he asked suddenly.

I swallowed uncomfortably. There was no way this sweet, old, confused man was going to suddenly rattle off an address or a telephone number of a teenager he’d fostered twenty years ago. Really, what on earth had I been thinking?

‘My name is Lily,’ I repeated. This time without the backstory.

Gordon Baker nodded, a small smile on his thin lips. ‘I knew a lass called Lily once. Proper little tearaway she was. Always climbing trees.’

I sat up straighter in my chair. ‘That was me,’ I cried in delight. ‘I was that Lily. I used to climb the old sycamore tree in your back garden.’

Mr Baker looked at me and then shook his head as though he was sorry to be the one to have to tell me this, but I was sadly deluded.

‘No. The Lily I knew was nothing but a lass. Couldn’t have been more than twelve or so. Skinny little thing she was, but she had a good heart.’

It was too much of a quantum leap for his failing memory to match his recollections of eleven-year-old me with the woman in her thirties who sat before him now. So I decided I too would refer to younger me as though she and I were completely unrelated.

‘Do you remember Lily being friends with one of the boys you and Janette fostered?’

Too late I realised my mistake. At the mention of his late wife’s name, Mr Baker’s face crumbled.

‘Do you know my Janette? Have you seen her recently? I keep asking

them why she hasn't come to see me, but they won't tell me anything.'

I looked around helplessly. Did he not know that his wife had died? Could he not remember being at her funeral – which I too had attended? I didn't want to have to tell him any of that.

Fortunately, I was saved from having to say anything by the clink of crockery and the sound of wheels trundling over the wooden-floored corridor. I turned around with relief as the young woman re-entered the room, carrying a tray loaded with a teapot, cups and saucers, and a plate of custard creams.

'Ah. Is it time for tea already?' Gordon asked, with a note of happy expectation in his voice. My head swivelled back at lightning speed. There was nothing on his face to indicate the sorrow that had been there just seconds earlier, when he was asking me about his wife.

'I think I'll just use the little boys' room,' the elderly man said, heaving himself to his feet and shuffling off to a room that I assumed was his ensuite bathroom.

I waited until he had clicked the door closed before turning back to the woman who had finished setting down the tea tray.

'He . . . he seems rather confused. He asked me about his wife, and why she hadn't been to see him. Does he not know that she died?'

The young assistant didn't look anywhere near as troubled by my words as I felt about saying them.

'Some days he does. And some days he doesn't. His memory is like an old pair of binoculars that look into the past. Sometimes – on a good day – it will be able to focus sharply for a moment or two, but most of the time what he sees is fuzzy at best.'

'So, asking him for something like an email address or a mobile phone number is going to be beyond him?'

The woman raised both her eyebrows eloquently.

I shook my head. 'Sorry. Stupid question. I knew he was suffering from dementia, but I wasn't aware how that presented itself.'

'No two cases are ever the same. And no two days are alike. Their memories fade in and out faster than you could possibly believe. The thing to remember is that when we're telling Gordon that his wife has died, it's like he's hearing it for the very first time and he's grieving for her as though it was only yesterday that she was standing right there beside him.'

Her words hit me like a blow. I was one year on from having lost my husband and I was still a long way from recovering from the first devastating

wound of being without him. Imagine having to go through that agony again and again. It was unthinkable.

Gordon emerged, and after a quick check that everything that should have been buttoned or zipped had been, the kindly assistant left us alone again.

Gordon seemed to have entirely forgotten the sadness of the past during his bathroom break, and the last thing I wanted to do was to bring those thoughts back into his head. Maybe somewhere in the faulty vaults of his memory he did know Josh's current whereabouts, but memories of Josh would be inextricably tangled up with those of his late wife. And despite my promise to Adam, I wasn't about to do anything to cause this gentle old man any further pain. And Adam would never have wanted me to.

We drank the tea, and Gordon polished off the entire plate of biscuits. We spoke about gardens – something I knew scarcely a thing about, living as I did in the top-floor flat of a mansion house.

'Built a little platform in that old sycamore for young Lily and my lad, you know,' Gordon said, leaning over and spilling biscuit crumbs on to the floor.

I craned forward, excited that a door to the past had unexpectedly opened.

'*You did.* You nailed some planks on to one of the upper branches.'

Gordon Baker's eyes narrowed. 'Who told you about that? Have you been talking to my boy? Have you seen him?'

'Josh? Is that who you mean? Josh was the young boy you fostered back in 2005. He came to live with you because . . . well, he didn't have a very happy life in his old home.'

'That poor laddie had it worse than most. Just about broke my heart knowing what he'd been through. Terrible thing what some folks will do to their kiddies.'

I swallowed a new obstruction in my throat. 'It is, Gordon. It is. But Josh was lucky; he had you and—' I stopped myself before I fell back into that abyss. 'He had you to look after him,' I completed.

'Would you like to see a photograph?' Gordon Baker asked, getting to his feet and crossing to a heavy oak dresser that had caught my eye when I first entered the room, not just for its rustic charm but because of the collection of framed photographs clustered on its surface. The majority appeared to be of a much younger Gordon and Janette. They ranged back

through the decades, depicting an array of fashion styles.

The old man's hand wove through the frames, seeking the one he wanted to share with me, and while it did, I looked among them for any that might depict a dark-haired man with high cheekbones and the most intense brown eyes I had ever seen. No one in any of the frames matched that description.

'Here she is. There's that Lily lass I was telling you about.'

He passed me a gilt-framed photograph that had been at the very back of the group. I stared down for a long moment at a photograph I hadn't seen for almost twenty years. It had been taken at a summer barbecue about two years after Josh had moved in with the Bakers. Many other neighbours were also in the photo – including my own parents, who looked younger than I ever remembered them being. I was standing to one side of the main group, with a hot dog in my hand and Josh's arm thrown casually around my shoulders.

Gordon had come to stand beside me and was looking down at the photograph with an expression of confusion. 'There she is. There's that Lily. Not sure who that boy beside her is though.'

He took the photograph back from me and lifted it close to his face until his nose was almost grazing the glass.

'And there's my Janette,' he said, lowering the frame and cradling it against him as though he was trying to press the image of his late wife into his heart. 'Do you know where she is? She hasn't been to see me for a really long time.'

Chapter Five

I breathed in deeply as I exited the care home. I wasn't sure if the relief came from having failed in my task, or simply because Redmount had been heated to a temperature most greenhouses don't even achieve.

I tried, babe. You saw that, didn't you? I silently questioned Adam as I pulled my car keys from my bag and pointed them at the Fiesta. *There wasn't anything else I could have done.*

Wasn't there? The voice in my head was so Adam that my footsteps actually faltered. There'd been just the right amount of wry amusement in the voice to almost persuade me that Adam was here in person. Not giving me an inch.

What else was I supposed to do? Sit the poor old guy in front of a swinging light bulb and interrogate him?

I heard no reply to that one but could easily imagine the small snort of humour my husband would have given in response.

Well, if you say you've done everything you can . . .

I sighed deeply and lowered the hand that had been about to open the car door. I hated it when my subconscious did this. I hated allowing it to imagine exactly what Adam would do or say in any given situation . . . and yet I kind of loved it too. It kept him here, near me, where he belonged.

I sighed heavily. 'No, I don't suppose I did do *everything* I could.'

Surprise flickered in the receptionist's eyes at my reappearance just moments after signing me out.

'Did you forget something?' she asked pleasantly.

'Sort of,' I said, already aware that my cheeks were turning pink. I would make an appalling poker player, because I was dreadful at bluffing.

'I was thinking that I'd like to let Gordon's family know I've been to see him, but unfortunately, I've . . . I've lost their contact details.'

The expression on the receptionist's face wasn't quite so warm now. I imagine she'd already guessed what I was about to ask her.

'Obviously, I realise you can't hand out confidential information,' I continued hurriedly, 'but I wondered if I might leave a note with you, giving them my phone number and address, so you could pass it to them when they next visit.'

‘So, they’ve lost *your* contact details too?’

My blush got deeper. Damn, I had *not* thought this through. It was all too easy to imagine Adam on a cloud somewhere, laughing his head off.

‘I’ve moved house, and they don’t have my new mobile number.’ My response sounded feeble even to my ears.

Despite this, the receptionist extracted a sheet of paper from the printer beside her and slid it across the desk to me. I carefully wrote out every contact detail I could think of, including my parents’ mobiles. It looked a little desperate, but the receptionist was too polite to comment as she took the piece of paper from me.

While I’d been busy writing down numbers, she had extracted a buff-coloured folder from the filing cabinet behind the desk. Even upside down I could see Gordon’s name on the front. For one wild moment I wondered what would happen if I snatched the folder from her hands and rifled through it for Josh’s address. Somehow, I didn’t think Adam would want me to take my promise so far that I ended up getting myself arrested.

‘If you could give this to Josh Metcalf the next time he visits Mr Baker, I’d be really grateful,’ I said, watching as she carefully slid the sheet into the folder.

‘Who?’

I had already half turned from the desk, but that one word had me back there in an instant.

‘Josh Metcalf. He’s . . . he’s a family member . . . kind of. I’d assumed he’d be listed as Mr Baker’s next of kin.’

My thoughts were spiralling back to the day of Janette Baker’s funeral. I remembered Josh telling me that his foster father had no living relatives, which was why he’d handled all the arrangements for the service. ‘*I guess I’m the closest thing to a next of kin he has now,*’ he’d told me sadly.

‘There’s no mention in Mr Baker’s file of anyone by that name, I’m afraid. But we do have his daughter down as an emergency contact.’

I stared at the receptionist, then swallowed hard, several times. I might not play poker, but I knew when to take a gamble.

‘You mean Claire? Claire Triplehorn?’

The receptionist looked relieved that she hadn’t had to break any confidentiality rules.

‘Ahh, you know her then?’

My smile felt fake – probably because it was. ‘Oh, yes. Claire and I go

way back.'

It was hard to hide my frustration as I realised my plan – which admittedly had always been shaky – had just run into an insurmountable obstacle. The chances of Claire Triplehorn, the Bakers' other long-term foster child, ever doing *anything* to help me were roughly about a billion to one.

A cool draught of air filtered into the foyer and the receptionist's gaze switched to something just beyond my right shoulder. Whatever she saw made her face light up in delight and astonishment.

'Oh, my goodness, I don't believe this. What are the chances?'

It was one of those moments when you wonder if Fate is deliberately out to get you, while simultaneously thinking that if this is a dream, it would be a *really* good moment to wake up now.

The receptionist was beaming as she looked towards the entrance, and I could already feel my stomach somersault and then tumble into freefall as I slowly turned around and followed her gaze.

The element of surprise was on my side. But I wasted my ten-second advantage by getting tangled up in noticing that her hair was longer and her tan deeper than the last time I'd checked out her Instagram account.

I eyed the door behind her, wondering if there was any chance of getting through it before she saw me. My own hair had been shorter, and several shades lighter, the last time we'd met. And I didn't need a mirror to know that the last twelve months had aged me more than a year had any right to do. There was every possibility that Claire might not recognise me.

Her eyes travelled past me and, for a second, I thought it might be okay after all, but the receptionist was enjoying the moment far too much not to intervene.

'Miss Triplehorn,' she cried out happily. 'Can you believe this? We were just talking about you. Look who's here.'

Claire looked.

I'd always thought there was something vaguely beady and avian about Claire's expression whenever she was studying something that displeased her. I ought to know, because I'd been on the receiving end of that look more times than I cared to remember.

'You,' Claire said slowly.

I guess that answered the question of whether or not she recognised me.

'Hello, Claire.' My voice sounded remarkably calm, belying the way my heart was trying to hammer its way out of my ribcage.

‘What are you doing here?’

Her eyes flickered over me, taking in my high-heeled boots, skinny jeans and chunky jumper. Her expression hardened, but I don’t think it was my clothes she’d taken an instant dislike to . . . it was the person inside them.

From the corner of one eye, I saw the young woman behind the counter do an almost comedic double take as the long-lost-friends reunion took an unexpected detour.

Claire pulled herself up, throwing back her shoulders, and I suddenly remembered how she’d always hated that I was so much taller than her. I fought an inexplicable impulse to slouch.

‘Claire, I—’

She shook her head, not allowing me to finish. She threw a glance towards the entrance and seemed relieved to see it empty.

‘Outside,’ she said, as though we were in a spaghetti Western and there was about to be a gunfight. I swallowed uncomfortably.

‘Look, Claire, there’s no need for us to be—’

She held up her hand, commanding silence, before disarmingly pasting a saccharine-sweet smile on her face that was entirely for the receptionist’s benefit.

‘Lily, please. Let’s go outside to talk, shall we?’

Claire didn’t wait for my reply, but spun on her heel, clearly expecting me to follow her. I did. She swept through the double glass doors, allowing them to swing shut in her wake. I imagined having them hit me in the face would have been an unexpected bonus.

She didn’t pause on the stone steps outside the care home but marched around the front of the building, taking us further away from the car park and other visitors.

‘Do you mind telling me what you’re doing here?’ she hissed.

‘I came to see Gordon,’ I said, pleased to hear that out of the two of us I sounded the calmest.

‘Why? My father is elderly and sick and doesn’t need to be bothered by unwelcome visitors.’

‘There was something I wanted to ask him. And I really don’t think seeing me bothered him. He didn’t seem to know who I was.’

‘He barely knows who *I* am,’ Claire shot back, which was so sad that unthinkingly I reached out a hand towards her.

She took a half-step back, looking genuinely horrified by the gesture.

Embarrassed, I let my arm fall back to my side before drawing in a deep breath and trying again.

‘Claire, can we please just talk for a moment?’

‘I have nothing to say to you, except “stay away from my father”.’ She turned, as though to stride away, but stopped to add, ‘No. Scratch that. Stay away from my entire family.’

We both knew who she was talking about.

‘That’s kind of the reason why I’m here today. It’s what I wanted to ask Gordon.’

Claire’s eyes widened until they were saucers of disbelief.

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’

‘I need to speak to Josh. It’s important.’

Claire shook her head as though she truly couldn’t believe what she’d just heard.

‘Well, he absolutely, one hundred per cent, does not need to speak to you. Not now. Not ever.’ No ambiguity there then, but had I really expected any different?

‘If I could just explain—’ I began. Claire shook her head and threw another glance back towards the care home.

‘What bit of “you’re not welcome here” don’t you get, Lily?’ she asked, her eyes narrowing. ‘My brother made it very clear to you six years ago that he never wanted to speak to you again.’

I felt my cheeks growing hot, despite the cool afternoon breeze. However badly that last conversation with Josh had gone, it stung that he’d apparently relayed it to her, word for word.

‘What happened between Josh and me is . . . between Josh and me,’ I said quietly. It was also between me and my late husband, but I had no intention of sharing that information with Claire.

‘Josh left me clear instructions that if you ever came looking for him, I wasn’t to tell you how to find him.’ She gave a small snort, as though that advice had been totally unnecessary. ‘So why don’t you go back to your husband and leave my brother in peace.’

It was the worst moment ever to feel the sting of tears in my eyes. ‘I’d love to do that, I really would, but I can’t because he died over a year ago.’

If I was expecting sympathy, I’d come to the wrong person, but she did at least look a little taken aback.

‘I didn’t know that.’

‘Yes. And maybe there are *other* things you don’t know either. Things that I need to talk to Josh about.’

Once again, she glanced towards the car park. The possibility that Claire might not have come to the care home alone had barely had the chance to form, when a man’s voice called out her name. My head shot up as a tall figure, hidden by the shadows of the building, began making his way across the gravel towards us.

My eyes went to Claire’s, and I thought I saw anxiety flicker within them. Was finding Josh really going to be this easy? But as the figure grew closer, I realised with disappointment that he was even taller than the man Claire called her brother, with the kind of bulging muscles you only get from spending hours each day in a gym. The stranger came to stand behind her, laying a hand roughly the size of a bear’s paw on her shoulder.

‘Everything okay, babe?’ he asked.

‘Yeah. All good. This woman was asking for directions, but she’s just realised she’s in totally the wrong place. Isn’t that right?’ Claire threw the challenge straight at me like a fast bowler.

I caught it squarely with a resigned nod of defeat.

‘Yes. I’m sorry to have bothered you.’

‘You haven’t bothered me at all,’ Claire said as she turned away, but not before throwing one final barb over her shoulder: ‘You never did.’



Fletcher was waiting with a wagging tail and a look of doggy reproach as I let myself into the flat. I reached for his lead, and we headed straight back down the stairs to the local park. While he did what he had to do, my thoughts kept circling back to the Claire I’d first met: a troubled teen who’d come to live with the Bakers two years after Josh had moved in.

It had been my first experience of ever being disliked, and her reaction towards me had been particularly venomous, as though everything about me annoyed her. Apparently, it still did. Back then I’d foolishly imagined that as we were the same age, she and I might become friends. But Claire had made it abundantly clear that was never going to happen.

Josh had been too loyal to ever reveal Claire’s backstory or how she’d ended up with the Bakers. Perhaps he didn’t even know why himself. But when I’d asked what I’d done to make her hate me, he’d told me to give her a

while to settle in and that she'd come from a bad situation.

'So did you, but you don't go around glaring daggers at me.'

Josh had grinned then, turning on the charm even at fifteen years of age.

'Ah, well that's different.'

It wasn't as though I hadn't tried to befriend the new arrival in the Baker household. But every attempt I made was thrown back in my face. When I stepped in to stop the school bullies teasing her about her surname, she'd rounded on me as though I was the one guilty of harassing her.

'I don't need anyone sticking up for me. And if I did, you'd be the last person I'd pick.'

But I kept on trying, because if Josh liked her, I knew there had to be something worth knowing beneath the angry, bitter, protective shell that Claire wore like armour. But my new neighbour had made it perfectly clear she had no desire to be my friend. It took me a long time to realise the biggest problem was Claire's jealousy of my close friendship with Josh. Perhaps, with hindsight, the fact that she had referred to him as her brother from day one should have given me a clue.

Much later, long after the Bakers and their foster charges had moved away, I wondered whether Josh had been the first person who Claire had ever allowed herself to care about, and in her eyes I was a threat to that. It made me uncomfortable to think she hated me purely because Josh didn't. But the thought had lodged in my head and stayed there for almost two decades.

The last time I'd seen Claire was at Janette's funeral, when I'd gone up to offer her my condolences. She had barely grunted an acknowledgement before turning away from me, but I'd put her reaction down to grief. And to be honest I'd been more preoccupied by the unexpected arrival of an attractive blonde at the crematorium, who loudly introduced herself to everyone as Josh's girlfriend. Curiously, he'd forgotten to mention her existence when he'd asked me to help him get through the day.

It would take a miracle, I realised, for Claire to change her mind and help me contact Josh, and miracles were something I no longer believed in.

Chapter Six

‘I can’t thank you enough for this, Lily.’

‘You already have. Many times,’ I said with a smile, raising my voice slightly as a bus rumbled past Raegan’s tiny maisonette. She lived on a busy road, and the morning rush hour traffic was still in full flow. It didn’t help that we were standing at least twelve feet apart, which I’m sure was twice the recommended distance.

‘Well, I owe you big-time for this one. This is above and beyond, and *not* what employers usually do for their staff.’ Her voice sounded scratchy, and her eyes were suspiciously bright, and I don’t think either of those symptoms was due to Covid.

‘Maybe not, but it *is* what friends do for each other,’ I said, desperately wanting to give her a hug, because she really looked like she needed one. Raegan had been talking about her parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary party for months. Family members and friends were travelling from all over the country for a huge celebration in their hometown of Berwick-upon-Tweed, and when Raegan had asked if we could make the cake for the party, I didn’t hesitate to say yes.

‘*I’ll pay, of course,*’ she’d insisted at the time, to which I’d mumbled something along the lines of ‘*We’ll see*’, knowing there was no way I’d let her do anything of the sort.

We’d finished icing the elaborate creation two days earlier, and even if I say so myself, I think we’d done a pretty amazing job. Apparently, Raegan’s parents hadn’t been able to afford a proper cake for their registry office wedding forty years ago, so we’d pulled out all the stops to create something truly spectacular for them.

‘*I’m going to drive as carefully as if I’m delivering nitroglycerine,*’ Raegan had joked, as together we’d loaded the cake into the back of her car.

But now, due to an outbreak of Covid in Polly’s class, which half the children *and* their parents had caught, neither Raegan nor her daughter were going to be driving up north after all. I was.

‘Poor Mum and Dad. They’re fated to never have a cake to celebrate getting hitched,’ Raegan had said sadly when she’d phoned the previous evening to let me know both she and Polly had tested positive.

I'd spent less than five seconds considering the logistics before telling her they'd still have the cake we'd worked on so hard together.

'I'll drive it up to them.'

'Lily, do you know how far away Northumberland is? Berwick-upon-Tweed is practically in Scotland.'

'I don't have to know, as long as Google Maps does,' I replied.

She threw more objections my way, but I kicked each one to the kerb. 'Look, it's the weekend, and I'd been toying with the idea of going away for a couple of days, anyway,' I said, crossing my fingers at the white lie. 'I've no plans that I need to rearrange, and the diary for next week is clear for a change. Besides, I've never been to that part of the country before. Fletcher and I can have a little mini break, walking along the beaches up there. They do have beaches, right?'

Raegan had laughed, which then turned into an ugly coughing fit. 'Bloody Covid,' she cursed, not for the first time, before adding, 'Yes. They have beaches, but you'll need to pack your thermal undies. It'll be freezing up there at this time of year.'

Now, the thump of small feet thundering down the maisonette stairs was quickly followed by a delighted shriek of 'Auntie Lily', as Raegan's flaxen-haired daughter shot through the front door towards me.

Raegan's reactions were quicker than a bodyguard's as she swept an arm around her daughter's waist, scooping her off her feet before she could hurtle into my arms.

'Sorry, pixie girl, you can't give Auntie Lily a hug. We don't want to make her sick too, do we?'

Polly's face fell, and if it hadn't been for my cake delivery mission, I'd probably have thought 'sod it' and hugged her anyway.

'I forgot I had bloody Covid,' she said sadly, looking stunned when Raegan and I burst out laughing.

'I warned you to clean up your language,' I said to Raegan, wiping tears of amusement from my eyes. Nothing and no one made me smile as much as my friend's young daughter. For a moment I felt the old, familiar ache of longing. If things had been different, perhaps I too could have been a mum by now.

I shook my head and repositioned that thought back to where it belonged, with all the other middle-of-the-night impossible dreams that broke my heart.

A volley of barking from the car alerted me that my travelling companion was growing impatient.

‘Fletcher,’ Polly said mournfully, as Raegan tightened her hold on her squirming offspring. I gave the little girl a sympathetic smile, because as much as she loved me . . . she loved my dog even more.

‘I’ll bring him round to see you when you’re both better,’ I promised.

Suitably mollified, Polly stood on the doorstep as Raegan retrieved a large flat box bearing the Cupcakes and Rainbows logo from her hallway. She carried it carefully down the path and set it on the ground halfway between the two of us before backing away sadly.

‘I’m so sorry you’re going to miss your family party,’ I said as I stooped to collect the box.

Raegan gave a shrug, but the disappointment was painted all over her face.

‘You know where you’ve got to go?’ she questioned one last time.

I nodded.

‘They’ll ask you to stay for the party. But take my advice, politely decline. My lot get a bit rowdy when they’ve had a few bevvies.’

I smiled. ‘Maybe that’s just the tonic I need.’

Raegan gave a small snort. ‘Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. If nothing else, stay away from Uncle Billy on the dance floor. He thinks he’s John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* and is downright dangerous.’ She mimed the film’s iconic dance move, and I stifled a giggle.

‘Drive safely, and once again, thank you so much. Have I said that before?’

‘Nah, I don’t think you have,’ I teased, securing the anniversary cake safely in the boot of the car. I straightened up and shivered slightly in the cool morning air.

‘This is nothing compared to what it’s like up north. Don’t forget to pack a warm coat,’ Raegan warned.

The advice was still ringing in my ears as I pulled into the morning traffic with Polly and her mum waving me off from their doorstep, as though I’d be away for months rather than just a few nights.



My weekend bag was where I’d left it in the hallway, beside a much larger

one containing Fletcher's supplies.

'You sure don't travel light, boy,' I muttered as I hefted the holdall containing kibble, food bowls and his favourite toys down the steps from the mansion-house flat and into the back of the car. Fletcher was pacing impatiently along the back seat, clearly anxious to be on our way. How he knew we were going anywhere more exciting than the vet was a mystery, but he was certainly keen to go. In a strange way, so was I. I'd delivered hundreds of cakes to customers over the years, yet there was an excitement to this trip that defied all explanation. Plus it would be a nice distraction from my failed attempt to find Josh. I'd had weeks to think of a new plan and had come up empty.

I refocused my mind on the six-hour drive ahead of me as I did one final check of the flat and reached for my warm, padded coat. But as I threw it over my arm, I noticed a mosaic pattern of dirty pawprints covering the fabric. I'd forgotten that Fletcher's last walk had ended with both of us looking as though we'd been mud-wrestling. There was no way I could wear the soiled coat, and my only other option was a much thinner jacket. *'It'll be freezing up there at this time of year,'* Raegan had warned, and I assumed she knew what she was talking about.

With a sigh I went from hallway to bedroom and opened the wardrobe doors on the far side of the room. There'd been days when I'd stood for worrying lengths of time in front of Adam's clothes, inhaling the lingering scent of him. I'd certainly put off clearing out his wardrobe far longer than the bereavement books said I should. It was the final wall to scale in the long process of saying goodbye, and although I knew it would feel like crawling over broken glass, I resolved to tackle the task when I got back from this mini break.

But right now, I was grateful I'd delayed, because it meant that Adam's thick cashmere coat was still hanging exactly where he'd left it, at the back of the closet. I pulled the navy garment from its hanger but resisted the urge to try it on. I already knew the warm woollen fabric would be more than a match for whatever weather Northumberland chose to throw at us.



'That has to be the bonniest cake I've ever seen.'

It was probably the fifth or sixth time Raegan's mum had said this, but

the joy on her face every time she took ‘another wee peek’ at her cake was in no danger of growing old.

‘And you say our Rae did this?’ asked my friend’s father, scratching first the stubble on his chin and then his not inconsiderable belly. It looked like he was already anticipating the first slice. I had no idea if the cake would arrive intact or minus a slice or two for the party the next day, but I’d done my bit – I’d got it from my home to theirs without mishap.

‘Yes, Raegan pretty much made it herself. I was more of an assistant.’ I had no qualms about switching the truth a little. It was worth it to see the pride in her parents’ eyes.

‘Are you sure you won’t stay for a bite to eat, Lily?’ Raegan’s mum pressed.

Yet again I shook my head. ‘I really should be going. I don’t want to be searching for my accommodation in the dark. But thank you again for the tea.’ I got to my feet, giving Fletcher a meaningful look where he was lying in front of the fire. He rose reluctantly, about as enthusiastic as I was to leave the warmth of the lounge and go back out into the cold. But the house was rapidly filling with visiting relatives for tomorrow’s party, and it was time we said our farewells.

‘Remember, you’re more than welcome to join us tomorrow, lass,’ urged Raegan’s father kindly. ‘I’m sure the hotel will bend their rules about dogs,’ he added uncertainly.

‘No. It’s very kind of you, but I think Fletcher and I are going to do some exploring of the area, and maybe even cross the border into Scotland, who knows? But I hope you all have a wonderful time.’



The one-room annexe I’d booked for the night was surprisingly cosy.

‘Have you and your precious pup got everything you need?’ the owner asked kindly.

‘Everything looks great, thank you. If you could direct me to the nearest beach, I’d like to take him for a walk before it gets dark.’

‘I can, pet, but you’d better wrap up warm or that wind will cut straight through you.’

‘Everyone is paranoid we’re going to get hypothermia,’ I told an unconcerned Fletcher as I wrangled him into the fleecy coat I’d bought for

him. It was like trying to put tights on an octopus, and by the time I'd done up the fasteners there was a thin film of perspiration on my upper lip. It almost made me think I didn't need Adam's warm coat after all, but I slipped it on nevertheless after clipping on Fletcher's lead.

Armed with directions, Fletcher and I headed for the beach. No sooner had we descended the steep stone steps that led to the sand than I realised why everyone had warned me about the weather. Even coddled inside the oversized cashmere coat, I could still feel the wind taking crafty nips at my exposed flesh.

We walked close to the water's edge, and I kept the pace brisk, for I was starting to lose all feeling in my cheeks as the North Sea wind blasted us relentlessly. I regretted not bringing gloves and thrust my hands deep into the pockets of Adam's coat, withdrawing the right one almost immediately when my finger encountered something sharp lodged at the bottom. I sucked the tiny bead of blood from a papercut on my fingertip before pulling out the culprit: a tightly folded square of paper. It was too dark to read whatever was on it, but the thought that I might have found one last note in Adam's handwriting made me slide it back. Finding items like this was growing rarer as the months passed, and even if this was some long-forgotten shopping list or reminder, it was still worth saving.



It wasn't a shopping list or a reminder. It wasn't even something Adam had written himself, I realised with disappointment, as I sat down with a welcome hot drink in my annexe room and unfolded the sheet.

My first reaction was surprise. The page appeared to be one Adam had downloaded from the internet, but for the life of me I couldn't work out why.

'Wildwood Furniture,' I murmured, causing an exhausted Fletcher to briefly open one eye to see if I was addressing him. I gave him a quick head scratch before returning my attention to the printout. Most of the page was taken up with photographs of handcrafted pieces of rustic furniture. They looked beautifully made, but they would have stuck out like a sore thumb among the modern décor of our flat. I had no idea why Adam had been thinking about buying one of these pieces, but he must have been considering it, for there was a big loopy tick scrawled on the top right-hand corner of the sheet.

I was on the point of setting my curious find aside, but something about the images on the page stopped me. I traced the outline of one photograph with my fingertip. There was something about the style and shape of the piece that reminded me of something. I took a large mouthful of tea and then almost choked as the answer occurred to me mid-swallow.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ I said to absolutely no one as I jumped from the armchair and took the sheet to the table lamp. I *had* seen that dresser before – or one identical to it. It had been in Gordon’s room at the care home.

‘It’s just a coincidence,’ I said, peering closely at the photograph while trying to deny the evidence of my own eyes. But now there was a new thought buzzing insistently like a trapped wasp in my head. Hadn’t I seen *another* piece of furniture like this somewhere?

Grateful for my last-minute decision to bring my laptop, I could feel my impatience ratcheting up with every sluggish minute it took to fire up.

It had been a while since I’d last checked out her Instagram page, and after our frosty encounter at the care home, there was every chance Claire had gone through her many followers and blocked me. My only hope was that she didn’t know my married name or that I’d be lost among the thousands of people who followed her fashion blog.

The question I probably should have been asking was *why* I’d ever looked her up online in the first place. Had it been just casual curiosity, or had I secretly been hoping that one day I’d see a face I recognised in one of her posts? A face I’d not seen in real life for six years.

Claire posted regularly, but it didn’t take long scrolling through the selfies to find what I was looking for. The airy hallway was one of her favourite locations for modelling outfits, and sure enough there she was, in a dress that showed off boobs a little too perfect to be a gift from nature. But it wasn’t Claire’s impressive cleavage that caught my attention; it was another kind of chest altogether: a large wooden one that she was perched on. I picked up the sheet of paper from Adam’s pocket and held it beside my laptop screen. The chest was a perfect match to one sold by Wildwood Furniture, just like the piece in Gordon’s room had been.

Why did Adam have the details of a handcrafted-furniture designer buried in his coat pocket? And why did my former neighbours both own pieces from the same company?

Suddenly my knees felt weak, and I lowered myself on to the bed as a new thought occurred to me. What if that tick at the top of the page wasn’t a

tick at all? What if it was actually a letter? The letter J . . . for Josh.

I dropped the piece of paper as though it had scorched my fingers.

'I want you to find Josh and fix things with him,' Adam had said to me in his final hours. He'd made me promise that I would locate my former friend and *'Listen to what he has to say.'* But even while he'd been extracting that promise from me, Adam must have suspected that I wouldn't try too hard to find him. Was that why he'd left me this clue in a place I was sure to find it when I went through his things?

'It would have been easier if you'd just written his contact details on our kitchen whiteboard, hon,' I said, closing my eyes and visualising the jotter beside the fridge, where Adam's scrawled reminder that we were out of coffee had sat for the last fourteen months.

With a heavy sigh I reached again for my laptop and typed in the website address for Wildwood Furniture. The site was infuriatingly vague. There was no address, no showroom to visit or owner's name. There wasn't even a mobile phone number to call. Who would run a business with such sketchy contact details? Maybe someone who didn't want to be found.

My brow furrowed as I read through the web page for a fourth time. I had no interest in buying one of the 'handcrafted bespoke items' that had been created in a 'remote forest workshop', but there was something about the phraseology that sounded vaguely familiar. Was I putting two and two together and coming up with a number more improbable than four? But somehow I didn't think I was wrong. Finding this clue to Josh's whereabouts – if that's what it was – felt like serendipity. As though Adam had purposefully led me to this point. *I guess you really do want me to go through with this,* I thought with resignation as I clicked on the Contact Us link.

I couldn't remember Josh ever expressing a desire to be a furniture maker, but he *had* always been creative and was forever carving something out of wood with that old penknife of his. I could still recall the rough cuts on his fingers whenever he'd take my hand to help me climb on to our treetop platform. Working with wood calmed him down, made him less restless, he used to say. Did it still?

'There's only one way to find out,' I murmured as I keyed my email address into the box on the screen. My fingers hesitated for a moment before finally beginning to type.

Josh, I realise I'm probably the last person you ever

wanted or expected to hear from again, but I really need to speak to you. Lily.

Chapter Seven

The sweep of the wipers across the windscreen sounded grainy. There was no denying that the rain, which had turned to sleet after I set off, had now mutated to snow. I cast a worried look at Fletcher on the back seat, who was pacing between the windows, steaming up the glass with his breath.

‘Sit down, boy,’ I said, automatically tightening my grip on the steering wheel as I felt the tyres begin to slip on the tarmac.

I should have listened to the weather reports. But I’d been in such a hurry to check out of the B&B and get on the road that I hadn’t even thought to check. It didn’t help hearing the radio announcer confirm that the Met Office was advising drivers north of the border to ‘only venture out if their journey is absolutely necessary’.

‘It is necessary,’ I said, my words ricocheting around the warm interior of the car like a challenge. ‘In fact, it’s vital. I have a promise I need to keep.’



I’d sent three messages to Wildwood Furniture, but none had been answered. Of course, not every small business checked their inbox regularly, and it *was* the weekend after all, but once the suspicion that I was being ghosted got stuck in my head it was hard to shake off. They *were* being read and deliberately ignored. And if they’d never heard of anyone called Josh Metcalf, why not message back and let me know?

However badly things had ended between us, Josh and I had enjoyed *years* of friendship before we’d argued . . . as well as a couple of moments when things had almost spilt over into something more. If he was ghosting me now, when I was clearly anxious to speak to him, it was proof those old wounds hadn’t healed at all.

Hours later, as I’d teetered on the edge of sleep, I’d realised there was a simpler way to find out if Josh owned Wildwood Furniture. The idea catapulted me upright in bed and had me once again reaching for my laptop.

I might still be barking up the wrong tree, I thought, smiling at my own pun as I keyed the business name into the search box on the Companies House website, where information on every business registered in the UK

was lodged. Wildwood Furniture popped up straight away. I grinned in triumph as I clicked on the People tab and the name of the man who seemed determined to ignore me appeared on my computer screen. Josh Metcalf was the sole officer of the company, but more interestingly, it gave his address.

The plan came to me at two a.m. and I tussled with it for a while, but by six o'clock my mind was made up. Josh's business was based in Scotland, and from the maps I'd been following all day, he was only a few hours' drive from where I was staying. I'm sure somewhere Logical Me was screaming out all the reasons why I shouldn't be doing this, but for once I tuned her out. There was a reason Fate had conspired to place me practically on Josh's doorstep after all these years.



Yesterday's motorway journey had been long and boring, but today as my phone directed me off the well-gritted surfaces of the major routes and on to lesser-travelled roads, I found myself missing the comfort of surrounding traffic – I even missed the continual spray of passing lorries.

'You can do this. You like driving,' I reminded myself as I turned my car towards an even more remote area on the map. It had been over an hour since I'd seen another vehicle, and the roads had grown narrower and more twisty.

Why Josh had moved to Scotland was a mystery, and living so far off the beaten track, he probably had to drive for miles to see another human being. This is exactly what teenage Josh had done whenever he was hurt or in pain; he'd cut himself off from everyone. It had taken the love and patience of a caring foster family, and maybe, just maybe, the friendship of a young girl who lived next door, to make him whole again.

Had what happened between Josh and me six years ago been a factor in his decision to live like a recluse? I shivered at the wheel, and it had nothing to do with the temperature outside the car, which my dashboard now informed me was below zero.

As the driving conditions continued to worsen, my confidence began to waver. A couple of minor skids had really scared me, but I didn't lose control; the tyres on my car were too new and expensive to let that happen. I sent up a silent thank you to Adam, because the promise I'd made him had kept me safe. I only hoped every promise he'd extracted from me turned out

to be such a good idea.

The journey was taking longer than anticipated, and I bit my lip worriedly every time extra minutes were added to my expected arrival. I'd booked an Airbnb for Fletcher and me to stay in that night, in a village over an hour's drive from Wildwood Furniture, which had been the closest place I could find.

I peered through the windscreen at the grey, snow-heavy sky. I realised dusk would fall hard and fast here, and the thought of travelling these slippery roads in total darkness was beginning to scare me.

I briefly considered turning back, before realising with a sigh that continuing was my best option at this point. I'd made a commitment, not only to Adam but also to myself.

My eyes were tired from continually darting between the map on my phone screen and the mesmerising fall of snowflakes which the wind was whipping into horizontal flurries. Phone signal in this area was clearly patchy, because mine had dropped out a few times. I added panic at being lost in the middle of nowhere to the list of things I now needed to worry about.

Finally, my phone chirped up with an instruction to turn right in fifty metres. I slowed the car to a crawl and saw a gap in the hedgerow. Beside it was a small signpost, almost obliterated by snow-laden foliage, confirming this was 'Private Woodland' and adding 'No Entry' for good measure.

'Not exactly welcoming, Josh,' I muttered as I pulled hard on the wheel to make the turn. The car bumped and jerked in protest on to the unpaved road. Around me the forest was dense and tall, but at least it shielded me from some of the falling snow. The lane twisted and turned in hairpin bends, and when I glanced at my phone the map had gone and the screen was terrifyingly blank. All I could do was keep following the unmade road and hope I was still heading in the right direction.

Reaching the clearing took me by surprise. One minute I was in the middle of a forest and the next the darkness from the trees was lifted as I drove into a large area which had been cleared of tall firs. There were two buildings here. One was a single-storey cabin-style lodge with a wraparound porch, which reminded me of saloon bars in old Westerns. On the far side of the clearing was another, much larger building which appeared to be a workshop. From within it I could hear the faint buzz of an electric saw. I switched off the engine, with fingers that I noticed were shaking.

Fletcher had jumped to his feet the moment we'd come to a stop, and I could feel his breath hot on the back of my neck as he looked through the windscreen. No doubt he too was wondering why on earth his owner had brought him here.

'At least I know we've arrived at the right place,' I told him, as I unclipped his harness and peered at the words 'Wildwood Furniture' that had been carved into a beam above the open barn doors. I was still looking at the opening when a figure appeared within it.

He was staring in the direction of my car with a fierce scowl on his face. Was this how he greeted all his visitors? Slowly, feeling like I was one hundred years old, my hand went to the door handle.

Josh had changed since the last time I'd seen him. His hair was longer now, falling across his forehead and into his eyes. He was also leaner and yet curiously broader than he had been. He looked muscled and strong and right now incredibly pissed off, as he strode out into the falling snow and headed towards my car. He was wearing jeans and a thin T-shirt, but didn't appear to feel the cold, whereas I was shivering like crazy. But that could have been nerves. My legs felt far from steady when I asked them to support me for the first time in hours as I climbed out of the car.

'What are you doing here?'

It was virtually the same greeting he'd given me twenty years ago, when I'd climbed up to join him in the Bakers' tree.

'Hello, Josh,' I said quietly.

'I mean it, Lily. Go away.'

I hadn't exactly expected a warm reception, but the hostility in his eyes, his voice, in every single fibre of his body, shook me a little. For a man who'd once claimed to love me, he certainly seemed to hate me right now.

I gave a small, nervous laugh. 'I was just in the area, so I thought I'd pop in and say hi.'

Humour had definitely been the wrong way to go, and the tightening of his jaw and the angry glitter in his eyes lit a flare of fury within me.

'I messaged you yesterday, Josh. Three times.'

I fully expected him to deny all knowledge of my attempts to contact him, so it was a bit of a shock when he replied, 'I know. I ignored them all.'

'That was rude,' I couldn't help shooting back.

'Perhaps it was my way of telling you that I didn't want to speak to you. Something I'm pretty sure I made perfectly clear several years ago.'

He was breathing harder and faster now, as though he'd been running, and yet nothing about him had moved. He was like a statue, standing there with his arms crossed, his body language so eloquent he had no need to confirm in words that I wasn't welcome here.

From behind me in the car I heard the scrabble of claws against glass. Fletcher had jumped into the front seat and was trying to get out.

'Can I let him out?' I asked, nodding towards the car.

'No,' Josh replied, shaking his head as though he couldn't believe I'd had the nerve to ask such a thing.

I ignored him and sprung open the door. A very grateful Fletcher headed straight to the bushes to relieve himself. It had been a long time since we'd last stopped and it occurred to me that I was in similar need of a bathroom.

'Look, I know my presence here isn't exactly welcome,' I began.

'You don't say,' Josh interjected with a sardonic note that I'd never heard in his voice before.

'But I really do need to speak to you.'

'We have nothing to say to each other. We said it all six years ago.'

Finished with his business, Fletcher bounded up and went straight to Josh. He was always the most sociable dog in any park I took him to, with an almost pathological need to befriend everyone. He wasn't used to being ignored and clearly couldn't comprehend why the man standing before him had no desire to pet him. That made me even angrier. Josh could be as rude as he liked to me, but blanking Adam's dog was a step too far.

'Look, do you think we could get out of the snow and go inside for a minute?'

'No,' Josh said. It seemed to be his new favourite word.

'I have been driving for many hours to get here—'

'That was entirely your decision, not mine,' he pointed out.

I ignored him. 'I've been stuck in that car for a very long time, and I need to pee. Quite badly, in fact. So, it looks like we have two choices: I could do it out here in the bushes like my dog, or you could be a decent human being and invite me into your house.'

For one dreadful moment I thought he was going to go with option a), but thankfully he hadn't lost all memory of how to interact with people.

'Five minutes. That's all you can have. Then you need to climb into your car, turn around, and head back to wherever it was you came from.'

He spun on his heel and strode towards the cabin with Fletcher and me

trotting behind. The front door opened into a surprisingly spacious hallway. The walls were lined with wood, and it reminded me of a ski lodge where Adam and I had stayed for our second anniversary.

‘Bathroom is down the hall on the right,’ Josh said curtly, turning in the opposite direction towards a room that appeared to be the kitchen.

More than his abrasive manner and lack of social graces, the shelves in the bathroom confirmed that Josh lived alone. A solitary toothbrush sat in a mug by the basin and the toiletries on the shelf were sparse. There was a single comb and a razor on a glass shelf, and none of the clutter that graced my own ensuite. The room was clean, the towels smelled fresh, but there was something incredibly lonely about it.

Very aware that the clock was ticking on the five minutes I’d been allowed, I washed my hands and tried to stop my eyes from straying to that lone toothbrush.

As I headed down the corridor, I could hear Josh’s voice and wondered if he was on the phone. *Probably calling the police to have me forcibly removed from his property*, I thought with a wry twist of my lips.

But I was wrong. Although Josh instantly clammed up at the sound of my footsteps, I realised he must have been talking to Fletcher from the way the dog’s tail was still waving back and forth. On the floor beside my pet was a large bowl of water, which Fletcher bent to lap from eagerly. That pulled a thread in me that I really didn’t want to be tugged on right then.

‘All done?’ Josh asked brusquely. ‘You need to be heading off now.’

I looked at him for a long moment, this stranger wearing my old friend’s face. Had I done this? Was I the reason he was now a granite facsimile of the person I used to know?

‘If it’s not too much trouble, could I also have some water before you evict me?’

His lips tightened, but he reached for a glass on the draining board.

‘And if it’s at all possible, could you heat it up and throw in a tea bag and some milk?’ The one thing we had always shared was a sense of humour, and for just a millisecond I thought I glimpsed an incoming smile, before the ice in his veins froze it out.

‘I’m not turning this into a social occasion, Lily. You need to leave.’

‘I will. But surely after all the years we’ve known each other, you can spare me the time it takes for the kettle to boil?’

‘I’d rather not,’ he said, his voice dour, but he reached for the appliance

and began filling it.

‘Thank you,’ I said softly.

‘Don’t thank me.’ His voice was gruff. ‘Just drink your tea and go.’

Unaware he was acting like a traitor, Fletcher inched closer to Josh’s legs, his tail beating out a tattoo on the wooden floor. Absently, Josh reached down and rubbed the dog’s head. Truly that animal had no loyalty. Adam would be positively spinning in his grave if he saw this. The thought brought me back to the present with the force of a slap.

I wasn’t here for tea, or small talk, or an afternoon of *Do you remember when . . .* ? We hadn’t left things in a good place six years ago, and it was foolish of me to have thought that the intervening years would have changed anything.

‘Adam died.’

I hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that. I hadn’t known the words were even in my head until I saw the stiffening of Josh’s shoulders as he reached for a mug from the cupboard. He extracted one – not two, I noticed – and set it down carefully on the worktop before turning slowly to face me.

‘I know.’

‘How? How do you know? Who told you?’

There was a ghost of a smile on his lips that held no humour at all.

‘I saw it online. I’m not completely cut off from civilisation out here. I do have internet and phone contact with the outside world.’ I felt a blush colouring my cheeks that I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop.

‘That’s not what I meant. I was wondering why you’d bothered keeping tabs on Adam . . . or me,’ I added, my voice fading away to a whisper.

‘I didn’t. But Adam messaged me about eighteen months ago. Said we needed to talk.’

‘What? Why did he contact you? What did he want to talk about?’

Josh gave a very eloquent shrug. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You never asked?’

‘I never replied.’

My embarrassed blush turned into a flush of pure anger. Eighteen months ago, Adam had already known he was dying. He’d reached out to Josh, for God knows what reason, and my bastard of a friend – ex-friend, a voice in my head immediately corrected – couldn’t even be arsed to reply to him.

I shook my head, my heart no longer sympathetic to Josh and his

isolated existence. 'I don't know who you are anymore.'

That arrow hit home. I saw him flinch from it, even though he tried to hide it.

'There's no need for you to. We're not part of each other's worlds any longer.' He paused, and then surprised me by adding, 'But for what it's worth, I was sorry to hear about Adam. He was far too young to die.'

Of all the times I'd never wanted to cry about losing my husband, this had to be the worst moment to feel the burn of tears stinging my eyes. I acknowledged his words with a slight nod of my head, and then tried to hide my surprise when he poured in exactly the right amount of milk and the correct number of sugars I took before passing me the mug. I'm not sure why I felt something stir in me just because, after all these years, he still remembered how I took my tea. But it made me think that somewhere beneath this arctic exterior, the old Josh I'd known still lived on.

'I'm here today because of a promise I made to Adam,' I told him. 'One of the last things he asked me to do was to find you.'

'Why?'

That was a very good question. I'd had an entire year to ponder it, and I still didn't have an answer.

'I was hoping you'd be able to tell me that.'

I saw the shutters coming down in his dark brown eyes.

'I have no idea. Whatever the reason, he's sent you on a wild goose chase.'

'Adam told me that I didn't know the whole story. That I should ask you what happened.'

Josh gave a shrug that tried to appear disinterested. 'I have no idea what he was talking about.' He turned his eyes towards the window. Perhaps he was checking the weather, or perhaps he didn't want to risk that I might still be able to read what he was thinking from his eyes.

His gaze was fixed on the falling snow when I added, 'He also said that I had to forgive you . . . and forgive him.'

Josh's hand tightened on the worktop. I saw the knuckles turn white, but his voice gave nothing away. 'I really don't know anything about whatever it was he was talking about. Perhaps he wasn't thinking straight at the time.'

It was a knife that slid straight into my heart. 'Adam knew what he was saying. He was lucid right up to the end. He did everything in his power to stay with me. This . . .'

 I waved my hand between us, indicating our

unwanted reunion. ‘This was important to him for some reason, and I drove all this way because he wanted you to tell me something.’

I thought for a moment I was reaching him. His tongue unconsciously ran over his lower lip as though it was suddenly dry, while a muscle beside his eye began to twitch.

‘There is nothing I *have* to tell you, Lily. Nothing. You’ve had a long journey for no good reason. We could have sorted all of this out on the phone.’

‘Yes, well, that would have required you to actually answer my messages, wouldn’t it?’ I challenged.

‘Touché,’ Josh said, with yet another ghost of a smile.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the windows. The lodge appeared to be solidly constructed, but it was still being battered by the elements.

‘You really need to leave right now, Lily,’ he said, sounding almost human as a tinge of concern crept into his voice. ‘The storm is getting worse. I’m surprised you ignored the forecasts and set out in it in the first place.’

‘I didn’t listen to them,’ I admitted, feeling foolish.

Josh shook his head in disbelief and began walking towards the door. Clearly, I was expected to follow him. I did, slipping my fingers beneath Fletcher’s collar and tugging him along.

‘Where are you heading?’ Josh asked, pausing at the front door to pluck a padded jacket from a hook.

I named the village with the Airbnb I’d booked, and then frowned as I saw Josh slip his arms into the warm jacket.

‘I’ll follow you down the track and back on to the lane until you reach the main road again.’

‘No, you won’t,’ I said, pulling my car keys from my pocket. ‘I don’t need some eleventh-hour act of chivalry from you. You don’t want me here. Fine. You don’t want to talk to me. Also fine. But you don’t get to play protective hero. I’m perfectly capable of finding my own way back.’

‘Are you? What if your phone loses signal?’

‘It won’t,’ I said with totally misplaced conviction.

‘It happens out here all the time in severe storms. The mast has a habit of coming down in bad weather. And this storm is predicted to be one of the worst we’ve had in years. Which you’d know if you’d bothered to listen to the forecasts.’

I narrowed my eyes, and wondered if he could feel the flames shooting

out of them.

‘You’ve made your point, Josh. There’s no need to rub it in. And there’s *definitely* no need to follow my car. If you won’t talk to me . . . well, then there’s nothing more I want from you.’

I stepped on to the veranda and was almost catapulted straight back into him with the force of the wind. He was right. The storm had intensified in the short time I’d been there. My body bowed into the wind as I fought my way through the falling snow to my car. I flung open the car door and whistled to get Fletcher’s attention. He was still sitting in the doorway of the cabin, which was looking remarkably cosy and appealing from my current position in the middle of swirling snowflakes and biting wind.

‘Fletcher! Come on.’ My dog’s reluctance to join me felt like the final straw. Normally he couldn’t leap into the car fast enough. It took three more attempts before he finally ran at speed across the clearing and jumped into the back seat. I fastened his harness quickly before he changed his mind.

Josh was now standing beside my car, looking not at me, but at the darkening skies.

‘Wait. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to leave right now. This storm is worse than I realised. You’d better come back inside.’

I tightened my grip on the driver’s door, which the wind was trying to tug from my hold. ‘Josh, nothing – I repeat, nothing – could induce me to return to your home. You’ve made it perfectly clear that you don’t want me here, so now I’m going.’ I climbed into the car and reached for the seat belt. I clicked it into place and went to pull the door shut, but he had a firm hold on it.

‘I don’t want you to go.’

For just a moment his words affected me in a truly visceral way, because it made it sound like he cared, but I knew from his actions that he didn’t.

‘Careful,’ I warned. ‘You’ll get whiplash from changing your mind that fast.’

‘I’m not joking, Lily. Get out of the car. It’s not safe to drive in these conditions.’

‘Well, that’s my decision to make. Not yours. You wanted me to leave and now I’m leaving. And the quicker you remove your hand from my door, the quicker I can reach my destination and you can forget all about me. Again.’ I didn’t know why that last word had come out so plaintive. That

certainly hadn't been my intention.

'I never forgot about you.' Josh looked shocked, as though the words had escaped unbidden.

This wasn't a conversation I wanted to have. Not now, in the middle of a raging blizzard. Not ever, in fact.

'Try,' I said, yanking on the door handle and somehow managing to pull it from his grasp. 'And don't follow me,' I added, seconds before slamming the door shut.

My tyres skidded on the snowy ground as I put the wheel on full lock and accelerated faster than I should have done out of the clearing.

'This was *not* one of your better ideas, my love,' I told the Adam who lived on in my head and was always happy to hear whatever I had to say. Unlike the man who I could still see in my rear-view mirror, who was standing in the blizzard, staring after my car until the red of my brake lights was swallowed up by the forest.

Chapter Eight

Realising I'd made a colossal mistake wasn't something that occurred to me gradually after driving away from Josh's home. I *knew* it was a bad decision before I'd even left the clearing. Despite the quality of its tyres, my car was under a double assault, skidding on the slippery surface of the track and being buffeted by strong winds whistling through the gaps in the trees. It was only mid-afternoon, but already it was as dark as dusk. When I entered the forest, the tall trees immediately stole the last of the daylight. Even on main beam I was struggling to see where the track ended and the undergrowth began.

The wind was vicious, tearing twigs and leaves from the trees and hurling them at my car. Some sounded as loud as bullets as they hit the metal panels. When a branch was suddenly ripped from a tree up ahead, I only just managed to swerve and avoid it – a manoeuvre I instantly regretted when the back of my car began to fantail into a skid.

'Go into a skid, don't fight it,' I could remember my dad once telling me, but we'd been on a tarmacked road at the time, and I had no idea if the same rules applied on an unmade surface.

My attention was on regaining control of my car and keeping it away from the ominous-looking ditch that ran along one side of the road, so I missed the exact moment when I lost phone signal. One minute my mobile had been displaying a map to get out of the forest, and the next it was totally blank.

With more luck than skill I brought the car to a standstill. 'Nooo,' I cried, plucking my phone from its mount and staring at it desperately, in case sheer force of will might make it light up again. On its screen were the two words no one ever wants to see on their mobile: *No Signal*.

Fletcher gave a fearful whimper from the back seat, clearly picking up on my panic. The sensible thing to do would be to return to Josh's cabin. The *really* sensible thing would have been to never have embarked on this journey in the first place. I peered through the sweep of the wiper blades. The snow was falling thicker and faster, settling in wind-driven drifts on either side of the lane. The track was too narrow for me to turn the car around, so as much as I hated to admit it, my safest option was to keep going.

Without your phone?

Without knowing in which direction you should be heading?

They were very good questions, but I chose to ignore them.

‘We’ll be fine,’ I told my anxious back-seat companion. But somehow, I didn’t think even my dog believed the lie.

I drove on slowly for a further fifteen minutes, trying to remember how long the inward journey had taken. It was getting much harder to ignore the niggling feeling that I ought to have been back on the lane by now. Were there other tracks running through these woods? Had I taken the wrong one and got myself lost in the forest? As a child, ‘Hansel and Gretel’ had been my favourite fairy tale, but it was far less appealing to find myself living it out in real life.

My hands were white-knuckled and starting to cramp from gripping the steering wheel. I removed one to hurriedly wipe my eyes, which were watering from the effort of staring into the blizzard. I refused to accept those tears had anything to do with Josh and how he’d reacted to seeing me again. From now on, he was as dead to me as I clearly was to him.

It was an unfortunate last thought to have in my head before a bad situation got significantly worse.

Above the banshee screech of the wind came a noise that my town-dweller brain couldn’t identify. It sounded like a thundering locomotive. Beneath my tyres I felt the ground shudder. Stupidly, I was still thinking, *Earthquake?* when the view through my windscreen was suddenly filled with the terrifying sight of an enormous tree crashing down less than thirty feet ahead of me.

Instinctively I stamped on the brakes. From that moment everything seemed to slow down, all except for my heart rate which was currently cramming more beats into a minute than it had ever achieved before.

I seemed to have all the time in the world to realise that braking hard had been the worst thing I could have done, as my wheels locked and I lost control of the car. It skidded forward on the ice, the fallen tree growing larger and larger in my windscreen as we careened towards it. I braced myself for the inevitable impact, only to see a new danger up ahead. The car was no longer travelling in a straight line but was veering towards the edge of the track . . . and the ditch.

It was a graceful accident, if such a thing existed. One minute we were on the track, and the next we were at a forty-five-degree angle in the ditch. However elegant it might have looked, the car had still jerked and bumped

roughly when we'd come off the track. My right shoulder collided with the driver's door and the side of my head connected painfully with the window.

But the ditch had achieved what the brakes could not: it had stopped the car. We weren't a crumpled concertina of metal, pretzelled around the tree. Ignoring the pain in my head and shoulder, I scrambled around in my seat, desperate to check on Fletcher. *Please, not Adam's dog. Please, don't let anything have happened to him.* With one arm braced on the dashboard I swivelled around to check. Fletcher was huddled in one corner of the tilted seat, wide-eyed and trembling. I reached over and gently touched his face and was rewarded with a swift and tentative lick. Some of my fear subsided, as I quickly ran my hands over him and he didn't flinch at my touch. I sent up a silent thank you that we'd bought the top-of-the-range dog safety harness, which I'd joked at the time looked more like a Kevlar vest. *'You never know,'* Adam had said. And remembering his words was all that it took. The sobs that followed were gut-wrenching, like the ones I'd cried over a year ago in this same car, when I'd left the hospice knowing nothing would ever be the same again.

But you didn't hit the tree, Lily. You're shaken up, but neither of you are hurt. You're alright. Even in the worst of times, I could always rely on Adam's voice to reassure me. And he didn't fail me now.

Gradually my sobs subsided, and that's when the cold terror slid home. We were in the middle of a forest, in a raging blizzard, with no car and no phone signal.

Fletcher and I were in big, big trouble. And I had no idea how to get us out of it.



I saw the headlights first, dazzling me in the rear-view mirror as I struggled to release myself from the imprisoning seat belt. They grew brighter, slicing through the falling snow and lighting up the forest around us. The vehicle came to a stop, and even above the shrieking wind I heard the pounding of feet on compacted snow and a voice calling my name. The door on the passenger side, which was now curiously above me, was wrenched open, and a flashlight beam, as bright as a search light, raked the interior of my car. I winced as it hit my eyes.

'Lily.' I'd heard Josh say my name a thousand times – in amusement, in

disbelief, even in anger – but I'd never heard that particular thread of desperation running through it before. 'Are you alright?'

I opened my mouth, but shock and relief had stolen my voice. I managed a shaky nod.

'Thank God,' he muttered. 'When I saw the tree, and the tracks in the snow . . . ' His voice trailed away and I glanced at the fallen oak, realising how easily my car could have been beneath it when it came crashing down.

'Are you hurt?' Josh asked, this time running the torch slowly down my body.

'No, I'm just shaken up,' I said in a quivering whisper.

'That makes two of us,' he said, not far enough beneath his breath for me not to have heard. 'I never meant to let you get so far ahead, but I had to stop twice to haul fallen branches off the track.'

'But I told you not to follow me,' I said.

'Yeah, well, luckily for you I'm crap at taking orders.' He finished his visual assessment and seemed satisfied that all my limbs were intact and still functioning. 'Next time you say something dumb I'm not even going to *pretend* to listen to you.'

'What makes you think there'll be a next time?'

For the first time I caught a glimpse of the smile I remembered. 'We've known each other for twenty years, Lily. Sooner or later one of us *always* says something dumb. This time it was you.'

I was still struggling with how to respond when Josh leant further into the car and released the seat belt which my trembling fingers had been struggling to undo.

'Let's continue this discussion back at the cabin,' he said, extending his hand towards me. A kaleidoscope of memories of Josh reaching down through leaves and branches to haul me up time-travelled from the Bakers' back garden to the present.

'I thought I wasn't welcome there.'

He sighed heavily. 'You're not. I still don't want you under my roof, but you've left me with no choice.'

There were at least a dozen snarky retorts all jostling for pole position on the tip of my tongue, but I silenced them all. I might have been obstinate, but I wasn't stupid. This wasn't the time to bite the hand that was attempting to rescue me, albeit reluctantly.

'Okay. But can we get Fletcher out first, please? He's really scared.'

Josh reached into the back seat and gently ruffled Fletcher's floppy ears, as though in apology.

'Those with *two* legs get out first,' he said, his voice deceptively calm . . . unless you knew him well enough to know when he was worried about something. Surprisingly, it appeared that I still did. I saw him glance upwards at the surrounding trees as though in casual interest, and the way he instantly stiffened when a long, creaking groan was heard. *This time*, even I was able to identify the sound.

We were still in danger. If one tree could come crashing down in the storm, so could others.

'Give me your hand, Lily,' Josh instructed, his voice tight with concern.

I did as he asked, placing my palm against his, a position that felt both familiar and totally strange. Josh must have removed his heavy coat to drive, and in his haste to reach my car, hadn't put it back on. The t-shirt he was wearing was plastered to his body. He must have been freezing, because I felt tremors running through his forearm as his muscles contracted. The tendons stood out like cords as he hauled me out of the car. My feet skidded on the icy track as he set me back down on them, and if his hands hadn't been fastened about my wrists I would certainly have fallen.

Josh's arm came around my shoulders as he attempted to steer me towards his waiting Land Rover.

'No,' I insisted, digging my feet in metaphorically, because doing so physically was frankly impossible. 'You have to get Fletcher.' I'd seen the look on my dog's face when he'd thought I was abandoning him.

'After you're safely inside the car,' Josh said, propelling me towards the vehicle which he'd leapt from so rapidly, the door was still wide open and the engine running. 'I promise I'll go back for him, Lily.'

After a tortured moment of hesitation, I allowed myself to be bundled into the front seat of the Land Rover, my hands reaching eagerly towards the warm air spilling from its vents. Through the parallel beams of Josh's headlights, I watched him run back to my car and climb inside. He disappeared long enough for me to run through several new catastrophes, all of which involved more falling trees and serious crush injuries.

It could only have been a minute or two before Josh reappeared, carrying Fletcher tightly in his arms. He strode through the snow towards me, cradling the terrified animal against his chest, and I knew that for this alone it was going to be much harder to keep hating him for cutting me out of his life.

Fletcher was hardly a lap-size dog, but the need to hold him close outweighed the discomfort. I buried my face in his thick dark fur, breathing in the smell of him and something altogether more precious. There was a unique bond that Fletcher and I shared. We were the only ones who could remember with total recall the touch of a hand that was no longer here to caress us.

I expected Josh to jump straight back into the driver's seat, but he surprised me with a question. 'Do you have a bag with you?'

'You mean like a handbag?' I asked stupidly, wondering if I might have hit my head harder than I realised.

'I was thinking more along the lines of a suitcase.'

'Why do I need that?'

'Because no one is getting out of this forest for a while. Not until someone with a tractor can get here to move that tree.' The furrows on Josh's brow told me he was almost as unhappy with this situation as I was. 'Bag?' he prompted.

'There are two in the boot,' I said, my thoughts spinning like tyres on ice.

I waited until he returned and had tossed the holdalls on to the back seat.

'I can't stay at the cabin with you, Josh.'

'Why not?' he asked, shutting the driver's door with a little more force than was required.

'Because we don't like each other anymore and . . . and it wouldn't . . . it wouldn't be right.' *And because this definitely wasn't what my late husband had in mind when he sent me on this mission.*

'Believe me, Lily, it's not exactly what I'd call ideal either.'

The Josh who'd angrily told me to leave seemed to be waging an inner battle with the one who'd just rescued me.

'How long would I have to stay? Are you sure there's no alternative?'

'Well, there's a Premier Inn about two hundred metres from my place. I suppose you *could* try there.'

I was out of practice. Adam had been quietly funny, but Josh's style of humour had always leant more towards rapier-sharp quips. There'd been a time – long ago – when we'd been evenly matched, but not anymore.

'Funny,' I deadpanned.

Josh had fastened his seat belt and then infuriatingly glanced down to check on mine, as though I was some stupid idiot who was likely to forget.

Or the kind of person who'd head out into the worst storm in years without bothering to check the forecast. Okay, maybe he had a point.

'I realise the idea of staying with me is abhorrent, Lily. But that's the risk you take when you decide to drop in on someone unexpectedly during a blizzard.'

I gave him a long, careful look.

'I won't do it again,' I promised.

He inclined his head. 'Glad to hear it.'

'It wouldn't hurt you to be a little more civil,' I muttered.

I swear I heard him growl in response. 'You need to stop talking now, so I can concentrate on driving, or you're going to end up in another accident.'

It wasn't the harshness of his words or the set of his jaw. It wasn't even the frosty atmosphere inside his car, which was colder than the temperature outside. That wasn't what brought the sting of tears to my eyes.

It was the contrast. Always the contrast.

The memory was right there; it had been since the moment my wheels had locked. Holding Adam's dog in my arms, adrenaline from the crash still pumping through my veins, how could I *not* be thrown back into the past and another near miss.

Chapter Nine

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

It happened at the worst possible moment, although to be fair I'm not sure when a *good* moment would be to have a tyre blow out.

I remember checking my estimated arrival time and feeling pleased I was well ahead of schedule. The party wasn't due to start for another two hours, which gave me plenty of time to travel the final twenty miles to the hotel to set up. The route on my map screen looked uncomplicated, and the roads were clear of traffic. In fact, I hadn't seen another car for ages.

The bang sounded like a firework going off beneath my car and, for a mechanic's daughter, I was embarrassingly slow to realise what had happened. One minute I'd been in total control of Betty, my old Ford Fiesta, and the next it felt as though an invisible giant had jerked the wheel out of my hands. The car veered sharply to the left, no longer under my control. Later I'd see the remnants of the front tyre that had been shredded to streamers as Betty slalomed whichever way she fancied towards the grassy verge and the unforgiving dry-stone wall running beside it.

I stood on the brakes, but the wall just kept getting closer and closer. With horrible clarity I could make out the shape and colour of the individual flat stones that were about to connect with Betty in the worst way possible. I braced myself for an impact that miraculously never happened as the car came to a stop just inches away from the wall. It took almost a full minute before I could persuade my fingers to unfurl themselves from around the steering wheel, and even longer before my heartbeat slowed down enough to stop deafening me.

It was the kind of near miss that makes you suddenly believe in guardian angels, and I instinctively glanced towards the wooden lucky mascot I'd had for years, which was still swaying back and forth from where it hung on my rear-view mirror. I steadied the tiny carved lily with shaking fingers and took a deep breath before reaching for the door handle.

The smell of burning rubber assaulted my senses as I stepped on to the

grassy verge. Already fearing what I'd see, I rounded the front of my car and stared down in dismay at the shredded front tyre.

'Shit! Fuck!' I swore softly under my breath, although there was no one to offend except the skylarks, who were singing prettily from the top branches of a nearby tree.

It might have taken seven years, but my dad's pessimistic prediction had finally come true. *'One day, Lily, you'll find yourself stuck in the middle of nowhere with a flat tyre, and you're going to be very grateful then that I taught you how to change it.'* We'd had that conversation on the day I passed my driving test, and I smiled wryly now because he'd been absolutely right. Today was that day.

I headed towards the back of the car where the spare and the jack were lodged, knowing they'd both be in perfect order because Dad checked them every time I went home. My floaty summer dress wasn't exactly suited for mechanic duties, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

It was only when my hand reached for the button to spring open the boot that I realised a flat tyre might be the least of my problems. How could I have forgotten the cargo Betty was carrying? I screwed up my eyes, convinced that all my hours of hard work had been reduced to culinary roadkill. Gingerly I opened first one eye and then the other, unable to believe my good luck had continued to hold. Despite Betty's dramatic spell of off-roading, none of the cakes for the stag party had been damaged.

It took longer than I'd expected to empty the boot and transfer the cake boxes to the verge, where I stacked them against the dry-stone wall. It looked like I'd set up a roadside stand, and when I heard the sound of a car slowing down behind me, I fully expected they were in the market for a cake.

That thought quickly evaporated when I straightened up and saw four men, all a few years older than me, in the car. The passenger window rolled down and the aroma of cigarette smoke and alcohol wafted out.

'Hey. You okay, babe? D'you need a hand?' It would have been a more welcoming proposition if the hand the man was offering wasn't already wrapped around a can of beer.

'I'm fine, thank you,' I said, remembering to tag a smile on to my words, because at least they'd stopped to offer help, even if it was unwanted.

I might as well have saved my breath because, one after another, all four car doors opened and the men, in various states of inebriation, climbed out. Thankfully, the driver at least appeared to be relatively sober.

‘Honestly, I’ve got it covered,’ I assured them, holding up my hands like King Canute. Like the tide, they ignored the gesture.

The driver had already walked all the way around Betty, pausing by her passenger side.

‘You’ve got a flat tyre there, love. You’ll need to get that changed.’

I smiled sweetly in the face of his mansplaining.

‘Yes, I know. Like I said, thank you for stopping, but really, it’s all under control.’

‘Nonsense. We’ve got time to help a damsel in distress, haven’t we, guys?’ asked the driver.

‘I dunno, Dougie, we don’t want to be late,’ replied the front-seat passenger, glugging down the last of his can before lobbing it into the verge.

I stiffened in irritation and came very close to pointing out that he appeared to have dropped something, when out of the corner of my eye I saw the two back-seat passengers bending to open the stacked cake boxes.

I spun around, forgetting I was trying to be polite.

‘Can you stay away from those, please? They’re for a party.’

The man whose hand was already halfway inside the box looked back at me over his shoulder. ‘Hey, we’re going to a party,’ he slurred. ‘I bet they’re for us, anyway.’

My jaw tightened as he extracted a cupcake from the box and sank his teeth into it. Meanwhile the driver had moved to the back of Betty and was obviously looking for the jack. An emotion I was slow to recognise as rage began to flood through me. I hadn’t asked for or invited their assistance, but they weren’t listening to me. It was totally beyond their comprehension that I didn’t want their help.

‘Look, thank you again for stopping, but like I said, there’s no need. I’ve called my boyfriend and he’s on his way right now. He’ll change the tyre in a jiffy. He’s a mechanic.’

The men exchanged looks, which if I hadn’t been so angry, I would have found really insulting. Clearly, they didn’t believe me. I’m not sure what they were struggling with: the idea that I had a boyfriend or that he worked in a garage. I wondered what their expressions would have been if I’d told them I was planning on changing the tyre myself.

It felt like we’d reached a critical impasse. The driver, who I’d hoped would simply shrug and climb back into his car, did the exact opposite, planting his feet wide apart and folding his arms across his barrel chest. Until

that moment I had felt more irritated than threatened, but now I was starting to wonder if I had played this whole thing wrong.

I was considering backpedalling when we all looked up like startled meerkats at the sound of an approaching car on the quiet country lane.

‘Ah. That must be him,’ I said, swivelling towards the road. The sun was low in the sky, and I had to shield my eyes to even see the approaching car. ‘You’re free to be on your way now, guys.’

‘Maybe we should just hang around and check it’s him. You know, there are some dodgy people out there these days.’

The irony of his words was totally lost on him.

‘Honestly, it’s best if you just go. He can be a little . . . possessive . . . sometimes.’

I’m not sure what I’d been hoping to achieve with that lie, but it didn’t get them scurrying back into their car. If anything, it ignited yet another challenge.

‘You can do better than being with a guy like that,’ said drunk passenger number three. ‘A pretty girl like you.’

I glared at him for insulting my imaginary boyfriend and was wondering how rude I was going to have to be to get them to leave, when the sound of the approaching vehicle grew appreciably louder.

My line of sight was blocked by the men who, by accident or design, were clustered between me and the road. I was preparing to sidestep them and flag down the driver when the car sped straight past us.

Disappointment felt like a rock in the middle of my chest as I watched it disappear.

‘Ah, not your fella then?’ said Doug.

And then, before I could think of a reply, something amazing happened. The car that had just driven past us came to a stop. I stared at its twin brake lights, unaware that I had been holding my breath in anticipation. The miracle continued when the car’s engine restarted but, instead of driving on, the vehicle reversed back the hundred yards or so to where we were standing.

‘There he is,’ I said, the relief in my voice totally genuine. Not caring if I was being rude, I pushed my way through the men and half walked, half ran towards the car whose door was already opening.

‘Hi, sweetheart. What took you so long? I thought I was going to have to call a garage after all.’

A tall man with sandy-coloured hair climbed out of the car. I’m sure that

beneath his reflective sunglasses his eyes held a million questions; I shook my head, my own eyes asking him not to give me away as I covered the distance between us. Not sure if I was jumping straight from the frying pan and into the fire, I acted on pure instinct and held out my hands to the total stranger standing in front of me.

He skipped a beat, just one. In that moment I saw his head turn and he seemed to take it all in at once. His jaw, which I was close enough to see was attractively covered with stubble, got infinitesimally tighter.

‘Sorry I got held up, Jessie.’

I smiled broadly, happily realising he was going to play along.

‘Thanks for stopping to help her out, mate,’ he said, addressing a seriously confused-looking Doug. ‘It’s nice to know there are still some good blokes out there.’

‘It sure is,’ I said, looking up at the stranger who I had no reason to trust more than the men who’d stopped to supposedly help me. But I did. Instantly and immediately.

‘Well, we don’t want to hold you up any more than we must have already,’ my new best friend said pointedly.

‘We’re going to be late if we don’t get going, and I don’t know how long the free bar is open,’ grumbled drunk guy number four. Clearly the thought of having to pay for their own alcohol was the most effective motivator of all, and one by one the men climbed back into their car.

The stranger and I stood side by side as they manoeuvred back on to the highway. I felt him throw an arm companionably around my shoulders; the other he lifted in a wave as the car was thrown into gear and disappeared in an engulfing cloud of dust.

My companion dropped the arm around me the moment the vehicle was out of sight.

‘Well . . . Jessie. That was fun.’

Unlike the ones I’d given to the men, this smile felt entirely natural. I held out my right hand. ‘My name is Lily.’

He placed his own in my grip. It was a perfect handshake: not too long, not too tight, and definitely not damp.

‘And I’m Adam,’ he said with an easy grin.

Chapter Ten

The cabin, which less than an hour earlier I'd been certain I would never see again, came into view. The lights had been glowing yellow, warm and inviting, when I'd driven away, but the building was now in total darkness.

'Fuck,' Josh muttered. His language was way more colourful than I remembered. 'The power has gone out.' He ran a hand through his hair, a gesture I swear I'd forgotten about until that moment. 'I'm not surprised the lines are down; it happens all the time out here.'

That *definitely* wasn't what I wanted to hear. Being stuck in a darkened cabin in the middle of the woods sounded horribly like the plot of a low-budget horror film.

Josh swung the Land Rover into a sweeping arc, bringing it to a stop not far from the unlit cabin. We both stared at the single-storey building through the headlights' beams. The roof had already disappeared beneath a thick blanket of snow, which seemed to be growing ever deeper as we sat there.

'We'll be alright here though, won't we? Without electricity, I mean? We're not going to freeze to death, or anything?' I tagged a small laugh on to the question, but it sounded more terrified than amused.

Josh's lips twisted wryly. 'We're in the middle of a forest full of trees. I think we'll manage to find something we can burn to keep warm.'

The only thing burning right then was my face, but thankfully, with the power out, Josh couldn't see that.

Land Rovers are sturdy, built for rough conditions, but Josh's was rocking like a fairground ride as the wind buffeted it.

'It's getting pretty wild out there,' Josh said. 'Are you ready to make a run for it?'

I nodded, peering through the darkness at the swirling snow and flying foliage ripped from the trees.

'Take this,' he said, extracting a torch from the compartment in his door. I took it from him, but before he got out, I leant across the centre console and lightly touched his forearm. 'I really *am* grateful to you for coming after us, Josh. Thank you.'

'I bet that hurt,' he muttered. But I'd seen the expression on his face when my hand rested fleetingly on his arm. There'd been no mistaking it; my

touch had caused him genuine pain. It was a disturbing realisation that would probably circle around in my thoughts for hours.

‘Wait here,’ he instructed. ‘I’ll come round and let you out.’

I wasn’t sure why he thought I needed assistance, until he stood beside the car, wrestling with the wind to open the door. The moment I stepped out of the Land Rover the storm tried to shove me back against it. Icy crystals of snow that felt like a thousand tiny knives struck my face. My attention was so focused on staying upright, I scarcely noticed when Josh’s arm clamped around my waist like a vice. It felt very different from my teenage memories, when his arm had nestled there in a gesture of friendship. This was purely a necessity to get me from A to B, and I was grateful for the way he shielded my body with his as we battled forward, practically bent double as we covered the distance from car to cabin.

Josh flung open the door to his home and firmly propelled me through it, along with a cloud of swirling snow. Fletcher was a black and white blur as he sped past my legs and disappeared into the shadows. In the pitch-black hallway my eyes were slow to adjust. I felt vulnerable and a little afraid as I heard the storm battering the timber-framed building, as though we’d somehow enraged it by escaping from its clutches. An unfortunate visual of the airborne house in *The Wizard of Oz* popped into my head and refused to leave.

My frozen fingers fumbled for the switch on the torch. I felt marginally better once its watery yellow beam sliced through the darkness.

‘Turn left and head towards the kitchen,’ Josh instructed, placing a guiding hand in the small of my back. It fell away as soon as we entered the only room in the cabin that felt vaguely familiar.

The kitchen still felt warm and cosy, and a wood-burning stove in the far corner of the room provided both heat and a dim red glow of light. Both drew me in like a magnet, and I held my hands towards the stove, waiting for the feeling to return to my chilled fingers. Behind a glass door the flames danced, making the rings on my left hand glint in the flickering light. It was a reminder of the man who’d brought me to this place today.

‘You’re absolutely sure you’re not hurt?’ Josh asked, sweeping his torch beam over me again.

I shook my head, deciding not to mention the vague ache on my temple or the stiffness of my shoulder. ‘Just shaken up, that’s all.’

In response he dragged a chair from the table and positioned it beside

the stove with a meaningful nod.

‘Sit,’ he said, with enough emphasis that Fletcher, who’d just padded into the kitchen, promptly did so at his feet. I felt a frisson of annoyance at my pet’s betrayal.

When I made no move towards the chair, Josh glared angrily at me. I glared right back.

He drew in a breath as though reining in something that was about to get away from him. ‘Lily, you’ve just been in an accident, you could keel over from shock at any minute. So will you JUST – SIT – DOWN.’

I’m not sure if it was the realisation that I was being deliberately difficult or the muscle that was twitching beside Josh’s eye that made me move to the chair and lower myself on to it.

‘Well, seeing as you asked so nicely,’ I said, my voice deceptively sweet.

He sighed heavily, as though a battle had just begun, and he had no idea if he’d won or lost the first foray.

Fletcher, who was still beside Josh, butted his knee for attention and Josh reached down and stroked his head. I watched the interaction in fascination for several seconds. They say dogs are excellent judges of character, but I wasn’t prepared to believe my pet knew better than me.

‘You’ve got a good dog,’ Josh observed, scratching that spot between Fletcher’s ears that was guaranteed to make him adore you for life. Of all the things he’d said to me so far, that one sounded more like a natural ‘Old Josh’ comment than anything else.

‘I’ve got a *great* dog,’ I corrected, and then paused for a moment before adding, ‘I don’t know how I’d have got through this last year without him.’

Josh had stood his torch upright on the table, creating a room full of shadows, and suddenly I could feel Adam’s presence among them.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably and looked for a change of subject. ‘So, how long does it normally take before the electricity comes back on?’

Josh shrugged with a nonchalance I was far from feeling. ‘It won’t be today, that’s for sure. The longest we’ve ever been off-grid was five days.’

I gulped audibly. ‘Is there someone we can call to find out?’

Josh leant back against the countertop, waiting for me to work out exactly what was wrong with that question.

‘Ahh . . . Shit. There’s no phone signal either, is there? Or internet? Bugger it.’ A couple of hours in Josh’s company and my vocabulary was

already earthier than usual. If I had to spend five days with him, I'd be swearing like a marine at the end of it.

Five days. The thought was sobering and frankly terrifying.

'You don't have a back-up means of communication? A CB radio . . . or a carrier pigeon?'

'Fraid not. We're just going to have to wait it out.'

The prospect of spending so much time in his company would once have been my idea of Heaven, but now it felt like a stay in a considerably hotter location.

'Does anyone know you were coming here?' Josh asked.

I shook my head in the gloomily lit kitchen.

'So, there's no one waiting for you to contact them? No one who'll worry about you when you don't?'

I lifted my head and met his gaze. 'You do realise those sound like serial killer questions.'

Josh laughed and then looked almost surprised at the sound, as though he hadn't heard it for quite a while. I felt my own lips twitch in response.

'What about your parents?'

'They're away visiting my dad's sister.'

'The one in Brisbane?'

'How on earth did you remember that?'

He turned his face away, but not before I'd seen something unfathomable scud across his features. 'Sometimes stupid stuff sticks in your head . . . whether you want it to or not.'



Fifteen minutes later I was cradling a cup of hot, sweet tea in a kitchen that was now glowing in the light of two storm lanterns. If you had to be stranded somewhere, it helped to discover the man you were with could probably give Bear Grylls a run for his money. Josh had disappeared to his workshop and returned with the lanterns, and a huge enamel kettle that he'd placed on top of the wood burner.

'It's a good back-up for whenever we lose power,' he'd told me as he spooned way more sugar than I took into my mug. *'It's for the shock,'* he'd added when he saw my raised eyebrows.

'And do you have something for the diabetic coma I'll be slipping into

afterwards?’ I’d smiled at my own joke, and the way it broke out a reluctant glimmer of a smile on his face. It was good to know that the old cut and thrust of our humour wasn’t entirely lost.

As I drained my mug I wondered if it was too soon to ask him again why Adam had sent me to see him, but my plan was derailed as Josh got to his feet and reached for his jacket.

‘Are we going back out again?’ I asked. The storm had lost none of its strength; if anything it was battering the cabin even more ferociously than before.

‘*You’re not. I am,*’ Josh replied, yanking up his zipper with a decisive tug.

‘Why? Where are you going?’

‘To see if I can drag your car out of that ditch before it gets totally buried beneath a snowdrift.’

‘Then I’ll come with you,’ I said, starting to get to my feet. His hand felt firm when it came down on my shoulder and prevented me from rising. ‘No. It’s better if you stay here. That way I only have one of us to worry about.’

Panic flooded through me, and I didn’t know if it was born from fear of being left alone, or fear of him going out into the storm. Probably a bit of both.

‘Hey, I’ve an idea. Why don’t we *both* stay here, and then you don’t have to worry about either of us.’

Josh shook his head, and there was a look that novelists like to call ‘steely determination’ on his face, but in real life it’s better known as sheer stubbornness.

‘If we don’t get your car out of that ditch today, I’m not sure I’ll be able to haul it out with the Land Rover, which means you’re likely to be stuck here for even longer. And I’m pretty sure neither of us wants that to happen.’

A knot twisted in my stomach. Did Josh really want me gone so badly he was willing to risk his own safety to ensure I wouldn’t be here for a single moment longer than I had to be?

‘Even if you *do* manage to drag it out, you can’t drive two cars back here,’ I reasoned. ‘Surely it makes sense for me to come too?’

‘No disrespect, but I’ve just seen your icy weather driving skills. I think both you and your car are safer if we wait until the storm dies down before bringing it back here.’

I hated that he had so many ready – and unfortunately reasonable –

arguments to back up his plan. Even more, I hated the danger he was putting himself in. I'd seen that huge oak come crashing down out of nowhere. No one, however much they resembled a TV survivalist, would be able to get out of the path of something like that.

Josh was pulling a woollen beanie from his pocket, obviously believing he'd convinced me to drop my protests. But I couldn't.

'What happens if you don't come back?'

A frown crossed his features. 'Stay here until your mobile service is reconnected and then call for help. You'll be perfectly safe here at the cabin if I'm . . . delayed.'

His eyes met mine. I think we both knew 'delayed' wasn't what I was worrying about.

Josh headed towards the hallway, looking genuinely surprised to find me still at his heels. Through a window beside the front door, we both surveyed the storm. The snow was now so thick on the ground I wondered if his car would even be able to make it out of the clearing.

With one hand on the latch, he turned to me. 'Just stay inside the cabin. It's built far enough away from the surrounding trees to be perfectly safe if any of them should come down.'

I shook my head, knowing the same couldn't be said for the place where my car had been abandoned.

'I'll be back in about an hour. If you get bored you could check out the larder for something we could heat up on the wood burner for dinner.'

I bristled at the cliché of being the little woman staying out of danger, preparing a meal, while the 'hero' went out to do battle – albeit only with the elements. But in truth, what did I know about hauling a car out of a ditch? Absolutely nothing.

'Can you please try not to end up dead?' I said, which had sounded a little less concerned in my head than it did when it came out of my mouth.

'I'll see what I can do,' Josh said, and then without another word he opened the door, letting in a flurry of snow, and slipped out into the storm.



Josh's larder reminded me of ones I'd seen in films, where a crazy survivalist reveals they're ready for the end of the world. Josh didn't have quite enough canned goods to see him through Armageddon, but he could easily ride out a

pandemic or two. I was bemused by an entire shelf of tinned tomatoes, but the one beneath it – filled with cans of creamed rice – made far more sense. As a teenager it had been his favourite dessert, and it was oddly comforting to know that while Josh had changed in a thousand different ways, his taste in puddings had remained the same.

Despite the distraction of the storm, an old memory I really didn't want to revisit elbowed its way into my thoughts.

It was the hottest day of the year, in the middle of the school holidays, and Josh and I had climbed the sycamore to escape the heat in its leafy boughs. We were eating ice creams he'd filched from Janette's freezer, which were melting faster than we could demolish them. 'You're dribbling,' Josh said, polishing off the last bite of his cone. He leant closer, and with his finger scooped up a line of escaping ice cream from my chin. And suddenly the air froze on that impossibly hot day. I wasn't able to breathe, and my heart was pounding so loudly I could no longer hear the buzz of bees or the sound of birds. All I could see, feel or hear was Josh, as he remained inches from my face, his gaze focused on my lips. Then, from what felt like another planet, we heard someone come into the garden and the spell fractured and then broke when he took his sticky finger and smeared the spilt ice cream all over my nose. But even as we laughed and I tried to retaliate, there was still a shadow of something lingering in his eyes that I'd never seen before.

Chapter Eleven

Josh had a retro, battery-operated radio in his kitchen, the kind I hadn't seen in years, and I spent a long time twiddling the dials until I finally landed on a music station that wasn't a mass of distorted crackles. I'd been hoping to find a news report or at least a weather forecast, which I grudgingly admitted would have been a useful plan twelve hours earlier. But the only station I could find among the static was a country music channel.

'Really?' I asked out loud. Country music wasn't a genre I'd listened to before meeting Adam. In the early days of us I'd teased him endlessly for his love of all things 'country', but over the years he'd whittled away my resistance, until I found my toes unconsciously tapping along to the beat of his favourite songs. In the past twelve months I'd determinedly not listened to a single country tune, because I wasn't sure my fragile heart could do so without hearing Adam's slightly off-key voice singing along in my head.

Out of all the radio stations I could have stumbled across, what were the chances that I'd find one playing my late husband's favourite songs? I stared with unseeing eyes out into the storm and wondered how many more 'signs' it would take before I acknowledged there were things at play here over which I had no control.

As the music played quietly in the background, I found my eyes continually drawn back to the clock. An hour, Josh had said. It didn't sound long enough to travel from 'concern' to 'panic', but I could see myself heading that way as we crossed the forty-five-minute marker.

Picking up on my nerves, Fletcher followed me anxiously around the shadowy kitchen until I eventually found a bowl and shook a sizeable amount of kibble into it. Thankfully I'd thrown a full-size bag into the holdall, but it wouldn't last forever. I wasn't sure if you were supposed to feed dogs rice pudding or tinned tomatoes, and I really hoped I wouldn't be here long enough to find out.

Josh's kitchen was surprisingly well stocked for a man who seemed to rely largely on canned goods to survive. I found a heavy cast-iron pan and tipped three tins of stew into it, stirring it with my eyes on the clock and my heart in my mouth. Seventy-five minutes after he'd left, the fear that mine wouldn't be the only accident the forest saw that day had crystalised into a

horrible certainty.

I wondered if I should set out to look for him, but how would I know where to start? Even so, I was on the point of lifting the heavy pan off the wood burner when headlight beams speared through the kitchen window.

By the time the storm had blown Josh back to the cabin, and he'd stamped a melting puddle of snow from his boots, my features were suitably rearranged as though they'd never given in to escalating panic.

Josh's face looked pinched by the cold as he shrugged out of his outer clothes and lobbed them over the back of a chair. I stepped out of his way as he strode across the room to the wood burner.

'You made it back then.'

'Did you doubt that I would?' Josh asked, turning his face towards me. His hands were extended as close to the stove as he could get them.

I gave what I hoped was a nonchalant shrug. 'How did you get on?'

'Your car's out of the ditch,' he said succinctly. Before I could ask anything further, I caught sight of the raw cuts and grazes criss-crossed over his knuckles. They hadn't been there when he left.

'Your hands!' I exclaimed, unthinkingly reaching for the one nearest to me.

He jerked back from my touch as though I'd poured lemon juice on his wounds.

'It's nothing,' he said, determinedly ramming both hands into the pockets of his jeans.

'You should put something on those . . . they could get infected.'

Josh stared at me for a long moment. 'I do worse than this in the workshop every day of the week. I don't need you fussing over me.'

Even though I shouldn't care, *didn't care*, the sharpness of his tone cut like a blade. It wasn't the way someone who cared about you would ever speak. It was a timely reminder – if one was needed – that it was a very long time since this man had loved me.

Fletcher inserted himself between us, like some sort of canine referee. He made a big show of sniffing the air, which provided a much welcome diversion.

I nodded towards the stove. 'I've heated up some canned stew. As per instructions.'

Josh chose to ignore the irritation in my voice. 'Great. I'm starving,' he said, crossing to the sink and plunging his wounded hands beneath the jet

from the tap.

While he washed the forest from his hands, I reached for the bowls I'd found earlier and began ladling piping-hot stew into them. It was no wonder Fletcher's nose had been twitching, it really did smell good.

Josh delved in the fridge and emerged with two bottles of beer. He cracked them both open, without bothering to ask if I wanted one.

'Not for me, thanks,' I said, halting the bottle he slid towards me.

'I've got some wine somewhere if you prefer. Merlot, I think.'

The air was suddenly charged with old memories. Was he thinking back to that night of the university party when a bottle of Merlot had been partly responsible for how everything had nearly changed? I truly hoped he wasn't, because I made a point of *never* thinking of that evening at all.

'I'd just prefer to keep a clear head,' I said, which even I had to admit sounded unnecessarily prissy. Josh lifted his bottle in a silent toast before bringing it to his lips. I turned my attention to the bowl in front of me, moving the stew from one side to the other as though forensically examining it for evidence, but the scratch of a match made me look up. Josh was lighting two candles, and as the flame touched the first wick, I fought an irrational impulse to blow it out. Candlelight brought an unwelcome date-like atmosphere to the meal that didn't sit comfortably with me. Never had I missed harsh electrical lighting as much as I did in that moment.

The stew was surprisingly delicious, although having eaten nothing since leaving the B&B that morning, even Fletcher's kibble had smelled worryingly appetising. For several minutes the only sound in the kitchen was the scrape of cutlery on bowls and the howl of the wind outside. Then, as though we'd received a silent prompt, Josh and I both spoke at once. We gave the kind of nervous laugh that strangers exchange. It was yet another reminder that we really didn't know each other very well anymore.

'After you,' Josh said politely.

'I was just going to say this is really weird. Me and you here . . . eating dinner like this. It's not anything I imagined we'd do again. How about you? What were you going to say?'

'I was just going to say you make good stew.'

My laughter sounded more canned than our dinner. Five days of this walking-on-eggshells atmosphere would be excruciating. 'I think Heinz did most of the hard work.'

'I guess it's very different from the things you make at Cupcakes and

Rainbows.'

I was so completely taken aback that he knew the name of my company, that I didn't know how to respond. I reached for the beer I'd claimed not to want and took a large swig. Did Josh have any idea, I wondered, that *he'd* been the one responsible for the name of my business? That I'd chosen it from a throwaway remark he'd made a million years ago? Curiously, it was something I'd never told anyone, not even Adam. And it was only now, all these years later, that I stopped to wonder why.

I told myself all evidence of my teenage crush on my next-door neighbour had long since been erased, but there he was, sign-written in cursive script on the side of my company van and at the top of every invoice I sent out. Some threads run so deep in your tapestry, perhaps it's impossible to ever unpick them all.

'Your business, it's doing well?' Josh asked, as though we were strangers making polite conversation.

'Really well, thank you. How about you? I never knew you wanted to make furniture.'

He stared at me for a long moment, and it became a silent contest of who would look away first. 'I guess there's a lot about me you didn't know,' he said eventually.

It was a thrown-down gauntlet that I ought to simply ignore, but I couldn't.

'Ditto.'

He nodded slowly in agreement. When I felt sure the topic had run its course, Josh unexpectedly returned to it. 'I've always enjoyed tinkering around with wood, and when I was travelling through Scandinavia I spent some time working with a guy who had his own furniture workshop. I enjoyed the creativity, didn't exactly suck at it, so thought I'd give it a try.'

He paused for a moment and then gave a small, humourless laugh. 'That's the answer I always give . . . but there's more to it than that.' There was something in his eyes that held me and dragged me with him as he looked into his past. 'Maybe growing up in a place where crockery was smashed, chairs were broken, and doors got slammed so often they never properly closed made me want to cancel out the past by *creating* rather than destroying.' He shook off the memory and seemed to regret lifting the curtain on a childhood he'd rarely spoken of. 'Or maybe I just like playing around with power tools.'

‘Well, whatever the reason, you’re very good at it. I’ve seen one of your pieces in real life.’

It was totally the wrong thing to say, and destroyed the moment of surprising honesty, because my words flagged up the route I’d taken to get here today, and the members of his family I’d involved in my pursuit of answers.

Josh’s lips tightened, so I already knew I wasn’t going to like what came out of them. ‘You shouldn’t have gone to see Gordon. Claire was furious about that.’

‘Claire’s always furious about something,’ I mumbled, unfortunately not quietly enough for it to escape him.

‘She says it upsets him, talking about the past,’ Josh said, not altogether unreasonably.

‘I’m sorry. That certainly hadn’t been my intention. But for what it’s worth, he didn’t seem distressed, just a little confused.’

I found it strange how Claire referred to their foster parent as her father, but Josh still called him by his first name. It prompted my next question.

‘Do you see much of Gordon these days?’

Guilt spasmed across Josh’s face in the candlelight.

‘Not as much as I should. Every couple of months or so, whenever I leave the forest to make deliveries, I check in on him.’

‘Oh, so you *do* get away from here sometimes?’

His eyebrows rose as though my question amused him.

‘Did you think I’d become some sort of hermit who’d shut himself off from the outside world?’

I flushed uncomfortably because that was exactly what I *had* feared, but the last thing I wanted was for him to realise that.

‘To be honest, Josh, I’ve scarcely thought of you at all in the last six years.’ It was the biggest lie I’d told in a very long time.

‘Ditto,’ he said, parroting my own earlier response.

The heat in my cheeks went from a flame to an inferno. I felt suddenly wrong-footed and fought back for solid ground the only way I could.

‘Why did Adam send me here?’

I wanted to shock him, and I had.

Josh rocked back in his chair as though from a blow he hadn’t seen coming.

‘You already asked me that, Lily. And I already told you I have no

idea.'

I shook my head. 'I don't believe you.'

He gave a shrug that was meant to look casual, except it missed the mark by miles.

'I don't know what else to tell you. I have no secret that I'm keeping from you.'

I wanted to believe him. I really did. I wanted to believe I'd travelled all this way on a wild goose chase. But I wasn't convinced. If Josh had proved nothing else, he'd shown that he was actually very good at keeping secrets from me. Huge ones. The biggest of which had threatened to blow my entire world apart. Josh might have conveniently forgotten that he'd hidden the fact that he was in love with me until the very worst moment that he could ever have revealed it. But I hadn't.



His pillows were much firmer than mine. But that wasn't the reason I couldn't sleep.

Despite changing the sheets, the bed still smelled of Josh. And even that wasn't the reason I was still wide awake hours after I'd eventually given in and agreed to sleep in Josh's bed – words I'd never imagined I would find in my vocabulary again.

I was exhausted from the events of the day. I ought to be comatose by now, and yet hours after I'd extinguished the storm lantern's flickering flame, I still couldn't sleep. Fletcher, on the other hand, had no such problems, and was quietly snoring away by the foot of the bed.

I'd tussled with Josh over who would sleep on the settee and who would take the bed, knowing all the while that I was wasting my breath. It had been the same with the shower.

'The water in the tank will be cold by morning. If you want a warm shower, it's now or never.'

There were many reasons to have passed on that one. The most pressing was tangled up in my reluctance to get naked in the place where Josh got naked. I had intended to decline the offer, but I could feel the grime of the day sticking to me like a second skin. I also had a sneaking suspicion that I no longer smelled great. It made saying 'no' impossible.

I took the quickest shower in recorded history, grateful that Josh had

volunteered to take Fletcher outside for his late-night toilet trip while he checked the workshop was weathering the storm.

I rinsed the suds from my body, aware that by the time I turned off the taps the temperature was considerably cooler than when I'd stepped beneath it.

'I'm sorry. I think I've stolen all the hot water,' I babbled as I exited the bathroom and unexpectedly bumped into Josh in the hallway. I'd dressed hurriedly in my pyjamas, and even though they were the button-up-to-the-neck type favoured by octogenarians, it felt wrong and uncomfortable to be having a conversation with him in my nightwear. I clutched the buttoned edges tightly together, terrified of displaying even an inch of skin, somehow forgetting that, long ago, his eyes, hands and tongue had travelled over most of it.

Josh shrugged. 'I'm used to taking cold showers.'

I really hoped that was because of the unreliable power supply, because any other reason was strictly off limits.

'Have you got everything you need?' Josh asked, sounding for once almost as awkward as me.

'Apart from electricity, phone signal and a way out of this forest, you mean?'

'Maybe tomorrow,' he said, sounding nowhere near as confident as I would have liked.

He turned to go, and later I really wished I'd said nothing more than 'Goodnight'. But I didn't.

'Thank you, Josh.'

'What for?'

There were almost too many options to pick. I went for the obvious one. 'For giving us somewhere to stay.'

His dark brows drew closer together. 'Did you really think I wouldn't do that?'

Something in his tone made me shiver. I shrugged. 'I guess we don't know each other at all these days.'

Josh gave a small sound that was almost a laugh. 'That's generally what happens when you say you never want to see someone again.'

How did we get here again?

'You said it first,' I replied childishly.

'And then you said it back,' he reminded me quietly.

He was right. I had. Sometimes my mind erased that bit of the story.



Sleep might not have been able to find me, but the memory knew where I was. Like an antidote to the day, I eagerly returned to the night I'd met Adam, as though it was a film pressed on pause, just waiting to be played.

Chapter Twelve

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

Adam asked me out five times before I finally said yes.

I hadn't taken him seriously the first time. How could I when, just moments earlier, he'd been staring with fascination at the giant penis that I'd crafted out of sponge and fondant icing? With hindsight perhaps I shouldn't have accepted his offer to help reload the cake boxes into the car.

'We need to be extra careful with this one,' I'd warned him, when there was just one last box to move. 'It's the groom's cake.'

'I'm not sure I even know what one of those is,' Adam said, walking beside me to the dry-stone wall.

'It's an American thing, and the guy getting married comes from Texas. Basically, it's a cake for the stag do that's meant to reflect the personality of the groom.'

Adam took the box from my hands and carried it carefully to my car.

'Can I take a peek?' he asked when the box was safely stowed in the boot.

'Knock yourself out,' I said, outwardly nonchalant although inside I was already cringing.

Adam lifted the lid, his eyes widening and then crinkling around the edges when he saw its contents. 'So, this groom is actually an enormous dick?'

I grinned. 'If those were his friends we just met, I'd say you're probably right.'

He bent down to examine the cake more carefully, as though it was a sculpture in a gallery. 'I was thinking more along the lines of the Star-Spangled Banner, or maybe a Stetson.'

I laughed. 'Both of those would have been so much easier to make.'

Again, Adam stooped lower, studying the intricate icing that gave the surface of the cake a very realistic appearance.

'I'm impressed with your eye for detail,' he said, his attention still on

the craziest cake I'd ever been asked to produce. 'And, also, a little intimidated.'

'Why so?' I asked, reaching past him and carefully closing the boot of the car.

'Well, I was planning on asking you out, but if this is drawn from the guys you've dated before, I might not be in your league.'

'There is no league,' I said, and then before he started to think I was encouraging him, I quickly added, 'But please don't ask me out.'

'Because you're already taken?'

I knew his eyes had already gone to my ring finger. I'd clocked him checking it out while I was changing the tyre.

I shook my head.

'Living with someone?' he guessed. 'Going steady? Courting?'

I gave a laugh that sounded worryingly like a snorting pig. 'Courting? Really? Did you time travel back to the 1950s for that one?'

'Ah,' Adam declared, leaning back against my car, looking extremely confident for a man who'd just been knocked back. 'Does your refusal have anything to do with my ignorance about car maintenance and how all I could do was hand you the spanner-y things while you changed your own car tyre?'

'No, of course not.'

'Good,' he said, crossing his legs at the ankles and still looking oddly pleased. 'Well, it can't be because you don't like me.'

'Can't it?'

He frowned as though I'd said something incomprehensible that needed serious consideration. 'Nah. It's *definitely* not that.'

'You're very cocky for someone who's just been turned down, aren't you?'

'Interesting choice of words, considering the cake you made,' he quipped.

Even though I had absolutely no intention of going on a date with a total stranger, albeit a very amusing and good-looking one who had kind of rescued me, I was honest enough to admit that I was enjoying our flirtation.

'I just don't date,' I told him. Unbidden, a snapshot image of Josh's face flashed across my thoughts like lightning in a storm.

'Not ever?' Adam asked, his curiosity clearly piqued. 'Well, that's just all kinds of wrong.' For a moment the teasing banter fell from his face. 'Bad break-up?' he guessed.

I bit my lip. Can something be called broken when it perhaps only ever existed in your imagination? I didn't know, but I wasn't about to explain my complicated feelings about Josh to my roadside Good Samaritan.

'I just got off that bus and I'm not ready for another trip yet.'

Adam nodded slowly, but there was still the trace of a smile on his lips. 'I think the most important word in that sentence is "yet".'

I laughed and shook my head.

'I'm not giving up on you, Jessie,' Adam said with a wink.

'You *do* remember my name is Lily, don't you?'

'Of course. The only thing better than my memory is my patience. I can wait until you're ready.'

And he did.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up confused, the way you do on the first morning of a holiday, when you can't work out why the door and the window are in the wrong place, or who moved all the furniture overnight. Something that certainly wasn't where it ought to be was my dog. There was no familiar reassuring weight across my feet, and I couldn't hear the snuffling grunt of canine snoring. I wasn't used to waking up to silence and it jolted me alert.

'Fletcher,' I called, scanning the room for my travelling companion. I hadn't been able to properly assess Josh's bedroom by lantern light, but in the dappled grey of early morning my suspicions that this was a room built for function rather than style were confirmed. There was a dresser and a wardrobe, both of which I recognised from the Wildwood website, and a solitary bedside cabinet. The absence of a matching one on the other side of the divan struck me as sad, as though it was already decided that another would never be needed. The room held nothing that didn't have a purpose or belong there. Except me, of course, I thought with a wry twist of my lips as I swung my legs out of bed.

Fletcher's absence was explained when I noticed the bedroom door was ajar. I'd fumbled with the unfamiliar latch on my return from a middle-of-the-night bathroom visit, so I guessed I hadn't fastened it properly.

Unwilling for another pyjama-clad encounter with Josh, I pulled on jeans and a jumper before padding into the hallway. I threw a cautious glance towards the lounge, where he'd slept. The room was still in darkness, and even though I was shoeless I still tiptoed past the doorway. I wasn't ready to face my reluctant host without a cup of coffee inside me first.

I was sure I'd find Fletcher in the kitchen, curled up beside the wood burner, but to my surprise the room was empty. My nose twitched as it picked up the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, and I followed the scent to the stove, where an old-fashioned enamel pot – the kind cowboys use out on the prairie – was sitting.

It was hard to imagine Josh as an early riser when I so clearly remembered the teenage version who would have happily slept until noon each day. It was another reminder of the differences between the boy I'd known and the man he'd become. And yet memories from decades ago

persisted on ping-pong into my head, as though someone had blown the doors off the vault where they'd been kept.

I turned towards the table where a clean mug had been placed. Propped against it was a note in handwriting that was still so familiar.

I have your dog.

I stared at the four-word missive, wondering if Josh had intentionally phrased it to sound like a ransom note (which was funny), or whether its brevity was an indication of just how little he had to say to me.

Fletcher's lead was missing from where I'd left it hanging over the back of a chair, and I toyed with the idea of following their tracks in the snow and reclaiming my dog (because wasn't that what Adam would want me to do?), but a quick glance out the window forced me to abandon that plan. The snow was still falling steadily, and the few tracks that were visible among the drifts were disappearing fast. It was probably more sensible to stay in the cabin and wait.

I tried to swallow the feeling of irritation, but I could taste it through the minty tang of toothpaste as I cleaned my teeth, and it was there in my reflection as I splashed ice-cold water – which was all the taps were prepared to yield – on my face. Everything was spinning out of my control, and the composure I needed to deal with Josh seemed to be forever beyond my reach.

Even though I knew it was pointless, I still tried every light switch in the cabin as I went from room to room attempting to capture a glimmer of phone signal. Although, even if by some miracle I found any, my battery was almost on the point of giving up. I blinked back tears of pure frustration. I hated this stupid forest for being so remote, and I hated the man who'd chosen to live here, but most of all I hated myself for ever thinking he'd be willing to help me. The only person I *didn't* hate in all of this was Adam. Him, I could never hate.

It was a full forty minutes later before a bark I recognised cut through the silence of the clearing. I crossed to the window and saw something that took me by surprise. Josh was laughing, his face split by an enormous carefree grin. The best I'd glimpsed on it so far was a glimmer of a smile, but out there, for only my dog to see, was the same face my foolish teenage heart had fallen in love with. I hurriedly stepped back from the window, shocked to

see it again. It felt unnatural, like coming across your own ghost.

Man and dog burst through the door seconds after I had repositioned myself at the kitchen table beside my second cup of coffee.

Fletcher was looking up at Josh with an expression of total devotion. Screw Josh and the way he kept trying to claim things that were rightfully Adam's, I thought angrily.

'Fletcher, come here,' I said, my tone a little sharper than he was used to hearing. Obediently, he padded across the quarry-tiled floor, leaving a trail of wet footprints in his wake.

'I would have taken him out,' I led with. 'You didn't have to go to the trouble of walking him.'

Josh's eyebrows rose at my tone. 'It was no trouble.'

He was looking at me steadily, and even though I knew I was being churlish it was hard to rein in my anger.

'Good morning, by the way,' Josh said, crossing the room to lift the coffee pot from the hot plate. 'Interesting to note that you're still not an a.m. person.' He felt the weight of the pot and gave a knowing nod. 'Well, not until you've had at least three coffees, that is.'

How was it that he remembered so many intimate details about a person he claimed he never wanted to see again? I would have thought he'd have done a better job of erasing every last memory of me.

But he was right about one thing: I could have started with a polite greeting before laying into him. 'Good morning,' I added. It sounded exactly like the afterthought that it was.

He finished pouring his own coffee, adding neither milk nor sugar. Strong, bitter and hot. Josh took his morning beverage the way most people would describe him. I almost made myself smile with that thought.

'Did you manage to get any sleep?'

I was surprised he cared, or perhaps he thought it was something you were supposed to ask a guest – even an unwelcome one. I'd actually slept well, which was unusual in a strange bed, but for some reason I was reluctant to admit it. I hadn't come here with the intention of scoring points, but I could feel normal, Reasonable Lily disappearing behind a prickly armour. He really was bringing out the worst in me, which was odd, because Adam had always had the exact opposite effect.

Even so, I hadn't tracked Josh down to fight with him. We'd done enough of that the last time. But when someone you'd once loved and trusted

was also the person who'd betrayed you, deeply buried resentments couldn't help but resurface.

'Can we talk, Josh?'

He looked at me for a long moment before replying. 'Can we at least have breakfast first? No one should embark on a row before they've had their Weetabix.'

'I never said I wanted to row.'

Josh's lips twisted into an almost smile. 'You didn't have to. You're doing that thing with your eyebrows,' he said, his finger pointing at the furrows on my forehead. 'And your left eye is twitching, which was always a red flag.'

I wanted to ask if my eye had been doing that during our argument six years ago, and if it had, why the hell hadn't he walked away before we both ended up saying things that were impossible to take back?

'So, what's the plan for today?' I asked, reluctantly backing down as he reached for cereal bowls and milk.

'My plan is to work. What you do today is entirely up to you.'

'Surely you need power for that?' I asked. It felt like our conversation was a game of chess, and I'd just taken his knight.

'No, because much of my work is hand-carved.' The glint in his eye said, *Checkmate*.

My presence in Josh's home might have been an unwelcome intrusion, but it didn't seem to have affected his appetite. While I pushed a solitary Weetabix around a bowl until it resembled something you might use to stick wallpaper up, Josh silently munched his way through two bowls of cereal as though I wasn't even in the room. And yet there wasn't a spare inch of flesh on his taut, muscular frame, which this morning was all too visible in a pale blue t-shirt that bore the tour dates of a band he'd introduced me to years before. It had been the first concert I'd ever attended, and my parents had only let me go if I promised to stay right beside Josh, an instruction I'd happily followed to the letter. Lyrics from the band's songs that we'd sung together were filling my head, and I clamped my lips shut, afraid I'd start singing them right here in his kitchen.

It was scary how easily I could remember the heavy beat of the bass thrumming through our bodies, and the reassuring security of having his arm around my shoulders in the heaving crowd. I really thought I'd forgotten the minutiae of us, but over the last twenty-four hours things had been floating

back into my head that had no business being there.

I waited until the dirty bowls had been rinsed in cold water before picking up the threads of the conversation I knew he didn't want to unravel.

'I never wanted to come here, Josh.'

A casual observer might have thought him indifferent to my words. But I'd lost the ability to be casual around Josh, so I noticed the way his jaw tightened beneath its camouflage of stubble. The hair on his face was thicker and darker than it had been in his twenties, and a whole world away from the first fluff-like appearance of facial hair that I'd laughingly teased him about until he'd rolled me on to my back on the grass beneath the sycamore tree and tickled me until I cried out for mercy. I shook my head. Where the hell had that one come from?

'And I never wanted you here. So, there you go, we *can* agree on something after all. Who knew?'

I wasn't about to let him turn this into a joke, not when it had meant so much to my husband that I made this journey.

'I came because you have answers to questions that no one else can give me.'

Josh sighed heavily.

'I don't know how many other ways I can phrase this, Lily. I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know why Adam sent you here. Maybe he just wanted to torture me some more.'

His words jerked my attention. A vague blush was now lurking among the stubble as Josh realised he'd given away more than he'd intended with his words.

'Why would Adam do *anything* to torture you? You scarcely knew each other. You met like, what, twice? And Adam wasn't mean or cruel. He was the kindest, gentlest, sweetest person I've ever known.'

If my words were painful for Josh to hear, he hid it well. Although I noticed he was drying a bowl with such intensity he was in danger of removing its pattern.

'I'm sorry, Lily. I'm sure Adam was a great guy and a good husband.'

I couldn't be certain, but it sounded very much like there might have been an invisible question mark attached to that sentence. But he had at least apologised.

'He was. We had a wonderful life together until . . . until he got sick.'

A strange resolve seemed to settle over Josh's features. 'I really *am*

sorry that you lost him, Lily. I know you probably don't believe me, but all I ever wanted was for you to be happy.'

I could have asked him if that was why he'd angrily told me, '*You're not meant to be with him, you're meant to be with me.*' But those were words another Josh had said to another Lily. They'd jarred then, and six years later, as they echoed in my memory, they still did. It had been a mistake to come here, and it was one I wanted to rectify as soon as possible.

'Is there really no way out of this forest? No footpath that could take us back to the road?'

Josh rubbed the back of his neck as though to ease away an ache before shaking his head and reaching for his jacket. 'You want to leave as quickly as possible – I get it, Lily. Believe me, we're on the same page here, one hundred per cent. But there's no way anyone's getting out of this forest until a tractor drags that fallen tree out of the way. Even if we managed to walk through thigh-high drifts and somehow made it to the road, there'd be no passing traffic to flag down. Even in the height of summer, it's rare that anyone comes this way.'

I shook my head in disbelief – not at what he was telling me, but at why anyone would choose to live somewhere this remote.

'What if there was an emergency? What if you had an accident and the power and the phone were both out?'

Josh shrugged as though the prospect either hadn't occurred to him or was of little consequence.

'I'm sure I'd survive,' he said decisively, zipping up his jacket.

I scoped the room, looking for my own coat. 'I'll come with you.'

'Why?'

'So we can talk some more.'

Josh didn't bother disguising his sigh. 'I guess you haven't worked out yet that my whole reason for going out is precisely so that we *don't* have to do that.'

'Were you always this rude?'

'You're the one who said, "*You're the rudest, most annoying boy I've ever met*",' he replied, parroting the words I'd said to him at the top of the sycamore tree twenty years ago. It shocked me momentarily into silence. He was almost at the door before I recovered the ability to speak.

'I thought you said you didn't remember anything about the past.'

'I lied,' he said. It was a great exit line, and he looked pleased with it as

he opened the back door of the cabin and let himself out into the softly falling snow.

‘You did,’ I said quietly to no one except Fletcher, as I watched Josh trudging through the drifts to reach his workshop. ‘And you’re still doing it. You know exactly why Adam sent me here, and by the time the snow melts and we get out of this forest, you’re going to tell me the truth.’

Chapter Fourteen

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

Adam spoke about our first date in his wedding speech.

‘After finally persuading Lily to go out with me, I wanted everything to be perfect, but nothing went the way I’d planned . . .’

He wasn’t wrong.

He’d been both persistent and inventive in asking me out, making it increasingly hard to keep turning him down. And each time I did, it was difficult to remember why I kept saying no.

‘Okay, how about an escape room? And if we don’t get out in the allotted time, I’ll buy you dinner.’

‘And if we *do* get out?’

‘I’ll still buy you dinner. Basically, it’s a win-win as far as dinner goes.’

I laughed. ‘I’m not sure escape rooms are my kind of thing.’ What I actually meant was that I wasn’t sure being locked up in close proximity with him was such a good idea. Not because I didn’t like him; I already knew from our numerous phone calls that I did. I think my biggest concern was that I might be starting to like him a little *too much*.

My suggestion came so unexpectedly I surprised even myself. ‘Maybe we could do something outdoors . . . ?’ Had he been standing in front of me, instead of at the end of a phone line, Adam would have seen the way I was nervously biting my lip as I waited for his reply.

‘I love outdoors,’ he said, with such warmth and enthusiasm, I wondered why I was trying so hard to keep our relationship purely in the friend zone.

Because you’re an idiot, who’s still waiting for something you should have given up on a long time ago. Josh was never going to be anything more than an impossible fantasy, and the sooner I stopped hoping for anything more from him than friendship, the better it would be for both of us. Maybe it was finally time to open myself up to other options.

‘How about a picnic?’ I said, glancing out the window at the brilliant

summer sunshine. The forecast for the next few weeks promised more of the same.

‘Done!’ said Adam with the speed of an auctioneer closing a sale. ‘How does tomorrow sound?’

Which was how I found myself giving him my address and, without realising it, opening a whole new door to my future.



My doorbell rang at the exact time Adam had arranged to pick me up. Unlike Josh, whose arrival time was always a rough approximation or a complete surprise.

‘Stop doing that,’ I sternly commanded my reflection as I gave my appearance one last check before running to the front door. My new white shorts looked good against the tan that was still lingering after a week spent under the Spanish sun. The shorts went well with the pale blue chambray shirt that I’d knotted at my waist. White trainers and simple silver hoops in my ears completed my look, and a high ponytail that swished from side to side as I hurried to let him in.

My breath caught in my throat as I opened the door to Adam. I’d forgotten how tall he was, and also how good-looking. Not like Josh was, in a dark, brooding, Austen hero kind of way. Adam was somehow . . . golden. It was the colour of the natural highlights the sun had streaked into his hair. It was there in the flecks in his hazel eyes. And it dusted like fool’s gold on the downy hair on his arms and legs. Like me, he’d dressed for the forecasted hot weather, in cargo shorts and a plain white tee. He was more muscular than I’d remembered, and had I known him better I’d have teasingly asked if he’d been putting in some extra gym time in the weeks since we’d first met, because that’s exactly what I’d have said to Josh.

I hesitated after my first ‘Hi’, unsure if I should invite him in or grab my denim jacket and the bottle of prosecco I’d plucked from the fridge and just go. He seemed to sense my indecision and took a step back on to the pavement, giving me my cue.

‘All set?’ he asked with a smile that radiated even more warmth than the August sunshine.

‘Absolutely,’ I said, following him to the pavement. His car was parked a little further down the road, the sunlight gleaming off the panels so

brilliantly I was glad of the polarising tint of my sunglasses.

‘I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve brought Fletcher with me. He’s waiting in the car.’

A silent warning buzzer sounded in my head. It wasn’t that I was against meeting his friends . . . eventually . . . but I hadn’t expected him to bring a mate along on our first date.

‘Oh . . . no, that’s fine.’

‘I hope so. He’s under strict orders not to eat all the sandwiches or slobber all over you.’

I nodded slowly, wondering if it was too late to fabricate a sudden migraine, when Adam blipped the car and a furry black and white head popped out of the gap he’d left in the car’s rear window.

‘Ohhh. Fletcher is your dog,’ I said, on a cry that landed somewhere between amusement and relief.

Adam’s brows drew a little closer together. ‘Yes. I said that, didn’t I?’

I was grinning now, I couldn’t help it, especially as his dog appeared to be doing so too, as he delightedly greeted his owner as though he hadn’t seen him in months.

‘Actually, you didn’t. You made it sound like Fletcher was a friend.’

Adam reached in through the open window and gently fussed the dog’s head.

‘He’s that too.’

Something warm stirred in my stomach as I saw the expression in Adam’s eyes as he looked at his dog, and then turned molten when he swivelled that same gaze to look at me.

The phone calls and banter we’d shared since the day Adam had ‘rescued’ me ensured the conversation flowed easily during the journey. He was funny, self-deprecating, and a really good listener. He asked all kinds of questions about Rainbows and Cupcakes, and although I was watching closely, I didn’t once see his eyes glaze over as I talked about the business and the plans I had for its future.

‘One day I’ll be able to rent proper premises and maybe even get a delivery van rather than having to use Betty.’

‘Betty is a colleague?’

‘Betty is my car. You helped me change her tyre.’

This time it was his turn to smile.

‘I think we both know that isn’t true, but it’s kind of you to be gentle

with my ego. Sadly, my knowledge of cars begins and ends with knowing where you put the petrol.'

I gave a quick grin, loving the way he didn't seem to feel the need to conform to a stereotypical macho image.

'I'm sure there are plenty of other things you're good at doing.'

I hadn't intended my words to sound suggestive or sexy, and yet somehow they managed to be both.

Adam took his eyes briefly off the road, just long enough for me to clock the cheeky twinkle in them.

'Maybe I should let you decide on that.'

I felt my cheeks morph from rosy pink to deep cyclamen, but thankfully the traffic was busy enough to have reclaimed Adam's attention. Something was fizzing quietly inside me, as though champagne had mysteriously infiltrated my veins.

I smiled secretly, suddenly really, really glad that I'd finally said yes to the man sitting beside me.



It wasn't long before we were sweeping through a set of imposing wrought-iron gates to a royal park I'd never visited before. From the excited canine whines from the back seat, I didn't think the same could be said for Adam's dog.

'It's a nice place to come and unwind after a busy day,' Adam explained, lifting the tailgate and flipping open a proper picnic basket to slip the wine I'd brought inside. My eyes widened at the impressive array of delicacies in the hamper, and the champagne flutes, crockery and linen strapped inside the lid.

'Whoa. When you said you'd pick up the food for today, I thought you meant a couple of bags of crisps and some Marks & Spencer sandwiches.'

Adam's laughter was light and yet it had the power of a magnet, making it impossible for me to look anywhere but at him.

'I love how you've clearly pigeonholed me as a ready-meal-and-takeaway-pizza kind of guy.'

I bit my lower lip, but the grin was irrepressible and escaped anyway.

'And you're not?'

He reached into the car and hefted out the basket with ease to balance it

on one hip. ‘I think you’re going to have to agree to at least a second date to work out the answer to that one.’

It was a confident reply, the kind that would normally have me running as fast as I could in the opposite direction. But sprinting away from Adam Tennant was surprisingly the last thing on my mind. And for the first time in a very long while, so too was Josh.

We found a perfect spot a little off the main thoroughfare through the park. My trainers sank into deep, springy turf as we left the paved pathway and headed up an incline to a shady spot among a cluster of oaks. I glanced around me, curiously pleased to see that none of the surrounding trees were sycamores.

‘Is here okay?’ Adam asked, watching me carefully as I inspected the woodland. I nodded happily, and he set the picnic basket on the ground.

We unpacked it together, and there was an ease and unexpected familiarity as our hands delved into the basket, occasionally colliding, fingers accidentally grazing each other. Or maybe not accidentally at all.

The prosecco was still chilled from my fridge, and it felt both decadent and delightful to be sipping it from crystal flutes under a blue cloudless sky. Fletcher turned out to be an excellent chaperone, ensuring that no sparks of electricity – however potent – were more important than repeatedly throwing a frisbee for him.

‘He’s tireless,’ I said, leaning back on my elbows and watching Adam’s pet launch himself high into the air to retrieve the plastic disc.

‘He’s like a child. An extremely hairy, energetic child,’ Adam said, his voice warm with affection.

‘Do you want them – children, I mean? Obviously not right this minute, I mean in the future. Someday. You know . . . whenever.’

It had to be the biggest red-flag question anyone could ask on a first date, and I could feel the sides caving in on the hole I’d just dug myself into. But Adam looked totally relaxed and unfazed by my curiosity.

He dropped down on to the tartan blanket beside me and threw the frisbee even further for Fletcher, as though his answer was for my ears only. ‘One day, with the right person, I’d love to have kids.’

‘Me too,’ I said quietly, reaching for the wine glass he’d just refilled. Our eyes met over the crystal flutes as though it was a toast, and neither of us heard the silent click of our future life falling into place like a puzzle piece.

I didn’t see her walk up to us. I had no idea we were no longer alone

until her shadow fell over the spread of picnic fare on the checked cloth. I looked up, using my hand as a visor as the figure paused for a moment and then carefully lowered herself on to the blanket beside us.

My eyes flew to Adam, but the expression in his was just as confused as mine.

‘Oh, you have cherry tomatoes. I love those,’ said the elderly woman, reaching into the container and extracting a plump red fruit. She smiled happily at me before popping the tomato into her mouth. There was a childlike expression of pure delight as she bit into it. I glanced back at Adam, my eyes silently telegraphing a question. *Do you know this person?*

A vague smile hovered on his lips as he almost imperceptibly shook his head.

‘Do you know what, I might just have another one. Is that very naughty of me?’ the old lady asked, with an almost girlish giggle.

‘By all means,’ Adam said graciously, as though the stranger was an honoured guest.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, waiting until the woman had finished her mouthful and before her hand connected with the plate of sausage rolls she was reaching for. ‘It’s really terrible of me, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name.’

The elderly intruder paused with the sausage roll poised halfway to her lips. ‘Oh, it’s . . . it’s . . .’ Her eyes clouded over, and after a moment they unexpectedly filled with tears. ‘Oh dear. I can’t seem to remember it either . . . Why don’t I know my name . . . ?’

My heart broke at the despair in her voice, but Adam handled it perfectly. He leant across the blanket and laid a gentle hand on the old lady’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, it happens to me all the time.’ He lied so smoothly I almost believed him myself.

While our uninvited guest munched contentedly on a pastry, Adam moved closer to whisper in my ear. Despite the weird situation, one part of my brain took a moment to enjoy the sensation of his breath against my skin.

‘I’m going to take a walk around and see if she’s with anyone. Are you okay staying here with her until I get back? I won’t be long.’

I nodded, watching as the elderly woman reached for the Kalamata olives. I’d be fine, so long as our picnic food held out.

Adam gave me a gentle smile which he extended to the older woman. ‘You should try one of the mini pork pies, they’re really delicious.’

He couldn't have been gone for more than fifteen minutes, but it felt like so much longer. The old lady had taken a break from working her way through our lunch after spotting Fletcher.

'Oh, what a sweet little doggy. Is he yours?'

It seemed easier to simply say yes.

'I think I used to have a dog. Did I bring her with me today?'

'I'm not sure,' I said, feeling at a total loss. I had no experience of dealing with people with dementia, which I was fairly sure this sweet old lady was suffering from. Instinctively I knew it wasn't helpful to bombard her with questions, so it seemed best to allow her to sit happily on the picnic blanket beside me until Adam returned. Not that she was particularly bothered about chatting to me anyway, because Fletcher was of far more interest.

It was a good five minutes before I noticed that she'd been secretly feeding him tiny mouthfuls from the pot of pâté we hadn't even tried yet. Fletcher was blissfully eating from her sticky fingers with a look that suggested all of his Christmases had come at once.

'Rose, my darling, there you are. I've been looking for you everywhere.'

The man's voice was breathless, either from the climb up the hill or with anxiety at having misplaced his companion.

'Where did you go, my darling?' the elderly man said, getting to his knees with a gunshot crack of protesting bones. 'I was so worried when I couldn't find you.' He pressed a kiss on the woman's wispy grey hair. 'I'd only popped to the gents for a moment,' he explained to me in an exaggerated whisper.

'Oh, I was perfectly fine. These lovely people asked me if I'd like to join them for their picnic, so I did,' said the woman, who we now knew was called Rose. 'And then I met their sweet little doggy and we've been sharing this lovely feast together.'

Adam's eyes went to the now almost-empty pot of pâté, and I caught an expression that was more concerned than amused.

I bit my lip guiltily. Was pâté bad for dogs?

'Come on, my love. Let's leave these kind people to enjoy their picnic in peace,' said the older man, getting back to his feet with an alarming wobble that caused Adam to take a step closer in case he fell.

'But I haven't finished my lunch yet,' Rose protested, her lower lip

trembling like a five-year-old's.

I had no idea what to say, but Adam didn't even miss a beat.

'Please, won't you both stay and join us? I've brought far too much for just Lily and me.'

'Oh no, we couldn't intrude,' said the man, who I assumed was Rose's husband and carer.

My eyes met Adam's and I saw the apology in them, and something flipped inside me at the kindness of this man.

'Really, we'd love you to have lunch with us,' I added with a smile.

Our date had taken a surprising detour, but over the next forty-five minutes, as we shared our picnic with Rose and her slightly embarrassed husband, Frank, strangely I learnt more about Adam than I could ever have done after weeks of dating. And there wasn't a single thing I discovered that I didn't like.

By the time we waved goodbye to our lunchtime companions, the skies had grown cloudier and a breeze was whipping through the trees. The first fat spots of rain fell when the hamper was still only half packed. I looked skywards as forked lightning streaked across a sky that was rapidly darkening to the colour of a bruise.

'This was not meant to happen,' Adam said, gathering up plates and containers and bundling them into the picnic basket with more haste than care. We were a good twenty-minute walk from where we'd left the car, and there was nowhere nearby to shelter safely.

In just minutes our clothes were plastered to our skin, which was nowhere near as sexy as Hollywood would have you believe. Though Adam's white t-shirt had turned interestingly transparent, as diverting as that was, I was horribly afraid my shorts might be about to do the same.

'Sit it out or make a run for it?' he asked as thunder rumbled in the distance.

'Run,' I said decisively.

The grass was slippery, and the hill steep, so when Adam held out his hand, I didn't hesitate to place mine within his firm grip. But when we reached the safety of the pathway, he didn't release it and I didn't tug it free. We were laughing as we ran through the rain, swerving puddles and dodging Fletcher, who seemed to think it was all an enormous game.

When the car park was in sight we put on a final burst of speed, falling breathlessly against the vehicle like sprinters crossing a finishing line. Adam

was fumbling in his pocket for the car keys when a weird retching sound made me spin around, and I saw Fletcher hunkered down low, his sides heaving alarmingly. The question of whether it was wise to feed dogs pâté was answered seconds later, very graphically. Adam immediately dropped to a crouch beside his poorly dog.

‘It’s okay, buddy, you’re okay,’ he gently crooned, running his hand down the dog’s back until the worst was over. Fletcher looked up at his owner with sorrowful eyes. ‘It’s not your fault, boy. Don’t worry.’

Adam passed me the car keys, urging me to get out of the downpour, but I made no move to open the door. I just stood there in the rain watching this big man, with his big heart, crouched down on the ground, soothing his frightened dog.

Even though his attention was all on Fletcher, Adam must have somehow sensed my eyes were on him. He looked up with an expression of apology.

‘I’m so sorry, Lily. Nothing about today has gone the way I planned. In fact, it’s hard to imagine a first date going any worse than this.’

‘Really? I was just thinking the exact opposite.’

‘You were?’

I loved the way his eyes widened and then lit up at my reply. Very slowly, I nodded and started to smile.

Adam gave a flash of the grin I was going to fall in love with. I just didn’t know it yet.

‘I guess it will make a great story one day.’

And he was right. It did.

Chapter Fifteen

With an impatient sigh I tossed the paperback on to the settee beside me. It landed beside the first two I'd plucked from Josh's bookcase and abandoned. The problem wasn't the books, it was me.

I was filled with restless energy, the kind that has zoo animals pacing their cages – or savaging their keepers, I thought darkly, my eyes going to the workshop on the other side of the clearing where Josh had disappeared three hours earlier.

I'd spent the first hour of his absence working my way to the bottom of the coffee pot, which in hindsight might not have been the best decision. When you're already climbing halfway up the walls, an overdose of caffeine is probably the last thing you need.

I paced Josh's cabin until I knew exactly how many steps there were from the bedroom to the kitchen, and the lounge to the larder. After my fourth circuit, even Fletcher abandoned me for a spot in front of a crackling log fire in the lounge which Josh must have lit earlier.

'Four more days of this and I might truly lose my mind,' I said out loud with a despairing shake of my head. I wasn't sure why the isolation felt so much worse here than it did when I was alone in the home I'd shared with Adam. Perhaps it had something to do with being constantly reminded that the man who lived here didn't want me under his roof. So much so that he'd sooner spend hours in a freezing cold outbuilding than in my company.

Fletcher's paws were twitching as he ran through a dream, chasing something he'd never catch. And in a way so was I, trying to crack the mystery of why Adam had sent me here, but only if Josh was willing to lower his defences. What I needed was something to use as a metaphorical white flag to call a truce in our sniping.

My restless feet had taken me on yet another tour of the cabin's floorplan, and I came to a stop inside Josh's Armageddon-style larder. And there was the answer right there in front of me, innocently disguised as a shelf full of canned rice pudding. Josh had always had a sweet tooth, and I owned a cake-making business. It didn't take a genius to work out what I should do next.

I'd never tried to change someone's mind with a gateau before, but I had

literally nothing to lose.

Lack of electricity made it a challenge, but I was determined to try and excited to discover if baking a cake on top of a wood-burning stove was even possible. If nothing else, it would make an amusing anecdote for the Rainbows and Cupcakes blog.

For the next thirty minutes I allowed myself to get lost in something that felt as familiar and natural to me as breathing. Baking calmed me, soothed me, in much the same way as I suspected working with wood did for Josh. That was something we still had in common, and something which perhaps Adam hadn't initially understood . . .



'Lily?' Adam said, wiping his eyes blearily as though he couldn't quite believe what they were seeing.

I looked up from the large earthenware mixing bowl, momentarily lost behind a cloud of icing sugar. I took a moment to appreciate the flat planes of his taut stomach and how the boxers he slept in left very little to the imagination.

'Sorry. Did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet. I didn't use the mixer.'

Adam had the look of someone who was still more asleep than awake as he shook his head, as though he wasn't quite sure whether this was a dream.

'Lily, it's' – he glanced down at the watch he wore, even when sleeping – 'it's three o'clock in the morning. Why are you baking a cake?'

I bit my lip guiltily, tasting the sweetness of the airborne sugar particles.

'I couldn't sleep,' I said, as though that explained my peculiar middle-of-the-night activity.

Adam padded barefoot to the worktop and pulled out one of my breakfast bar stools.

'You couldn't have tried counting sheep?' he asked, taking a seat.

I shook my head regretfully. 'That never works for me.'

Adam was staring at me, with a look halfway between bemusement and bewilderment. I'd been here before with previous boyfriends, and to be honest it had never gone well. It was, admittedly, a very peculiar habit. 'Whisking up a Genoise sponge isn't quite as sexy as getting down and dirty with a potter's wheel in the middle of the night,' my friend Andie had observed, when yet another guy had referred to my nocturnal baking as

‘downright crazy’. It had become a kind of relationship litmus test, I suppose. And so far, every person I’d dated had failed it.

Adam leant forward and scooped up a blob of dropped mixture with his finger. He lifted it to his mouth, and all at once my attention was a million miles away from the ingredients in the bowl. I watched, fixated, as the finger travelled past his lips and he took the raw cake mix into his mouth. I swallowed noisily and felt something stir down low between my legs.

‘So,’ Adam said, his eyes locked on mine in the half-darkened room where I’d been working by the light of the under-cupboard lamps. It made the small kitchen in my flat feel curiously intimate. ‘Does this happen often?’

I gave a small, almost helpless shrug. ‘Now and again,’ I admitted, before shaking my head. ‘No. Maybe more than that. Once a month or so?’ I felt small and vulnerable, almost naked, despite the silky camisole and shorts I’d pulled on when I’d slipped out of his arms and the bed we’d been sharing. ‘It’s usually when I’m overthinking stuff or worrying about something.’

Adam’s eyes clouded. ‘And are you worried about something right now?’

The middle of the night is made for honesty and the sharing of secrets.

‘Is it us? Is it me?’ he asked, and there was no trace of sleepiness in his eyes anymore.

I leant across the worktop between us, touching his cheek gently with flour-covered fingers. ‘No. It’s definitely not us. I’m really happy with where we are right now . . . with where we’re going. I know it’s only been a few months, but it feels . . . it feels . . .’ The small hours of the morning aren’t the best ones when you’re trying to express something that important, and I had a horrible feeling I was going to say it all wrong. ‘It feels right,’ I finished lamely.

Adam’s smile lit up everything around me – the kitchen, the worktop, my heart. Everything.

‘It does, doesn’t it?’

We shared a smile that I took a mental photograph of, because it was one I knew I wanted to keep forever.

‘So, what is bothering you?’

I blew out my cheeks in a long sigh. ‘Work. Bank loans. Juggling finances. Letting people down. Disappointing customers. Disappointing anyone.’

‘Well, there’s one person you don’t ever have to worry about

disappointing . . .’ Adam reached for the bowl, dipping his finger into the mixture, but this time lifting it to my lips. ‘Me,’ he completed, his voice as low as a purr as he slid his forefinger into my mouth. My knees almost buckled. Baking was a lot of things to me, but erotic wasn’t usually one of them.

‘And for what it’s worth,’ Adam continued, ‘I don’t think any of your customers could ever be disappointed in you. You put so much of “you” into your work. It shows, Lily. It really does.’

His words felt like walking into sunlight after being in the shadows.

‘It’s why making cakes – especially these types of cakes – has always been my dream,’ I confessed, wanting him to know me, really know me. ‘People are celebrating something important in their lives, whether it’s a wedding, an anniversary, a birthday . . . or the birth of a baby. And I get to be part of that. And I love that about my job, I really do.’

‘And I love you.’

The air went still. It was the first time he’d said those words. It was the first time, and yet it felt like they’d been there all along, since the very first day.

‘I love you too,’ I breathed softly.

There was cake mixture on my fingers when they slid around his neck, but he didn’t care as his mouth met mine. There was a sweetness to that kiss that had absolutely nothing to do with the cake I’d been making. The cake I happily abandoned as Adam lifted me up and my legs locked around his hips . . .



Forty minutes later, when I stood back to admire the very basic cake I’d made in Josh’s kitchen, I was beaming as broadly as a *Bake Off* winner. The simple Victoria sandwich was a million miles away from my usual creations, but I couldn’t have been prouder of my achievement. I automatically reached for my phone to post a photo on Instagram, before remembering there was still no internet and my battery was low. I was starting to miss social media like a lost friend and wondered yet again how Josh had so easily withdrawn from that kind of interaction. And more importantly, *what had caused him to do so.*

Fletcher reappeared at some point during my endeavours, ever hopeful that a dollop of raspberry jam or buttercream might hit the floor. He was

practically drooling in anticipation as I cut a large wedge of sponge and transferred it to a plate.

The cabin was filled with the mouth-watering aroma of cake, a fact that Josh was unaware of, for he'd failed to put in an appearance at lunchtime. Perhaps he always worked through, or perhaps he was trying to pretend my presence here was just a bad dream that he'd wake from soon.

Fletcher jumped excitedly to his feet as I shrugged into my coat, clearly ready for another walk. 'Later,' I promised, picking up the cake plate in one hand and a mug of tea in the other. He padded behind me to the front door, not giving up until I squeezed through a narrow gap to prevent him from following me. Through the closed door I heard his disappointed sigh.

The deck was treacherous. I almost lost my footing twice on the snow-covered wraparound and cursed my footwear with its zero traction. Walking as gingerly as an OAP, I reached the shallow steps that led down to the clearing. There was a smooth wooden rail beside them, but with my hands full of peace offerings, I had to descend without it.

It happened when I was almost on solid ground. The last tread looked no different from the others; there was no way of knowing that beneath the thin crust of snow was a layer of black ice. The smooth soles of my fashion boots didn't stand a chance.

My startled cry was whipped away by the wind as my left leg shot out from under me. My arms pinwheeled, sending scalding tea and Victoria sandwich in every direction, while my legs did that running-on-the-spot thing seen in cartoons. But then my heel skidded, and I was suddenly airborne.

I landed badly, crashing to the frozen ground with a bone-shuddering jolt. I knew instantly I'd done damage. My left ankle was twisted beneath me and felt as though it was on fire. Equally painful was the throb at the back of my head, which had connected sharply with something unforgiving beneath the snow.

A hot shaft of pain lanced through my head when I attempted to sit up, and I felt a fledgling flutter of panic. I tried to straighten my leg, but my ankle immediately protested. I was going to need help getting up . . . and there was only one person around to ask.

My first attempt to call Josh was a pitiful squeak that he'd never have been able to hear. Winded by the fall, my lungs felt like broken bellows, incapable of gathering enough oxygen to summon up a whimper, much less a plea for help.

I called Josh's name repeatedly, but my voice was no match pitted against the howling wind and the creaking boughs of the trees. The workshop was less than fifty yards from the cabin, but Josh might as well have been a hundred miles away. For now, I was on my own. Or maybe not.

From within the cabin I heard the sound of paws scrabbling so frantically against the door they were sure to have scratched the woodwork. The noise was accompanied by a series of high-pitched, keening wails that I didn't think I'd ever heard Fletcher make before.

My eyes filled with hot tears at the reminder that Fletcher wasn't just my dog, he was Adam's too, and he was doing exactly what his owner would have instructed: he was trying to help me. Fletcher began to bark. Volley after volley ricocheted around the clearing, the sound bouncing deafeningly from tree to tree.

I turned my head on its lumpy pillow of snow, and stared at the sliding doors of the workshop, willing them to open. Sleet was falling on my face, stinging my skin like a thousand tiny needles and making my eyes water, but they were open when the doors finally wrenched apart.

Josh's face looked entirely different with its mask of indifference ripped away. This time I finally recognised him. But in an instant a new expression took over: panic. He covered the fifty yards or so between us at Olympian speed, never once losing his footing on the ice and snow. He dropped to the ground beside me, his jeans immediately saturated.

'Lily! What happened?'

'I fell,' I said, hugely embarrassed by the wobble in my voice.

'What are you doing out here? Why aren't you—?' His voice broke off and a look of terror flooded his features. 'Christ. You're bleeding. Don't move.'

'I am?' I asked, confused. Had I impaled myself on something hidden beneath the snow? If so, why couldn't I feel it? It was only my head and ankle that felt painful. Oh . . . and my pride, that had *definitely* taken a beating.

'Don't move. I need to see where it's coming from,' Josh instructed, sounding more scared than I'd ever heard him. He was looking down in horror at a circle of red that had pooled beneath me. 'Fuck. I think it's coming from your back. We might need the air ambulance.'

I glanced down, and then incredibly began to smile. 'Or maybe just a fork?'

‘Huh?’ Josh said, his eyes darting around the clearing, as though assessing its suitability as a helicopter landing pad.

‘A fork,’ I repeated, reaching up and taking hold of his hand. It was the first time since I’d arrived that he didn’t flinch or pull away from my touch.

‘It’s jam,’ I said. ‘Raspberry jam.’

Cautiously, Josh dipped a finger in the red-tinged snow, brought it to his face and sniffed deeply before investigating the residue with the tip of his tongue. Watching the realisation dawn on his face was something I wouldn’t forget in a hurry. The relief changed every feature, one by one.

‘Why, exactly, are you lying in a pool of jam?’ he asked, sitting back on his haunches. The damp stains on his jeans now went all the way up his thighs, and I noticed for the first time that he was only wearing another washed-thin t-shirt. He had to be freezing.

‘I made a cake and was bringing you a slice when your steps sabotaged me.’

Josh was still in the hinterland between receding panic and ‘normal service has been resumed’, but there was a glimmer of amusement in his eyes as he offered me his hand to sit up. I needed it more than I realised, for the clearing immediately began to spin like a carousel as he tugged me upright.

With his eyes trained on me, Josh instantly saw my wince of pain as the colour drained from my face.

‘Where does it hurt?’ he asked, the humour in his voice gone as fast as it had arrived.

‘I think I bumped my head when I fell,’ I admitted cautiously, sucking in a huge gulp of air as his hand reached out and gently swept the hair back from my temple. There was an old snapshot memory in the vaults of the past from when he’d done that in an entirely different situation.

Did he remember it too, because he certainly sounded shocked as he cried out, ‘Fuck, Lily! You have an enormous bruise on the side of your head.’

Tentatively I touched the area with my fingertips, flinching the way I’d done that morning when I’d spotted the dark purple mark in the mirror.

‘Oh, that’s nothing. I got that yesterday when my car went into the ditch.’

Josh narrowed his eyes. ‘When you told me you weren’t injured at all?’

I attempted a shrug that I couldn’t quite pull off because it made the new injury at the back of my head too painful.

‘Damn it, Lily. You’re a bloody liability. Is there anything else that hurts before I attempt to get you back inside the cabin?’

I bit my lower lip. ‘Erm . . . I think I’ve done something to my left ankle.’ I was trying to play down the severity, which was pointless when we both looked down at my foot. Even through the soft leather boots, it was starting to swell.

‘Anything else?’ Josh sounded almost angry, as though I had deliberately fallen over to screw up his day.

‘No, that’s it.’

‘Okay. Then hold still and I’ll try to be as gentle as possible.’

Before I could argue or suggest that I hopped to the cabin, Josh slid one arm beneath my knees and the other behind my back.

‘Put your arms around my neck,’ he instructed. It was an awful lot of touching for a man who couldn’t seem to bear the feel of my skin against his anymore. But there was something in his voice that told me this wasn’t the time to object. I did as he asked, and in a movement that he made look surprisingly easy, I was carefully lifted off the mattress of snow and squashed cake and was being held firmly against him as he carried me into his cabin.

His gentleness confounded me, and it really shouldn’t have done. Because for as long as I’d known him, almost everything Josh Metcalf did surprised me.

Chapter Sixteen

SIXTEEN YEARS EARLIER

I could hear their car engine ticking over, even from here. I glanced at the upper branches wondering if I dared climb even higher up the sycamore tree to escape the sound. It was bad enough that he was leaving, I didn't need to hear the final slam of their car door or witness the moment when the Bakers drove away.

I'd spent the last six weeks trying to pretend this day wasn't coming, but it just kept creeping inexorably closer.

'But why do you have to leave?' I'd asked Josh when he'd first broken the news to me. His face had been paler than usual and there had been a resigned expression in his eyes that I'd never seen before.

'Janette's mum has had a really bad fall. The doctors say she can't live alone anymore, and she has this big old house up in Yorkshire, so . . .' He gave a shrug that was probably supposed to be nonchalant, but his shoulders looked bowed down by the weight of events he couldn't control. 'So, it looks like we're moving to Yorkshire.'

'That's ridiculous,' I retorted, trying to hide my despair beneath a cloak of indignation. 'Why can't her mum move down here? That would work,' I said, nodding enthusiastically at my own idea. 'Perhaps I could offer to help look after her? Do you think that would make them change their minds?'

Josh's smile was gentle, taking the sting out of the way he sadly shook his head. 'I think it's a done deal.'

Panic clutched at my stomach, making me feel physically sick as I realised that in less than two months Josh was going to move away.

'I guess now Gordon has retired, they don't have anything that ties them to this area,' Josh said on a sigh.

But you do, I silently screamed. You have me. You just don't know it. But that one was down to me, not him, because despite a thousand opportunities, I'd never once told Josh how I felt about him. It had always been easier to let everyone – including him – believe my feelings had never

ventured any deeper than teenage friendship. But they had . . . for a long, long time.

‘Can’t you just tell them you don’t want to go?’

Josh’s smile was heartbreaking. ‘Tried that. It didn’t work.’

‘But they can’t *force* you to go. Maybe if you tell them you have to stay here for school. I could ask my parents if you could come and live with us.’ We exchanged a look that at any other time would have made us laugh. I didn’t think either of us could see my dad ever agreeing to that one. But I was clutching at straws, feeling the razor-like sting of their sharp edges as they slipped through my fingers.

‘The only other option I’d have would be to go back into the foster system, and I can’t do that again, Lily. I just can’t.’

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat, because I knew that was too much to ask of anyone, especially him. I’d seen the changes in Josh since he’d come to live with Gordon and Janette. He was calmer now, less rebellious, and more settled and at peace than he’d ever been before. The Bakers were more than just long-term foster parents; they were his family now. Of course he wouldn’t want to leave them. And yet, selfishly, part of me had secretly hoped he wouldn’t want to leave me either.

The six weeks had flown by. After that first day we’d scarcely spoken about him leaving. Like a pair of ostriches, we’d buried our heads in the sand, hoping that somehow it wouldn’t happen.

But now the moment I’d been dreading had finally come.

Over the last weeks we’d spent more time on the sycamore-tree platform than we had in years. Admittedly there was much less space for us now, with our gangly teenage limbs and Josh’s broad shoulders. It meant we had to sit much closer together, shoulder to shoulder, thigh against thigh. Not that I was complaining.

I’m not sure which one of us had suggested it might be easier if we said our final goodbye in the tree.

‘I don’t think I could stand there on the pavement with everyone else, waving you off,’ I’d told him. ‘It’d be too sad, like a scene from a movie.’

Josh seemed to consider my words for a moment and then slowly nodded. ‘Okay. I get that.’

I held my breath as I waited for him to look up from the piece of wood he was currently carving with his ever-present penknife.

‘I wouldn’t want you to see me cry.’

He laid down whatever it was he was whittling, and his dark brown eyes met mine.

‘Would you cry?’

I swallowed, and the sound resembled a gulp. ‘Of course I would. I’m going to be really sad when you’re gone. I . . . I’m really going to miss you.’

He chewed on his lip as though trying to prevent the words from escaping.

‘Gonna miss you too. You’ve been a good mate.’

Do not cry. Do not let him see you cry, especially not in this tree where you’ve shared so many happy moments. If you must be sad, do it later. That’s when your tears can fall. Just in case the pep talk didn’t work, I bit down hard on my inner cheek until I tasted blood on my tongue.

‘We can keep in touch on MSN and maybe even write to each other – that’d be retro,’ I said hopefully.

Josh shook his head. ‘I’ve never been very good at keeping in touch.’

Before he’d come to live with the Bakers, there had been a succession of temporary homes with impermanent family and friends in Josh’s life who he was forever having to leave behind. But surely this time it was different?

He must have seen something flash across my features because he put down his penknife and reached over to squeeze my hand.

‘But I guess I could try.’

He left the sycamore tree before me. ‘I’ve still got some packing up to do.’

I nodded sadly but made no move to follow him. ‘I think I’ll just stay up here for a bit longer.’

Josh swung easily off the platform, a manoeuvre I’d seen him do a thousand times before. He moved with a fluid grace, like he was made from mercury instead of flesh and bone. He began to descend the tree, his trainers instinctively finding the footholds Gordon had hammered into the sycamore’s trunk. His head had almost disappeared from sight when he paused, and then cleared his throat awkwardly. I looked up.

‘I’m going to really miss you too, Lily.’



‘Not coming out to wave the Bakers off?’ Mum had asked that morning, when I finally finished pushing my uneaten breakfast from one side of the

plate to the other.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said, getting up from the table and scraping the wasted food into the pedal bin.

‘I thought you and that Josh lad were as thick as thieves. I felt sure you’d want to say goodbye to them,’ my father said, lowering his newspaper with unusual curiosity.

I could feel my eyes begin to sting, and looked down at my bare legs, bronzed from a summer spent outdoors, rather than meet his gaze.

‘Leave her be, Tony,’ my mum said, and shot me a look so full of love and understanding that it was all I could do not to catapult myself straight into her arms.

‘Think I’ll go and sit in the garden for a bit,’ I said, already halfway to the back door. ‘I don’t want to get in anyone’s way.’

No one saw me duck into the flower bed, to the spot where the loose fence panels between the properties had never been repaired. I squeezed through the gap, the boobs I’d finally acquired that year making it a tighter fit than it used to be. It had been years since I’d snuck into the Bakers’ garden this way, but this morning it felt totally appropriate.

The next-door neighbours were too busy with their final preparations to notice me slip into their garden or silently scale the old tree. It felt weird doing so without Josh beside me, leaning down to hoist me up on to the platform, but I got there in one piece.

I sat on the old wooden boards, knees drawn up to my chest, as I listened to the soundtrack of my teenage heart breaking. I heard the removals van rumble away and Claire’s piercing shout as she called out Josh’s name.

‘Come on, Josh. We have to leave.’

His voice came from somewhere below me, startling me, because I hadn’t known he was in the garden. Perhaps we’d both been drawn there by the same impulse. And yet already a chasm had opened between us.

‘Are you coming or not?’

I heard his mumbled reply, and then the creak of their garden gate that no one had ever got around to oiling. Perhaps the new owners would do it, I thought morosely.

There were voices I recognised coming from the street. Mum and Dad had obviously gone out to wish their neighbours one final farewell, and from the sound of it they weren’t the only ones who had done so. The Baker family were well liked and would be missed by the residents of Elm Close.

I steeled myself and counted the slamming of car doors, not allowing my tears to fall until the fourth one had been shut. The engine roared into life, and with a short salute on the car horn, the Bakers' car began to pull away. A sob tore its way from my throat, so loud that I almost missed the sound of brakes being hastily applied.

The collection of voices rose a little louder, but my attention wasn't on them, it was on the vibrations pounding through the sycamore's trunk as someone began to rapidly climb the tree. Josh hauled himself on to the platform as though it was a piece of gym equipment.

I didn't say anything. Nor did he. We just looked at each other for the longest moment and then suddenly he was in front of me, reaching for my hands and tugging me on to my knees. My heart was hammering so loudly in my chest I was sure he could hear it echoing through the canopy of leaves. He released my hands and brought his own up to my face. They stayed there for a moment before his fingers gently swept my hair back from my temple and then wound a pathway through the chestnut strands, as he drew me closer towards him.

Breathing was suddenly not just difficult, it was downright impossible. I had dreamt of this moment a thousand times, and in none of my fantasies had it ever felt this intense, exciting or terrifying. I'd never been kissed before. I had no idea how any of this worked. Practising which way to tilt my head and how to press my lips against someone in front of a mirror was a million miles away from everything I was experiencing right now.

I felt the warmth of his breath before his mouth touched mine. Somehow my head had gone the way it was meant to. There had been no embarrassing clashing of noses or teeth as his lips fleetingly grazed against mine. I gasped, and my eyes, that I hadn't even realised were closed, flew open when I thought it was all over. I had just a moment to see something fiery in his gaze as his mouth re-joined mine in a first kiss that made me realise that every book I'd read or teen movie I'd watched had got it all wrong. His lips were firm, and although this was my first kiss I knew instinctively that it wasn't his. He was too good at it. Too skilled at coaxing my lips to respond to his. His tongue slipped briefly into my mouth, and something really hot happened way down deep inside me.

A long low beeping sound broke us apart. I was panting slightly, and so was he. The car horn sounded again, even more impatiently this time.

'Claire,' he muttered, shaking his head in frustration. It wasn't hard to

imagine her leaning over from the back seat and pressing on the horn.

‘I have to go,’ he whispered.

I nodded.

Before turning to leave, Josh reached down for my right hand. Gently he unfurled my fingers before pressing something into my palm, and then curling my hand around it.

‘For good luck, and so you don’t forget me,’ he said, already swinging himself down from the tree.

I moved to the edge of the platform to watch him run across the lawn one last time, and seconds later heard the sound of his car door slam shut once again. This time when the car started up it didn’t come back.

I sat back on my heels, raising one hand to my newly kissed lips that could still feel the taste of Josh upon them. It was only then that I opened my hand and looked at the object he’d pressed into my palm.

I recognised it instantly as the piece he’d been working on the day before. Although twenty-four hours earlier I would have struggled to identify it, today a tiny, perfectly carved, wooden lily sat in the palm of my hand. I turned it around in the filtered sunlight and admired the miniature flower he’d crafted from a piece of driftwood. I brought the lily to my lips and rested them against the smooth wood. It was the closest I could get to kissing him, and for now it would have to be enough.

Chapter Seventeen

After the initial panic of finding me on the snowy ground, Josh went into ‘take charge’ mode. He headed for the lounge and set me down on the sofa beside the now-dwindling fire. With a gentleness I hadn’t expected, he slid the coat from my arms and extracted me from it.

‘Lie down, Lily,’ he instructed, repositioning a pile of scatter cushions to support me.

‘I’ll make the covers wet,’ I protested with a shake of my head, a move I instantly regretted. Tears of pain flooded my eyes. I was one blink away from letting them fall.

‘Fuck the covers.’

For the second time that day he slid his fingers through my hair. This time he parted the long chestnut strands at the back of my head. His sudden indrawn breath did little to calm me.

‘What is it? Is it bad?’

‘You’ve got a small cut and a not-so-small lump back there. I’ll get some ice for a compress.’ His fingers felt warm as they brushed against the nape of my neck before he let the hair fall free again. I shivered and Josh reached for a couple of logs from the pile beside the fire and threw them on to the glowing embers.

He returned a short while later carrying a far more comprehensive first aid kit than mine. With a patience I would never have suspected, Josh gently cleaned the head wound before turning his attention to my ankle. Worryingly, it appeared to have swollen even more, pressing against the leather of my boot as though it was preparing to Incredible Hulk its way free.

I’d already eased down the zipper, but one half-hearted tug confirmed I wasn’t going to get the boot off without Josh’s help.

‘I’ll try once more, but if it won’t come off, we’ll have to cut you out of it,’ Josh said, reaching into his back pocket and extracting a penknife that looked exactly like the one he’d had all those years ago in the sycamore tree.

‘Please don’t cut them. They’re . . . they’re special,’ I begged, wiping away the film of sweat that had gathered on my upper lip after our two previous attempts.

‘I don’t care if they’re expensive,’ muttered Josh. ‘We need to get that

boot off.'

'It's just . . . they were a gift.' They were Adam's last gift to me, given on our final Christmas together, and the thought of destroying them felt like losing yet another piece of him. And I'd lost so much already.

With surprising intuition, Josh seemed to understand. 'Okay. Let's try one last time,' he said quietly.

He was as gentle as he could be, or I was better at hiding just how much it hurt. With a little more tugging and twisting, the boot finally came off. For a moment we both stared down at my swollen ankle, its bruises perfectly matching the one on my temple.

'Can you move your toes?' Josh asked.

I think we were both holding our breath until we saw my crimson-painted toenails waggle back and forth.

'Good,' Josh said, and there was no disguising his relief. 'I don't think it's broken. It's either a sprain or – if you're really lucky – just a nasty twist.'

'And they teach you all this at furniture-making college?' I asked, not sure why snarky was my go-to reaction. Perhaps I could blame the adrenaline that was still coursing wildly through my veins.

'No. I taught myself basic first aid. I'd be crazy to live somewhere this isolated and not know how to cope with an emergency.'

For the next twenty minutes Josh put that first aid knowledge to good use as he tended to my head injury with competence and detached efficiency. I kept sneaking furtive glances at his face as he worked, but it was blank, totally devoid of emotion. His eyes never met mine and his jaw was tightly locked in a way that didn't invite conversation.

But the atmosphere changed when he asked me to remove my jeans. I knew it was necessary, but taking off my clothes in front of Josh was the last thing I wanted to do.

He turned around, giving me an illusion of privacy, but after a couple of failed attempts I realised I needed his help.

'You'll have to pull them off me,' I said.

Josh cleared his throat several times, as though the objections he wanted to raise were stuck there.

It was the most awkward I'd ever felt in his company, with his hands on my hips and his breath – which seemed to be coming a little more roughly than usual – fanning my face.

I tilted my hips and tried not to remember the last time Josh had pulled a

pair of jeans from my body.

I didn't see the expression on his face as he slid the garment down my legs, because I kept my gaze firmly fixed on the flickering flames in the fireplace. Perhaps that's why my cheeks felt like they were burning as he finally freed me from the Levi's. I had no idea what made him draw in a sudden intake of breath as though he'd been burnt. Perhaps it was for the best that I didn't know.



'You're still here. Why?'

My voice sounded thick and fuzzy, as though someone had stuffed my mouth with cotton wool balls while I slept.

In the flickering glow of a storm lantern, Josh jolted upright in the chair he'd dragged in from the lounge to watch over me. His startled grunt revealed I hadn't been the only one who'd been napping.

It was pitch black beyond the bedroom window, except for the eerily luminous glow of moonlight on snow. The storm had finally abated, but I had no idea if it was late afternoon or the early hours of the morning. My head felt weirdly disconnected from my neck, but at least it wasn't hurting quite so much. Like a drunk trying very hard to appear sober, I repeated my question, carefully enunciating every word. The vowels felt impossibly large on my tongue. *This is what happens when you take someone else's prescription medication.* I should have known when Josh tipped two enormous horse-size tablets into my palm that they'd be strong enough to fell an ox.

'I'm not sure something that large is actually intended for oral consumption,' I had grumbled. *'Did you read the instructions?'* His lips had twitched at that.

'I did and they are,' he'd assured me. *'I took them last winter after hurting my back.'*

Dubiously, I'd taken the glass of water he was holding out. To be honest, my head and ankle were so painful, I'd probably have swallowed a glass of hemlock if he'd told me it would help.

Josh unfolded himself now from the chair that looked far too small and uncomfortable for the length of his limbs.

'How long have I been asleep?' I asked, not liking how disoriented and vulnerable I felt.

‘About four hours,’ he replied. ‘How’s your head? Any dizziness? Do you feel sick?’ He sounded like a doctor, but he looked more like a lumberjack in the fleece check shirt and black jeans he’d changed into while I slept. He could have stepped straight out of a poster for the Canadian Tourism Board.

I tested my head, moving it cautiously from side to side and gave a grateful sigh when the pain remained in the ‘manageable’ sector.

‘Better,’ I replied. ‘See. I told you it wasn’t a concussion.’

‘That’s precisely what someone with a concussion would say,’ Josh replied, spinning me back to hundreds of infuriating squabbles when we’d each fought to get the last word in. Thankfully life with Adam had never been that volatile or competitive.

‘I still think sitting there watching someone sleep is creepy.’

Josh shrugged off my words.

‘How’s the ankle?’ he asked, changing the subject.

I looked down at the pile of pillows on top of which my left foot was resting. Nervously, I flexed my ankle. It still wasn’t right, but the inferno of pain had been tamped down to a low smoulder.

‘Well, I won’t be tap-dancing for a while,’ I joked, ‘but I should be able to walk on it.’

‘Sure,’ Josh agreed equably, covering the width of the bedroom in two easy strides. ‘In a few days.’

‘I can’t sit around on my backside for a few days,’ I immediately protested.

He cocked his head, looking so much like teenage Josh, I lost my train of thought.

‘Got somewhere else to be?’

As if I needed reminding, his gaze went to the curtainless window and the snow-covered clearing beyond.

‘Anywhere but here,’ I said, frustration making me unreasonable.

Josh shot me a look at my childish response. To be fair, I *was* acting like an irrational pre-schooler.

Josh gave an immensely annoying chuckle. ‘I thought I’d remembered everything about you, but I’d forgotten what a pain in the arse you can be when you’re hungry. I’m going to heat up some soup for you.’

I would have protested, but just the mention of food made my very empty stomach rumble like a freight train.

‘I might be a tad peckish,’ I conceded, telling myself the warm glow I felt was due to the prospect of food rather than a remembered echo from the past.

I flopped back against the pillows as soon as he left, wondering if he realised how much he’d inadvertently given away with his parting words.

‘I *knew* you hadn’t forgotten everything,’ I whispered triumphantly in the shadowy room. ‘And if your recollection goes back that far, then I’m sure you remember exactly what Adam sent me here to find out.’



I managed most of the bowl of minestrone before the second round of painkillers Josh had insisted upon kicked in. One minute the spoon was in my hand, and the next I heard it clatter back on to the bowl. Fingers rough with calluses were gentle as they released my hold on the tray and lifted it from my legs.

It felt like an old dream as I was eased back on to the pillows and the heavy comforter was tucked beneath my chin. As I teetered on the edge of sleep, I lifted my face, waiting. Before turning out the light, Adam would always kiss me goodnight and then run the pad of his thumb lightly over my cheekbone. My lips parted in readiness, but they didn’t feel the touch of another’s. And yet as I loosened my grip on reality and fell into slumber, there it was: the lightest of grazes across my cheek.

‘Goodnight, Adam,’ I mumbled sleepily.

There was no reply.

Chapter Eighteen

ELEVEN YEARS EARLIER

‘Have you ever been in love?’

The question came out of nowhere. My hand wobbled, and the cat’s-eye-effect eyeliner took a detour that made me look like a circus clown. It was typical of Andie to suddenly turn an innocuous conversation into interview practice for her journalism course. It was all the more bizarre because the last question she’d asked was whether she could get away without wearing a bra under the strappy top she’d picked out for the party. Frankly, I was far happier discussing her boobs than my former love life.

My silence was a dead giveaway that she homed in on with unnerving accuracy. She was going to make an excellent journalist. She rolled over on my bed, where she’d been scrolling through her phone, and focused her attention on me. I hid as much of my face as I could behind a tissue as I wiped off the wonky eyeliner.

‘You have, haven’t you? You’ve been in love. How come you’ve never said anything about it before?’

Andie wriggled on her belly, commando fashion, to the edge of the mattress so she could better study my face. ‘Was it that Pete boy who you dated in first year, the one with the weird earlobes?’

Despite the intensity of her gaze, I smiled. ‘There was nothing wrong with his ears,’ I said loyally. I might not have been in love with my first-year boyfriend, but I was still willing to defend him – and hopefully throw Andie off course in the process.

I should have known better. She was relentless.

‘Nah. It can’t have been him. You weren’t even that sad when you two broke up.’

She was right. Neither of us had been when Pete and I went our separate ways.

As my best friend, who’d occupied the room next to mine in our student accommodation, there wasn’t much Andie and I hadn’t shared during our

time at university. And yet, somehow, we had got almost to the end of our second year and hadn't once ventured down this particular conversational avenue. Probably because I was pretty good at negotiating one-eighty-degree swerves whenever the topic came close.

'Well, it definitely can't have been that bartender bloke in the club we used to go to, because you said he was a weird kisser.'

'I'm sure I never said that.'

'You did,' Andie said, pulling herself upright and crossing her legs. 'You said his tongue was too big.'

I bit my lip to stop the smile, but it got out anyway. 'So, according to you, I only go out with guys with peculiar body parts.'

'Just reminding you how it went down,' Andie said, tapping the side of her head with a forefinger. 'Steel trap, you know. It's going to come in handy when I'm a world-famous investigative journalist.'

That might have been the opportunity to redirect the conversation to Andie's big glittering future, but I missed it by a whisker.

'So, this guy you were in love with . . . where does he come into the picture? I thought you said you'd never dated anyone seriously from back home. Was he a holiday romance?'

For the life of me I didn't know why I didn't just lie and make up some steamy story about a summer fling under foreign skies with a smoking-hot local. Although Andie probably wouldn't have believed me.

'Come on, Lily,' she urged, using the same wheedling tone that had got us into countless clubs and bars for free over the last two years. 'Who was the guy who broke your heart?'

This time I waited until I'd reapplied my eyeliner before replying.

'Who says my heart has ever been broken?'

Andie's grin slowly slid away when something I hadn't even realised had escaped must have shown in my eyes.

'It's okay, Lily,' she said, sounding unexpectedly contrite. 'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. Even though I do tell you absolutely everything.'

She did. I knew more about the guys she'd dated than I'd ever wanted to. I wasn't a prude – far from it – but there were images burned into my brain that I'd probably never be able to erase, of her passion-fuelled relationships that had shorter sell-by dates than the milk in our fridge.

'It was no one,' I said after a long moment of internal debate. I knew

Andie, she'd be hounding me all night for more information if I didn't say something now. She'd follow me at the party like a determined stalker, convinced that was how good investigative journalists got their stories. For all I knew, it might very well be true.

'It was the boy who lived next door to me.'

For a moment Andie looked a little disappointed at the cliché, but perhaps she caught a whiff of the wistfulness that still, even now, managed to creep into my voice whenever I thought about Josh . . . despite the fact that I tried very hard not to do so anymore.

'Ahh . . . I see, the classic next-door neighbour shtick,' she said, nodding wisely. 'You fell in love when you were toddlers splashing around in the paddling pool, but he never knew you existed until you were sweet sixteen, when suddenly . . . bam . . . he was head over heels.'

'He'd moved away by the time I was sixteen,' I corrected. 'And we were never a thing.'

She leant forward, balancing her weight on her forearms, positioning herself up in my grill. Her face was close enough to admire how carefully she'd applied her own make-up tonight. She'd definitely made a big effort for her blind date.

'Oh, that's even worse. Unrequited love. You never told him how you felt, but he still broke your tender teenage heart, didn't he?'

'You should be thinking about writing romantic fiction instead of becoming a journo,' I told her, reaching for the black halter-neck top I was wearing to the party. 'We were friends, that's all. Really good friends. If my heart got hurt, it was only because, despite our good intentions, we never kept in touch after he moved away.'

Finally, I seemed to have told her a story that she could file away under the heading 'Mildly Interesting, But Not At All Spicy'.

'Oh, well. You never know who'll be at the party tonight. Maybe my mystery guy will bring a mate with him. Or maybe there'll be another bloke with an oversized body part who'll take your fancy.'

I snorted with laughter. 'Yeah, maybe,' I said.



The party was in full swing when we got there. We could hear the thumping throb of music before we'd even started walking up the hill from the bus stop.

We had to stop twice on the five-minute walk for Andie to slip out of her ridiculously high shoes and rub her pinching toes.

‘Why did you wear them if they hurt your feet that much?’ I asked reasonably.

She gave me a scowl as she tried to persuade the blood to return to her little toes. ‘Darren said his friend is really tall.’ She looked up and grinned mischievously from behind the fall of her blonde hair. ‘And fit. He’s super, super fit. Have I mentioned that yet?’

I gave an over-exaggerated, long-suffering sigh. ‘Only about a thousand times. Do you know anything else about him, other than the fact that your cousin thinks you’ll fancy the pants off him?’

Andie gave an uncaring shrug. ‘What else is there to know?’

‘Well, his name might be nice for starters. Or what he studies. Or what he’s into.’

She frowned as though faced with some really tough interview questions. ‘Erm, I think his name is John . . . or maybe Johnnie? And I’ve no idea what he’s studying. And as far as what he’s into . . .’ She checked her watch. ‘Well, I’m hoping in about ten minutes or so, the answer to that one is going to be “me”.’

‘You’re impossible,’ I said on a laugh, taking the bottles of cheap wine from her as she hopped on one leg to put her shoes back on. ‘Perhaps this one doesn’t want to be another notch on your bedpost.’

Andie paused for a moment, as though the absurdity of that statement deserved her full attention. She shook her head, making the silver hoops in her ears glint beneath the streetlight. ‘Well, now you’re just being ridiculous.’

But as extra insurance against rejection, she leant forward and jiggled her cleavage into position.

‘Poor bloke doesn’t stand a chance,’ I said, feeling almost sorry for her unsuspecting date. It was like watching a black widow spider close in on its prey.

The place was heaving and the front drive was already filled with an overflow of people clutching cans, bottles, or plastic beakers full of cheap plonk.

‘One day it would be nice to drink a wine that couldn’t double up as paint stripper,’ I said as I placed the bottles we’d brought with the dozens of others on the kitchen table.

I picked a random bottle and filled two plastic cups to the brim. Andie

was still busy on her phone.

‘Is your cousin here already?’

She slid the mobile back into her jeans pocket and gave a nod before scoping out the room again.

‘He messaged about half an hour ago saying they’d arrived. But he’s not replied to my message since then and isn’t picking up his phone.’

‘He probably can’t hear it above the music,’ I grumbled, raising my voice to a shout to be heard.

‘Alright, grandma,’ Andie teased, downing half of her drink in a single gulp. ‘Shall we circulate and see if we can spot them?’ She was already heading out of the kitchen.

Andie didn’t need a wingman, she did just fine on her own – and she especially didn’t need one tonight, with her blind date already in the bag. Even so, I followed her into the jam-packed hallway. We had an unspoken pact to keep an eye out for each other. I knew her cousin had vouched for this unknown John bloke, but I wouldn’t be happy leaving her until I’d seen him myself. The guys went to university in another city and I didn’t know how well Darren knew him.

‘Over there,’ she said, turning and grabbing my elbow to ensure I was keeping up. ‘That’s Darren on the left by the window, and I’m guessing – or rather, hoping – the guy beside him with the broad shoulders and great bum is my date.’

I tried to follow the direction where she was looking, but unlike Andie, I wasn’t wearing skyscraper heels, and it was hard to see over the sea of heads bobbing up and down to the beat of the music. It was only when we were halfway across the room that the crowd thinned out enough for me to see where we were headed.

There were two figures standing beside the open window. Both had their backs to us. Andie’s cousin was in a pool of light but the person beside him was much harder to make out as they were half hidden in the shadows. All I could see for sure was that his hair was dark and that my friend’s assessment of his physique had been accurate. A t-shirt was stretched taut across a pair of muscular shoulders. His jeans were faded, fashionably ripped, and slung so low on his narrow hips I could read the brand name of the underpants he favoured. I had to agree that the bum they covered looked every bit as cute as Andie had claimed.

I was disappointed with myself at the sudden pang of something that felt

an awful lot like envy. I'd never been one to go solely on a person's looks, but even before this guy turned around, I was interested in him. And he wasn't mine to fancy. He was Andie's.

'Hey, Darren,' Andie called out, managing to find a segue between songs to make herself heard. Her cousin spun around, a broad grin splitting his face when he spotted her. He jabbed his companion in the ribs, who also turned.

Several things happened in that moment. I heard Andie's appreciative 'Phwoar' as though it was coming from a great distance, even though she was right beside me. My knees suddenly turned to jelly, my feet froze to the ground, while the contents of my stomach considered making an unwelcome reappearance.

Andie didn't seem to notice I was no longer following her. Her attention was only on the two figures by the window. She threw her arms around her cousin in an enormous hug, somehow managing to never once take her eyes off the guy standing beside him. The guy who was looking right beyond her and staring straight at me.

Andie disengaged herself from her cousin's arms and turned her thousand-megawatt smile on his friend.

'Hi there. I'm Andie, and I'm really hoping that you're John.'

I don't know if he even heard her because he was still looking pretty dazed. That made two of us.

'Way to make a good impression, Andie,' Darren teased, giving his cousin's shoulder a playful shove. 'I never said his name was John, it's—'

'Josh,' I said, my voice infused with at least fifty different emotions.

Andie's head whipped around faster than a tango dancer to study my face. It still felt frozen in shock. There were a hundred questions in her eyes, none of which I was capable of answering. Comprehension only dawned when Andie looked back at her blind date and saw the way his eyes were still locked on my face.

'Fuck me,' she said softly, catching on far more quickly than her cousin.

'Do you two know each other, then?' Darren asked, his hand gesturing between Josh and me.

It looked as though neither Josh nor I had the ability to construct a sentence, so it was left to Andie to educate him.

'*Of course* they know each other, dummy. Josh used to live next door to Lily.'

I had no idea how she'd worked it out so quickly, but if nothing else it proved she'd made an excellent career choice. She was going to be a great investigative journalist.

There were still about two yards separating Josh from me. And even though I'd lived through this scene countless times in my head, it wasn't following any of the rules. We should be clenched in an enormous hug by now, or he should be spinning me around in his arms – although admittedly that would have been tricky, given the crowded room. Or we should have been kissing. The last was always a stretch, given there had only been one occasion when I'd felt the touch of his lips on mine, and that had been the day the Bakers had moved away, five years ago. But no one forgets their first kiss, do they? And Josh had been mine.

But in all my fantasies there had never been an awkward chasm between us that apparently neither of us knew how to bridge.

Gradually the dumbfounded expression on Josh's face dissolved into a smile. It grew slowly, the way it always had done, reaching his eyes way after his lips were engaged.

'Lily.' He said my name like it was lyrics in a song, and it might as well have been, because suddenly my heart was singing. His voice was deeper than the last time I'd heard it. It was lower and somehow more soulful than it had been at seventeen.

'I can't believe it's you,' he said. 'You look . . .'

My insecurities had a field day filling in the blanks in that sentence. Twenty looks very different to fifteen, and I felt raw and exposed as his eyes swept over me.

'Older?' I suggested, desperate to plug the gap.

'Fantastic,' he corrected. This time his eyes smiled first.

Around us the music was pounding, but in this corner of the room we were enveloped in a pocket of silence.

'Why don't you guys go and get us some more drinks,' Andie suggested pointedly to her cousin.

Darren's eyes dropped to her half-full plastic cup. 'You've still got some,' he said reasonably.

Andie lifted the cup and drained it in one. 'And now I haven't,' she said, speaking to him volubly with her eyes. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to be a language he was particularly familiar with.

'I think they want to talk about us, so we have to leave,' Josh said, his

eyes twinkling in amusement.

Darren looked surprised. 'Why didn't they just say so then?' he asked, taking the empty beaker from his cousin's hands.

Josh looked down at my still largely full glass. No way was I knocking it back like Andie had. Something told me I needed to keep my wits about me.

'Would you like a top-up?'

'Yes, please,' I said, shivering as his fingers grazed mine when he took the wine from me.

'You used to only drink cherry cola,' he said, as though out of all the changes he'd seen, that one was the most remarkable.

'There's a six-pack of it in our fridge,' Andie told him, giving Darren a gentle shove in the direction of the kitchen.

'Don't move,' Josh said as he went to follow his friend.

I shook my head, my throat too full to allow me to speak.

Andie barely waited until they were out of earshot before letting out the kind of sound I thought only lottery winners made.

'Bugger me, Lily. Can you believe this, because I bloody well can't.'

I shook my head, having to forcibly tear my gaze away from Josh's retreating back as he wove through the crowd. He was easy to follow, for he was taller than almost all the other guys in the room.

'It's as if you magicked him up from your past,' Andie declared dramatically. 'Like voodoo.'

I knew what she meant. What were the chances of the very person I'd been talking about just hours earlier turning up tonight?

'Well, if we did cast a spell, it's gone catastrophically wrong, hasn't it?'

Andie's pretty features scrunched into a frown. 'What do you mean?'

'He's here for you, isn't he? He's your date, not mine. Darren told him about you, and he's come all this way to meet you.'

'You're joking, right?' Andie asked, as though it was her fate tonight to be surrounded by total idiots. 'One look at you and I could have been standing there stark naked and he still wouldn't have noticed me. Come on, Lily, it's not been that long since you've hooked up that you've forgotten what it's like when someone has eyes only for you.'

'That's not how it was.'

'He couldn't look away from you.'

'He was just surprised to bump into me again.'

‘Yeah, well, from the way it looked I have a feeling you’ll be bumping into each other again in a totally different way pretty soon.’

In the split second before I refuted her words, my head filled with an image that was going to be hard to shake off. ‘Josh and I have only ever been friends. It was never anything more.’

‘Well, that was then, and this is now,’ Andie said emphatically, her voice dropping unnecessarily as she spotted the two men beginning to cut a path back towards us.

‘He doesn’t want me,’ Andie said, spelling it out in case I was still in any doubt. ‘And as much as I love you, I don’t want your sloppy seconds.’

Josh and Darren were too close now for me to put her straight on that one, so I just shot her a glance that she chose to ignore. She saw the smile Josh was giving me and stepped to one side, in every sense of the phrase, as he passed me a fresh glass of wine.

‘Go for it,’ she mouthed silently, before linking her arm through Darren’s and dragging him away until they were swallowed up by the crowd.



It was Josh who suggested leaving the party, but it was as though he’d read my mind – not too accurately, I hoped, because there was definitely some stuff in there I didn’t want him to know.

Having a conversation at the party had been impossible, and trying to lip-read what he was saying involved a little too much staring at his mouth for me to stay focused. After the fifth ‘I’m sorry, what did you say?’ Josh bent down, positioning his mouth so close to my ear, his words probably left fiery scorch marks on my skin.

‘Do you want to get out of here?’

I nodded, half terrified, half excited, at the thought of being alone with him, which was ridiculous considering the thousands of hours we’d spent in each other’s company in the past. But as Andie had so succinctly put it, that was then, this was now.

‘Will your friend be okay if we leave?’ Josh asked, which ought to have been foremost in my thoughts, rather than his. But then, he had come all this way to meet Andie. Perhaps that was still on his agenda?

‘We could ask her to come with us?’ I said, hoping he couldn’t see how little I wanted that to happen.

Josh shook his head, and a lock of hair fell on to his forehead and stayed there. I wanted to brush it back so badly, I had to ram my hand into the pocket of my jeans before I ended up embarrassing the hell out of myself.

‘I’d prefer it to be just you and me,’ Josh said, making my heart skip momentarily out of rhythm as he placed a hand at my waist to guide me through the crowded party. The black halter top was short, not quite meeting the low waistband of my faded jeans. Had his fingers ever touched that narrow strip of skin before, I wondered? I didn’t think they could have, because nothing about this felt in the least bit familiar or comfortable. It was old and yet at the same time very, very new.

Back in the hallway I couldn’t see Andie or Darren anywhere, so I reached for my mobile, immediately regretting the move when it made Josh remove the hand loitering at my waist.

It was too noisy to call her, so I rattled off a quick message. Her reply pinged back almost immediately.

Have fun. C U later. Use condoms. xx

‘What did she say?’ Josh asked. I’d shut the message down as fast as I could, but still couldn’t be sure he hadn’t glimpsed it on the screen. ‘Will she be okay on her own?’

I loved the fact that he was concerned about the welfare of someone he’d only just met, unless it really was Andie he was interested in after all. The idea that he could think of me in any way other than purely platonically still didn’t seem feasible.

My own feelings were far less complex. He was the boy who’d stolen my heart without having the faintest idea that a theft had taken place. Fifteen-year-old me had been surprisingly good at hiding what she felt. I just hoped that, five years later, I still remembered the technique.

The night air was a cooling balm that hit us the moment we left the house. The driveway was still crowded with partygoers so we pressed pause on any attempt at conversation until we began walking back down the hill.

‘It’s incredible finding you again,’ Josh said, his grin wide beneath the amber glow of the streetlamps.

‘I don’t think I was the one who was lost,’ I said, immediately regretting the unfiltered retort that I hadn’t been quick enough to catch.

He had the grace to look a little guilty. He bit his lower lip, leaving tiny white marks on the sensitive skin.

‘I guess I deserved that,’ he said.

‘I just thought we were going to try to stay in touch, that’s all.’ That was definitely my fifteen-year-old self speaking, but I was powerless to silence her.

‘I wanted to. I mean, I intended to, I really did. But you know . . . other things got in the way. And the longer I left it, the madder I knew you’d be that I’d not kept my word.’

‘You must be really scared about how I feel now, after five whole years have passed.’

His eyes weren’t serious, but his words were. ‘Are you angry with me?’

‘Fucking furious,’ I said, ruining it by breaking out into a grin. ‘I might never forgive you.’

His own smile was back, confident that I wouldn’t be mad at him for long, simply because I’d never been able to sustain it in the past.

‘It’ll give me something to work towards,’ he said, and as much as I tried to dismiss his words, they really made it sound as though seeing him tonight wasn’t going to be a one-time thing.

The walk back to the bus stop was filled with back-and-forth catch-up questions about our families. Josh seemed genuinely interested in how my parents were doing, and that scored him loads of points.

‘Who lives in our old house now?’ he asked, looking nostalgic as his thoughts went back to the first stable home he’d ever known.

‘A couple of solicitors moved in after your family sold it.’

‘Did they have kids?’ His question surprised me. I shook my head, my hair catching in the evening breeze and blowing around my face. I could feel his eyes on it.

‘No. They were an older couple. Why do you ask?’

He gave a shrug that tried to look casual and didn’t quite pull it off.

‘I don’t know. I guess I was wondering if you’d found anyone else to climb our tree with.’

I could play it cool. I could make him think he’d been easy to forget. But what was the point? We’d both know I was lying. ‘No. I never climbed our tree again after you left.’

He gave a slow nod, and something that hadn’t been there before began to glimmer in the dark.

We hadn’t discussed where we were heading, and it wasn’t until we reached the bottom of the hill that I thought to ask what he wanted to do. ‘We could go to a pub, if you like,’ I suggested. ‘There’s a fairly decent one not

far from here.'

His nose wrinkled a little. 'I'm not sure if that's just swapping one noisy environment for another.'

I bit my lip, Andie's message still very much in my head as I made an alternative suggestion. 'Or we could get the bus back to my place. Everyone is out for the evening.'

His eyes went to mine.

'Would you be okay with that? Are you comfortable with it just being us?'

I couldn't think of a single guy I knew who'd bother asking me that. Suddenly the two-year age difference between Josh and the boys I usually dated was even more apparent.

'More than okay,' I said, wondering if I was being too obvious, but not really caring.

'Then let's do it,' he said, throwing an arm around my shoulders in a purely companionable way.

There was a small parade of shops beside the bus stop, one of them a twenty-four-hour SPAR.

'Shall we pick up something to drink?' Josh asked, glancing at the brightly lit shop.

'We probably should, unless you fancy cherry cola.'

His laugh was the same, but strangely more grown-up than it had been. So many changes. Uncovering them was like a treasure hunt, and I was an eager explorer.

Inside the shop I gravitated towards the special offer section, with the wines my student grant preferred, even if my palate didn't. Josh however had gone to an entirely different section.

'Do you like Merlot?' he asked, holding up a bottle that cost four times more than the ones I'd been looking at.

'I don't know. How good is it at taking the enamel off your teeth? That's usually the type I go for.'

That laugh again. If it wouldn't have looked weird, I'd have taken out my phone and recorded it, just in case tonight was all I was ever going to get before he walked out of my life again.

He bought the bottle, refusing to allow me to pay anything towards it. He slipped it into the rucksack he'd collected from beneath a pile of coats at the party. As he closed the flap, I glimpsed a rolled-up sleeping bag and

wondered where he'd be staying tonight.

The bus journey flew by. We went upstairs, even though the lower deck was practically empty. I climbed the steps first, glad I'd chosen to wear the jeans that fitted me better than all the others in my wardrobe. Josh was keeping up a constant flow of conversation, but it faltered as though he'd briefly lost his train of thought as he ascended the steps behind me.

The lounge in our house was quite frankly awful. The settees were lumpy and uncomfortable, and it didn't matter how many colourful throws and scatter cushions we used to disguise them, they were still gross.

'We could sit in here, if you like,' I said, opening the door like a reluctant estate agent and showing him the bleak option, 'or we could hang out in my room.'

It wasn't as provocative as it sounded. My bedroom was on the ground floor and would have been the formal dining room of the house before the landlord converted it to a student rental. It was bigger than the other bedrooms, and had a fireplace and French doors that led on to a garden we did absolutely nothing with, so was kind of a jungle.

'This is huge,' Josh exclaimed, looking around in amazement at the room that housed a double bed, wardrobe, desk, and a small two-seater sofa bed. He crossed the room to stand before the French doors. 'Do these open?'

'If you can get past the stuck-on paint they do,' I said, already heading to the kitchen for wine glasses.

By the time I returned he'd managed to open both the doors, allowing a warm summer breeze into the room. Something fragrant from the neighbour's garden was in the air, suffusing the room with a soft musky aroma.

Josh opened the wine with a corkscrew on a penknife he plucked from his rucksack.

'You still carry a penknife around with you?' I asked, not sure why it made me happy to discover traits of the boy I'd known were still there.

The conversation and the wine flowed easily as we sipped on our drinks and travelled down the lanes of our memories. Every sentence seemed to start with a *Do you remember when . . .* I remembered it all. I always had, and yet for some reason I was surprised that Josh did too.

We sat side by side on the sofa bed my parents had bought – '*in case you want to have guests,*' as they'd said at the time.

'I think it was more to ensure that anyone staying overnight didn't have to share my bed,' I told Josh with a grin.

He looked oddly shocked at my words, before slowly shaking his head. 'I keep forgetting that you're all grown-up now. I keep thinking of you as still being fifteen.'

I blinked several times, not sure if I was brave enough to say the words, but knowing I couldn't stop them from coming.

'I'm not a kid anymore, Josh.'

I took a large gulp of Merlot, trying to drown the thought that I'd never felt less mature than I did right then, with his gaze on me. I'd caught him looking at me several times, and each time he did I was powerless to stop the breath from catching in my throat.

His eyes were on me now, lingering on my lips before dropping to my throat, which was swallowing convulsively, and then briefly dipping lower to the shadowy space between my breasts. If he looked any harder, I was pretty sure he'd be able to see my heart beating crazily beneath the fabric of my top.

I took yet another mouthful of wine, surprised to see the bottle was almost empty.

'It's so good to see you again, Lily,' Josh said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

Very deliberately I set down my wine glass and leaned a little closer towards him. What I wanted couldn't have been any clearer, but just in case he was in any doubt, I ran my tongue over my lower lip.

His breath hitched. I heard it, even above the blood thundering in my ears.

Very slowly, as though he could neither believe he was doing this, nor stop himself, Josh reached out and threaded his fingers through my hair and cupped the back of my neck.

'I don't know if this is a good idea, Lily,' he said, his voice suddenly hesitant.

His eyes were black, the pupils practically taking over the entire iris, and for the first time ever, I felt the kind of desire I thought only existed in romantic fiction.

'I'm sure it is,' I said, my voice hoarse. 'It's such a good idea. In fact, I think it's the best one we've ever had.'

And before he had a chance to refute my words, I bridged the distance between us and brought my lips within an inch of his. Then I stopped. I didn't want to have done all the work. I wanted him to want me too.

His lips crushed mine. There was no tentative teasing. There was no

peck that subtly grew to become something deeper. It was nought to sixty and then more . . . so much more. His tongue found mine and I welcomed it as I leant into the kiss. My head was spinning, and it could have been the Merlot, but I was sure it was actually Josh. Always Josh. Forever Josh.

Chapter Nineteen

ELEVEN YEARS EARLIER

‘Wait.’

It was my new least-favourite word in the entire English language, even more so because Josh had to say it twice before it broke through the desire that was coursing through me like molten lava.

‘Lily, please, wait.’

I blinked slowly as though coming out of a trance. My chest, exposed in its lacy strapless bra, was visibly heaving and I was panting. To be fair, we both were.

‘Please, Lily.’ There was a thread of desperation in Josh’s voice that doused the passion like a bucket of ice water. My seeking hand, which had slid beneath the waistband of his jeans, now felt like an unwelcome intruder. I carefully removed it, noting as I did that there were certain parts of Josh’s anatomy that clearly didn’t agree that we should be stopping this at all.

‘We need to think this through. We need to talk,’ Josh said, his voice still ragged with desire.

Talking had been very low down on the agenda only seconds before. It certainly hadn’t been a priority when his mouth had left mine and laid a trail of kisses down my throat, nipping gently at the sensitive skin where my neck met my shoulder. Discussion hadn’t been on anyone’s mind when he’d reached for the fastenings of my halter top and untied them. He’d looked down at me, his eyes glazed with the same emotion I knew was in mine. I’d tugged his t-shirt over his head, and it had fallen on the floor beside my abandoned top. Somehow I’d ended up beneath him on the small sofa, our legs a tangle of denim wound around each other, as though playing a very grown-up, horizontal version of Twister.

I’d known from the pressure behind his zip how much he wanted me, wanted this. Which made it even harder to believe he was now calling it to a halt.

Very gently he put his hands on my shoulders and eased himself away

from me, creating a chasm that felt as wide as a canyon.

‘I’m not sure we should be doing this,’ Josh said, sounding as though he was trying to convince himself almost as much as me.

‘Why?’ I said, hearing the sting of rejection in my voice. ‘You wanted to just minutes ago.’

My eyes dropped to his jeans, where the outline of him was still pressing against the fabric. His eyes took the same path as mine. ‘I still do,’ he said with a catch in his throat that I thought had taken him by surprise. ‘You have no idea how much I want to lay you back down on this couch and peel off the rest of your clothes and show you just how much I want you.’

My smile was tentative, as though I was walking on thin ice. ‘Then do it.’ I reached out a hand and laid it on his chest. His heart was thundering beneath my palm.

‘I can’t. Or rather, I won’t.’

There was a resolution in his eyes that I recognised from the past. Whatever I said now wasn’t going to make any difference. His mind was made up.

‘Why not? Surely I at least deserve to know that?’

Josh shifted slightly and my hand fell away. ‘Because it’s you. And because it’s me. It’s us,’ he replied, which told me absolutely nothing, something he seemed to realise because he added in a low voice, ‘And because I don’t think you’ve ever done this before.’

My cheeks flushed. Was I really so bad at sex, he actually thought this was my first time?

‘I’m not a virgin, Josh.’

For a moment his smile returned, but it was tempered with something tender.

‘I didn’t think that you were.’ He bit his lip, and for a second the flame of desire was back again. I saw it and he knew that. ‘What I mean is that I don’t think you do one-night hook-ups. You’re not a one-and-done girl. This —’ He waved a hand between our semi-clothed bodies. ‘This means something to you.’

If he’d produced a dagger and slid it between my ribs, I doubt he could have hurt me more.

‘And it doesn’t to you?’

It was a tit-for-tat assault, and I could tell he hadn’t walked away from my words unscathed.

‘It would mean too much to me. That’s why we can’t do this.’

I shook my head, unable to reconcile the rejection with his words.

‘I’m a twenty-two-year-old bloke with a healthy sex drive and yes, I can have one-night stands and amazing sex with someone I know I’ll probably never see again. But you don’t do that, do you?’

I lifted my chin in a challenge. ‘Who says I don’t?’

His smile was heartbreaking, because within it I could see how much he thought of me.

‘Me. I do. I know you, Lily.’

‘You *knew* me,’ I corrected, bravely trying to restore the tattered remnants of my pride.

‘I can’t make love to you and then walk away.’

As much as I liked the fact that he’d called it ‘making love’ rather than something more earthy, the ‘walk away’ bit was what broke me.

‘And why would you *have* to walk away?’

He looked as though someone was tearing him slowly in half, and part of me was glad this wasn’t entirely easy for him.

‘I don’t want to do anything that would make you think this could go anywhere – at least, not right now. I’m leaving in two days, Lily.’

‘Leaving where?’

‘Leaving the country. I’m part of a twelve-month university exchange program. I leave for Asia on Monday. And when I’m done, I plan to go travelling.’

He reached for my hands, and after a brief tussle when I wouldn’t surrender them, he folded them inside his own.

‘This isn’t the right time for us to be starting anything. Finding you again tonight, reconnecting with my old friend, that’s more important to me than a quick—’

‘Fuck,’ I said, not sure if I was completing his sentence or expressing my own disappointment.

‘Exactly,’ he said with a sad nod. ‘I lost our friendship once because I was too careless with something I should have tried much harder to hold on to. I’m not going to ruin it again for a one-night stand.’

‘I’m trying to be a good guy here, Lily,’ Josh said, his voice virtually pleading. ‘I don’t want to lead you on, or make you hope for something that we both know I can’t give you.’

‘Which is?’

‘A real relationship.’

He felled me into a silence there was no coming back from, because part of me knew he was right. Josh shied away from close relationships. It was a lingering scar from his past, long after all the physical ones had faded. He’d stopped us from going further because he knew it would hurt me more to have him for one night only and then have to say goodbye. I wanted to be grateful to him for trying to protect me . . . but it hurt too much.

Josh lifted one hand and brought it to my cheek, wiping away a tear I hadn’t even known had escaped.

‘Do you want me to leave?’ he asked, getting to his feet and reaching for the discarded t-shirt on the floor.

‘No,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘Stay here tonight.’

‘That won’t be too weird?’

‘Everything about tonight has been a little bit weird.’

I got to my feet, deliberately not reaching for my halter top. I think part of me still wanted to show him what he was missing. From the way his eyes travelled my body, there was a small measure of satisfaction in realising that he already knew.

Chapter Twenty

It was early. The morning light filtering through the tree branches created a troupe of grey wraiths who were shadow-dancing on the wall opposite the window. I watched them in a fog that took me back to student hangovers, when cheap wine or tequila shots were the culprit, instead of pain meds that deserved a Class A rating.

I rolled over to face the corner of the room, where the man whose name had been on the packet of pills had spent the night. But except for a neatly folded blanket and a pillow, the chair was empty.

I glanced at my watch; it wasn't even seven o'clock, but Josh had already gone. The bed was a cosy nest that I'd happily have stayed in longer, but my need to visit the bathroom was now fairly urgent and the chance to do so without Josh witnessing – or worse, having to help – was too good to miss.

Using the wall for support, I managed to hop awkwardly to the bathroom. I avoided the mirror above the basin as I washed my hands, because the brief glimpse I'd caught in the glass hadn't been good. My hair was sporting a style that could best be termed Birds' Nest Chic.

Fletcher was waiting for me outside the bathroom door and almost sent me flying when he jumped up and planted his paws on my chest. Still, the hot swipe of his tongue on my cheek was a nice reminder that at least *someone* was happy to see me.

I ruffled his ears and then wobbled alarmingly as I straightened up. I was going to have to seriously work on my balancing skills or I'd be spending an awful lot of time on my backside, I realised, as I tried to find my missing equilibrium.

It didn't help that the wooden floor of the hallway was wet and slippery from Fletcher's feet. It looked as though Josh had already taken him out this morning.

'Where is he now, boy? Is he in the kitchen?'

Before knowing Adam, I'd thought owners who believed their dogs understood them were crazy. I'd have laughed if you'd told me that one day some of my most meaningful conversations would be with someone who could only bark their response. But then there were a lot of things old me would never have understood. Back then I hadn't known that losing the

person you were meant to grow old with would be so hard that some days you could barely drag yourself out of bed. If it hadn't been for Fletcher, and the promise I'd made to Adam to take care of him, I could easily have spent weeks on end in our darkened bedroom. But I'd given my husband my word, and I'd kept it then, like I was keeping it now.

'Let's go see,' I urged my dog, pivoting on my good leg before hopping down the gloomy hallway. Out of habit, I reached for the light switch and flicked it on, never for a moment expecting the corridor would immediately flood with light.

The power was back. I gave a whoop of joy, and with childlike glee turned on every bulb I passed, grinning broadly each time they lit up.

The kitchen was warm from the wood burner and looked much cosier now with its shadows dispelled by the overhead lamps. I looked around, a little disappointed there was no one to share the excitement with.

On the counter was a plate full of crumbs beside the Victoria sponge, from which several slices were missing. *At least he liked my cake*, I thought with a satisfied smile, which I was still wearing when I heard the click of the front door. I spun around a little too fast, swayed, and had to grab hold of the worktop to steady myself. Truly, if I made it through the day without falling over, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

'The electricity is back,' I cried triumphantly, as he stamped snow from his boots.

'So I see,' he replied with a twisted smile.

'Isn't that great?' I asked, spotting a switch I'd not yet flicked. I grinned as a row of under-cupboard lights illuminated the worktop. 'It's like a gift.'

'You must be very easy to buy for at Christmas,' Josh said, peeling off his coat and lobbing it at a hook on the wall where it snagged first time. He really was too cool for school, but then he always had been.

I was one step closer to getting back to civilisation and being able to leave this forest hideaway; I ought to be giddy with excitement, but oddly I wasn't. Before I could examine why, Josh reached for something he'd propped up against the wall behind him.

'Talking of gifts . . .' he said, holding out a length of polished wood that gleamed beneath the newly restored lighting.

My expression went from confused to delighted in a heartbeat.

'You found me a crutch!'

'I *made* you a crutch,' he corrected.

‘You made this?’ I asked, running my fingers down the smooth wood, with its gently curved top. ‘When? Why? How?’

Josh gave something that could almost have passed as a smile, and took back the crutch to stand it upright on the tiled floor. ‘*When?* This morning when I couldn’t sleep. *Why?* Because if that wobble I just witnessed is anything to go by, you’re going to need one for the next few days. And I refuse to answer the *How?* question on the grounds that it’s professionally insulting.’

‘Thank you, Josh,’ I said, reaching out to take the crutch from him. ‘That was really thoughtful of you.’ He flushed uncomfortably at my words, which confused the hell out of me. It was as though we’d forgotten how to be nice to each other . . . but that could have been as much my fault as it was his.

I positioned the head of the crutch under my armpit and took a tentative step. Like a nervous parent watching a toddler, Josh had his arms outstretched, waiting for me to topple. It strengthened my resolve to remain upright, which surprisingly I did.

Looking over at Josh, I realised something was starting to happen here in the forest. I wanted to blame it on the painkillers, but what I was experiencing hadn’t been mentioned in the long list of possible side effects. It was a long time since I’d fallen for Josh Metcalf, and if there was one thing I knew with absolute certainty, neither of us wanted that to happen again.

It’s Stockholm syndrome, I told myself stubbornly. *It’s that weird phenomenon when hostages start warming towards their captors.* Except I wasn’t Josh’s prisoner here in the forest, and nor was I his guest . . . I was something else, which had no name. And whatever it was, it was conjuring up random memories from the past that I hadn’t thought about in years. And some of them felt good to revisit . . .



‘We could so easily have screwed this up, couldn’t we?’

I stiffened, and wondered if he could feel it beneath my charity shop coat. It might have been a year since I left university, but I still shopped like a student.

Josh’s arm tightened around my shoulders, pulling me closer to his side, offering a welcome barrier against the sharp autumn breeze.

‘Screwed what up, precisely?’ I asked.

He dragged me to one side of the pathway, as a cyclist whizzed past, almost mowing me down. Josh muttered a phrase I'd never heard before.

'Are you swearing in Chinese again?'

His crooked grin still did stupid things to my pulse.

'Maybe.'

His vocabulary had certainly expanded in new and interesting ways over the last two years. I'm not sure if he knew how to hold a conversation in the native language of any of the countries he'd visited, but he could swear like a marine in many different tongues.

'You never answered my question,' I said, falling back into step beside him. We were in perfect sync, as though we were hardwired for compatibility. 'What is it that we could have . . . messed up?' He smiled at the way I'd sanitised his comment.

'Us. You and me. Our friendship. If we'd chosen to go down the path we nearly followed on the night of that party two years ago, I don't think we'd be able to do this now – hang out together the way we do whenever I come back home.'

I kicked at a pile of leaves, taking my frustration out on them and hoping he didn't notice.

'I'd miss this,' he continued, reaching for my hand and squeezing my fingers warmly. 'This is so much better than having sex.'

I looked up at that. I had to.

'If you truly believe that, then I think you're doing it wrong.'

His laughter drew the attention of several passers-by.

'What I mean is that I'd rather be with you like this, having fun and hanging out together, than sleep with you.'

'Sorry? Is that meant to be a compliment or an insult? I can't tell.'

'It's a compliment, of course.'

'I think you should stop talking now,' I said, 'before the hole you're digging becomes so deep you'll never be able to climb out of it.'

We walked on in silence, broken only by his occasional quiet chuckle as he rewound our conversation in his head. I'd probably be doing that too, but I'd wait until the middle of the night before forensically dissecting his words. Perhaps one day, when I'd heard enough comments like these, I'd stop waiting for Josh to have a miraculous epiphany and realise the person he was meant to be with had been standing right there in front of him all along.

He genuinely believed our decision to whitewash the memory of the

night of the party and concentrate on just being friends was a mutual one. It wasn't. And each time he came back to the UK and turned up on my doorstep, I came a little closer to letting him know that it wasn't what I wanted. But at the last minute I always chickened out.

'One of these days I bet I'll turn up and find you're married with a kid,' he'd teased on his last visit, as he hauled the sleeping bag he always brought with him out of his rucksack. 'I still don't understand how you're always single.'

'Maybe I'm just waiting for Mr Right,' I'd said, looking at him long and hard, willing him to read my mind.

He didn't pick up on my silent message. Perhaps that was for the best.

'Are the guys in this city all blind or just stupid? You're gorgeous, funny, kind and super smart. You're a catch. These blokes are all idiots.'

You're the idiot, I silently screamed at him. Or maybe I was, to keep on waiting for something that I should know by now was never going to happen.

Maybe today was the day when I'd finally speak up. But before I could find the courage, our attention was drawn to three teenage girls a short distance ahead of us on the path. They were gathered at the base of a towering oak tree, calling up into the high overhead branches.

One girl broke away from the group as we approached and ran towards us.

'Please can you help us?' she begged, frantically grabbing my arm. She looked to be no older than sixteen, and her freckled face was stained with tears.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'It's Missy. My cat.'

'Your cat is missing?' misheard Josh.

'Missy. Her cat's called Missy,' I corrected.

The girl gave me a look like she wanted to adopt me as her big sister. 'Some morons threw a firework into our garden,' she said, pointing towards a row of properties that backed on to the park. 'Missy got spooked, jumped over the fence and ran up this tree, and now we can't see her, and she won't come down.'

Josh's expression darkened as the girl told her tale, and he scanned the park with a new and dangerous look in his eyes. 'Where are they? Are they still here?'

The girl shook her head. 'No, they legged it as soon as they saw us. Can

you help?’

‘Of course,’ I said, pulling my mobile from my pocket. ‘We’ll call the fire brigade for you. They sort out things like this all the time.’

The girl shook her head, and some of the confidence she’d placed in us faded from her eyes.

‘We’ve already done that, but they said it might be a while. And Missy needs help now. What if she’s hurt?’

‘I’m sure she’s not,’ Josh said, already slipping his arms out of his jacket and passing it to me.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked, afraid I knew the answer to that one by the way he was staring up into the tree and searching for footholds.

‘I’m going to climb up the tree and get the cat,’ he said.

The three young girls looked at him, and collectively sighed.

‘Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,’ cried Missy’s young owner.

Josh flashed her a quick smile, which was cut short when I laid my hand on his forearm, stopping him.

‘Don’t even think about climbing this tree. You’ll fall and break your neck.’

Josh looked into the upper branches, as though that thought hadn’t even occurred to him.

‘No, I won’t. You know better than anyone how many trees I’ve climbed.’

‘This is different. You’re older now.’

‘Lily, I’m twenty-four, not eighty-four. I’m pretty sure I can still manage a simple tree like this.’

‘There are men on the way with extendible ladders and proper cat-rescuing equipment. Why can’t we just wait for them?’

‘Because Minnie needs us.’

‘It’s Missy,’ I corrected. But Josh wasn’t listening. He was enjoying the chance to save the day and nothing I said was going to stop him. He turned towards the oak, but before reaching for a lower branch, he spun back and pressed a quick hard kiss on my lips. ‘That’s just in case I do fall,’ he said with a grin.

My neck was aching from staring up into the tree when Josh finally called down that he’d found the cat, a comment that was quickly followed by a loud yowl from a clearly terrified Missy, and a swear word that was definitely not age-appropriate for Josh’s new adoring fan club.

It was all a bit of a blur after that. The leaves shuddered and the cat shot back down the tree, travelling at warp speed across the grass and back into her own garden. She was followed by the three teenagers. A few minutes later Josh reappeared, with leaves and bits of twig in his hair and two long bloody scratches on his forearm, a gift from the cat who'd never needed rescuing after all.



'Ouch! That stings.'

'Don't be such a baby,' I said, pressing a cotton pad drenched in TCP on to his scratches. 'This is what happens when you try to pretend you're Superman.'

Josh grinned at that.

'I was trying to impress you with my superhero skills. Did it work?'

'No,' I said. But it had, and I had a strong feeling he knew that.

Chapter Twenty One

‘That was really delicious.’

‘Should I be offended that you sound surprised?’ Josh asked, swiping the plate from my hand when he saw I was about to get to my feet.

‘I’m not an invalid,’ I protested, wobbling alarmingly as I struggled to position the crutch beneath my arm.

‘It’s not you I’m worried about,’ Josh threw over his shoulder as he walked towards the dishwasher. ‘I just don’t have enough crockery for you to keep smashing it all to smithereens.’

‘One plate. One tiny plate,’ I muttered under my breath, knowing without even looking up that he would be grinning.

‘So why did you think I’d be inept in the kitchen?’ he asked, upending a can of creamed rice and shaking it into two waiting bowls.

‘Well, a) you have an awful lot of tinned goods for a man who can actually make a very decent casserole,’ I said, still satisfyingly full following the meal he’d made from scratch. ‘And b) because when we were kids the only thing you ever made were peanut butter sandwiches.’

Josh gave a shrug that seemed to hold more secrets than it should. ‘I think we’ve both changed many times over since we were next-door neighbours, Lily.’

That was definitely true, but it was a hornets’ nest of a comment that I had no intention of poking.

He set the dessert bowls on the table and then brought over two mugs of steaming black coffee.

‘Was Adam a good cook?’

The question shattered the mood like a stone through a window. Josh saw me flinch and his face immediately twisted into an expression of remorse.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, his head bowed as though spooning sugar into his mug suddenly needed all his concentration. Perhaps it did, because he appeared to have forgotten he never took any in his coffee. ‘I don’t know what made me ask that. It was thoughtless of me.’

I shook my head, watching as he sipped the brew without apparently noticing how sweet it was. ‘Do you want to know one of the worst things

about losing your husband?' I asked, my voice small but steady.

Josh looked up and his eyes met mine across the width of the kitchen table. He nodded.

'Nobody wants to hear about him. They don't ask you what he was like, or what were the things he loved. No one wants to know what made him laugh or drove him crazy. They edit him out of every conversation because they believe it'll be too painful for you to talk about him. But really, the most painful thing of all is *never* getting to talk about him.'

'You can talk to me.'

That had been true once, long ago. There had been a time when I'd happily have shared my every thought with him. But now?

Josh nodded, encouraging me.

I felt a door slowly swing open in my head, as a very different smile found its way to my lips. It was my Adam smile.

'Those questions are almost too easy,' I said, as I checked the responses off on the fingers of one hand. 'Adam was kind and considerate. He was the sort of person who everyone wanted as their friend.'

Josh's expression didn't change, although I saw the twitch of a muscle at the corner of his eye.

'And the thing he loved most . . . that was me. And he told me so, every single day. I always knew how he felt about me, because he was incapable of lying.'

The muscle twitched even more as I continued.

'And Fletcher made him laugh. He adored that dog.'

Josh made a small sound that sounded like agreement. 'And what was it that drove him crazy?'

I paused, like a cautious diver preparing to leap off the high board. 'You. You drove him crazy.'

'Me?' I could tell my answer had shocked him. 'Why?'

It was suddenly hard to meet his eyes. 'I don't know. But just the mention of your name . . .'

'What possible reason was there to *ever* mention my name?'

Trust Josh to go for the one question I wasn't prepared to answer. I lost my composure, stumbling over the words as though they were suddenly too awkward to get past.

'I didn't. We never really spoke about you. I guess it was just knowing you'd been there in my past . . . that there'd been history between us—'

‘Ancient history,’ Josh corrected, looking about as uncomfortable as I felt.

The truce between us suddenly felt in danger of collapse and, determined to salvage it, my tongue set off at a sprint, without waiting for my brain to catch up.

‘Anyhoo, in answer to your question about cooking: Adam had a three-dish repertoire that peaked at fish finger sandwiches. Everything else he incinerated.’ I gave a laugh that sounded a little too high to be natural. ‘He’d have set off every smoke alarm in the house if he’d attempted anything like you pulled off tonight. You’re definitely a better chef.’

Josh got abruptly to his feet and strode across the kitchen in scissor-sharp strides, to scrape his uneaten dessert into the rubbish. There was no doubt he was angry; the proof was right there in the pedal bin.

‘I don’t need you to throw me a bone here, Lily. Adam and I aren’t in competition with each other anymore.’ His laugh held very little humour. ‘The best man won, didn’t he . . . and then he got to be the groom.’

As closing lines go, I had to admit that one would be hard to beat.

The wind, which had been steadily picking up since late afternoon, matched the mood in the kitchen by angrily rattling the glass in the window frame. It gave Josh an excellent excuse to walk away from me, something he was particularly good at doing. I wasn’t surprised when he snatched up his coat and muttered something about having to go outside to ‘check things out’.

With a switch of allegiance that irritated me more than it should, Fletcher hurried to Josh’s side, exactly as he used to do when Adam took him out for his last walk of the night. Wordlessly, Josh bent to clip on the lead and disappeared out of the kitchen with my dog.



I’d always found cleaning to be a great way of relieving tension. When Adam was really sick, and our future was hanging by a thread, our flat had never been more spotless. But tidying up Josh’s messy kitchen scarcely even dented my frustration. I suspected it would take more than a few gleaming work surfaces to stifle my irritation with the man who lived here.

I wasn’t snooping. But I’d seen Josh delve into this drawer for clean tea towels and I needed one to dry the glasses. As I reached for a folded cloth, I felt it snag on something at the back of the drawer. I tugged a little harder and

it came free, bringing whatever had been lodged behind it.

‘Oh!’ The tiny exclamation sounded loud in the empty room as I stared down at the snow globe sitting incongruously on a nest of kitchen odds and ends.

I recognised it instantly. The laughing polar bear sitting in a clearing of tall pines was just as cute and amusing as it had been the first time I’d seen it. I carefully reached for the ornament, as though the glass was as fragile as a soap bubble. I shook it gently, settling it in the palm of my hand as the artificial snow fell on the trees and engulfed the jovial bear in swirling flurries. The price label was still on the base, and I wondered if the globe had spent its entire life hidden away at the back of the drawer, like a guilty secret.

I breathed in deeply, and suddenly my nose was filled with the memory of crisp winter air and mulled wine . . .

Chapter Twenty Two

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

‘Are you having a good time?’

I looked up at Adam and smiled. ‘I really am. I’m a complete sucker for a Christmas market.’

Adam grinned and pulled me a little closer to his side, a place I was fast realising I might be happy to occupy forever. ‘Warm enough?’ he checked, cinching me even closer.

‘I am, but you must be freezing.’

He’d come straight from work, still in his suit and tie, to meet me at the Winter Wonderland extravaganza, knowing how much I’d been looking forward to browsing the market with its festive bars, street food stalls and unique holiday gifts.

‘We don’t have to stay much longer if you’re cold,’ I said, my eyes saying something entirely different when I spotted a whole avenue of artisan stalls which we’d yet to explore.

‘I’m happy to keep browsing,’ Adam said, his eyes warm even if the rest of him wasn’t. ‘It’s fun seeing you all lit up with excitement like this.’

‘If you think this is bad, just wait until Christmas is actually here,’ I warned.

He pulled me towards him, despite the jostling crowds, and kissed me warmly.

‘I can’t wait.’

Even above the Christmas music from the nearby speakers and the buzz of the crowd, I could hear the sincerity in his voice. ‘There isn’t a single thing about you that I don’t love, Lily Williams, except perhaps’ – he paused for half a heartbeat – ‘your surname. That’s something I’d really like us to think about changing.’ Another tiny pause. ‘Someday soon,’ he finished softly.

It wasn’t the first time he’d said that, or something similar. It wasn’t a proposal, not exactly. But it was a testing of the waters, trying to gauge my reaction, to see if the walls I’d once erected were still there. They weren’t.

He'd brought them down so effortlessly that I'd hardly noticed them crumbling away to dust.

The past six months had been a joyful time as we wove a space in our lives for each other. I had a drawer in his bedroom; his toiletries were in my bathroom cabinet. He loved my family and liked my friends and hadn't even minded the extensive grilling Andie had given him over Skype when I'd finally introduced them.

'I've been through tougher job interviews,' he'd said, only half joking, when we finally ended the call. 'Do you think I passed the test?'

I climbed on to his lap, curling my body against his – one of my new favourite positions – although there were a couple of new bedroom ones that threatened to knock it off the number one spot.

'Absolutely,' I told him, nuzzling his neck and breathing in his aftershave. 'Andie would have told you if she'd thought you were a waste of space. She has no filter, and she's always had my back.'

'For that reason alone, I already love her.'

And when they eventually met, I had no doubt the feeling would be mutual.

'I want all of your family and friends to realise how much you mean to me and to know that I'd never do anything to hurt you.'

They already knew that. If it came to a jury decision, everyone important in my life had already made up their mind about Adam. There was only one special person who had yet to cast their vote. Josh. But as he remained addicted to travelling and was rarely in the country for more than a few weeks at a time, the two hadn't yet met.

We meandered from stall to stall, watching ice-carving demonstrations, sampling street food from vendors, and filling the bag he carried for me with unusual Christmas gifts.

'Fancy a beer?' Adam suggested, inclining his head towards an Oktoberfest-style beer tent.

I was about to say yes when I felt something tugging me towards one last stall tucked away at the end of the row. It was festooned with large, teardrop-shaped fairy lights which illuminated an array of snow globes set out on a long trestle table.

Adam's breath was ballooning like a cloud from the cold, but he saw the expression on my face, clasped my hand in his and wordlessly steered us away from the craft beers and towards the stall.

Snow globes. In every shape, size and colour. As the stall holder dealt with another customer who had his back to us, I stepped a little closer, my gaze running over the variety of snow-trapped scenes.

Janette Baker, our old neighbour and Josh's foster mum, had been an avid collector. *'For some people it's china teapots, but for me it's snow globes,'* I could remember her telling me once, when I'd admired the kitchen dresser which displayed her not inconsiderable collection. Even now, years after her death, I couldn't pass a snow globe without thinking of her.

My eye was caught by a particularly amusing globe near the front of the stand. I plucked it up, smiling broadly at the cheerfully grinning polar bear who was having to endure yet another blizzard.

'Very cute,' said Adam.

I'd told him about Josh – well, as much as I thought he needed to know – but I'd never mentioned Janette or her hobby.

'Would you like it?' Adam asked, his hand already halfway towards his wallet.

I hesitated for a moment. 'No. It just made me remember—'

'Lily!' The customer who'd been in front of us at the stall turned around so fast it made my own head spin.

'Lily,' he cried again, putting down the globe he'd been holding as his arms reached for me.

I didn't remember letting go of Adam's hand, but I must have done. Because there wasn't a tug of war as the man I'd once loved and the one I did now pulled me between them.

'Josh!' I exclaimed as he encircled me in an enormous hug, so huge it lifted me off my feet. He held me tighter than Adam did; his cheek was scratchy with stubble, which itched compared to my boyfriend's smooth skin. There was little difference in their heights, but Josh's thick parka made him seem broader and taller than Adam.

'What on earth are you doing here?' I asked when he eventually released me and allowed some of the missing oxygen to return to my squeezed lungs.

'Looking at snow globes,' Josh replied artlessly, his eyes flickering briefly over my left shoulder to where Adam was still standing.

'I meant in the UK. Weren't you spending Christmas in Albania, or Lithuania, or . . .'

Josh grinned. 'Or some other place ending in -ania?' he teased.

Although my feet were now back on the cobblestones, Josh's arms were still around my waist. It was a small move, but it felt like a very big one as I wriggled myself out of his hold and took a step back to stand beside Adam. It forced my old friend to swivel his eyes over to the man at my side.

'Adam,' I said, turning to him first, because it felt important to get the order of the introduction right. 'This is my old friend, Josh. Josh, this is Adam . . . my partner.'

It went very quiet for a moment. I felt the passing of every single second as I waited. Adam extended his hand to Josh a split second before Josh lifted his. They shook and I had no idea whose grip had been just a fraction too hard for a polite greeting, but I had no doubt someone's had been.

'Nice to meet you,' Adam said, his voice giving nothing away. 'Lily has told me all about you.'

Annoyingly, Josh allowed his eyebrows to rise at that. 'Has she?' he said, picking up a metaphorical stick and already deciding to poke the bear with it.

I turned and glared at him, and the stick was immediately dropped.

'Well, I'd only believe half of the nice things she said. She was probably just being kind.'

'And what about the bad things?'

I whirled around, and this time it was Adam's turn to be on the receiving end of my glare.

Josh laughed and patted my shoulder in a jovial 'we're all mates here' kind of way. 'Oh, they were definitely all true.'



I didn't know who had suggested that Josh should join us in the Oktoberfest tent for a beer. I was fairly sure it hadn't been me. But then I equally couldn't imagine one of my companions floating the idea either.

The tent was large and bustling. Long trestle tables were filled with people enjoying the chance to sample the extensive range of craft beers and take a load off for a few minutes. We stood at the entrance for several moments, scanning the tables for a place. Perhaps, if none could be found, we'd have to abandon this plan, I was thinking hopefully, when a foursome sitting on the end of the table nearest the exit got to their feet and Josh swooped in to claim the vacant seats.

Adam waited until I'd slid on to the bench opposite Josh before setting down the bag he was carrying. 'What would you like?' he asked Josh, and I held my breath, willing Josh not to give a snarky reply and just choose a damn beer. Perhaps my telepathy skills were better than I realised, because that was what he did.

Josh waited until Adam had stepped away to join the long queue at the bar before turning back to me. His smile was the one that used to melt my internal organs, but for the first time ever I could feel its potency had waned.

'I can't believe we've randomly run into each other like this,' Josh said, shrugging out of his heavy jacket and pulling the beanie from his head. Despite my resolve, something kicked inside me as he rolled his shoulders and settled back on to the bench. Old habits die hard, screaming in protest when you deliberately decide to ignore them – or so it seemed.

'I can't believe you didn't tell me you were coming back to the UK for Christmas.' Josh wasn't exactly the most reliable of correspondents. He rarely used his phone when travelling and had a habit of turning up unannounced at my door, something I'd always kind of loved, but now I felt unsettled and jangly.

'It was a last-minute decision. Claire was giving me a hard time about being constantly away, so I thought I'd surprise everyone.'

I allowed my eyes to flicker towards Adam, who was still some distance from the head of the queue.

'Consider me surprised.'

'Ditto,' Josh said, his own eyes also going to Adam. He went to reach for my hand across the beer-sticky tabletop, but I whipped it out of his way. Up went the eyebrows again. 'You didn't tell me you were seeing anyone.'

'Was I meant to?' My question was all innocence and nonchalance. 'I mean, I never know who you're seeing.'

The eyebrows drew closer together. Truly, I could have an entire conversation with Josh without him ever having to say a word. 'That's because the people I "see" are all impermanent and unimportant.'

'I'm sure they'd all love to hear that,' I said, so sweetly that he winced.

'You know what I mean. None of them was ever going to be a long-term fixture in my life. The kind you'd want to introduce to your oldest friend as your "partner".'

Ah, so that was what had stung.

'Partner, not boyfriend,' Josh said, a frisson of something like panic

flickering across his face when he saw that Adam was now being served. 'It sounds like it's serious, Lily.'

I licked my lips nervously. This was a conversation I'd always known would come. What I hadn't known was how I would feel about it. Surprisingly okay, as it turned out.

'It is serious, Josh. I think he might be the one.'

His throat visibly tightened at my words, but his face remained impassive. He nodded slowly as he watched the bartender pass Adam three pints of beer.

'He seems like a nice guy. I'm happy for you. I look forward to getting to know him better.'

That was three lies, one right after the other, but there was no time to challenge him on any of them, as Adam returned to the table and slid into the space beside me.

Chapter Twenty Three

It took me twenty minutes to finish tidying up the kitchen. I was moving much better now on the crutch, and despite Josh's gloomy prediction, not a single piece of crockery had been lost.

I hesitated for a long time with the snow globe still in my hand. I could slide it back into the drawer and pretend I'd never found it, or I could stop running away from answers I might not want to hear. With a new resolve, I placed the snow globe front and centre on the kitchen window ledge, where it couldn't be missed. As I did, the memory of a long-forgotten Christmas present that never was suddenly made sense.

'I'd really wanted to get you that cute snow globe with the polar bear,' Adam had said regretfully on Christmas morning. The floor was a sea of colourful wrapping paper from the many gifts he'd given me. 'But when I went back to the Winter Wonderland the following day, the stall holder said someone else had bought it.'

At least now, seven years later, I knew who that had been.



'So, that was Josh.'

I smiled around the toothbrush in my mouth. I'd been waiting over an hour for this conversation, but I hadn't anticipated Adam would choose to begin it when I was frothing at the mouth like a rabid dog.

To be honest, I'd thought it would come in the taxi on our way home from the Winter Wonderland. We'd been lucky and had snagged a cab almost as soon as we'd left the beer tent, and as I'd sunk back on its cracked leather seats, I was eager to hear what Adam thought of my old friend.

But I never got to find out, because Adam had given both of our addresses to the driver, and with hardly any traffic on the road we'd probably reach my flat in less than ten minutes. I had a feeling this conversation deserved longer than that.

As we drove towards my home, it was hard to ignore the niggling concern that perhaps this wasn't a discussion that should be allowed to fester overnight. Acting purely on impulse, I leant forward to speak to the driver.

‘Actually, can you just forget about that first address and take us both to the second one, please.’

Adam looked surprised. Pleasantly so, I hoped.

‘I thought you said you couldn’t come back because you had an early client meeting in the morning?’ he queried.

I did. And I loved how he never complained when sometimes I had to put work before our time together. But tonight was about priorities, and there was something in his eyes that had been there since we’d run into Josh that I hadn’t seen before. I didn’t want it – or anything – driving a wedge between us.

‘I can get up super early to make my meeting,’ I assured him, snuggling against his side. He slid an arm around me, and I tilted my face up for a kiss.

Before my eyes closed, I’d searched his for the thing that had been vaguely worrying me for the last hour or two and had made me decide to change my plans. It was still there.

Now, I rinsed my mouth and patted it dry with a towel, which conveniently prevented Adam from seeing the way I was anxiously gnawing on my lower lip.

‘Yes. That was Josh. What did you think of him?’

The answer shot back so quickly I didn’t entirely trust it was his honest opinion. It was a knee-jerk response. ‘He seems very nice.’

I picked up my comb and smoothed out the tangles in my hair as I tried to navigate my way through an unexpected obstacle course.

‘No, he didn’t,’ I said, talking to Adam’s reflection in his bathroom mirror. He was wearing only a towel, having stepped out of the shower just moments earlier. The temptation to drop the conversation and slide myself against him was strong, but I resisted. ‘Josh was being weird tonight. I don’t know why, but he’s not normally like that. He’s not usually that . . . prickly.’

It hadn’t gone well from the moment Adam returned to our table with the beers and unfortunately overheard Josh making some totally unnecessary comment about never having imagined I’d go for a ‘stuffed shirt, suit and tie kind of guy’.

Adam hadn’t reacted, but I’d noticed the way his lips had tightened. On the surface, if you read a transcript of the rest of the evening, there had been nothing said by either man to hint at any animosity or underlying aggression. But that didn’t mean it hadn’t been the world’s biggest silent pissing contest.

‘I think Josh was thrown to find out I was seeing someone, and that it

was serious.'

Some of the tension went out of Adam's features at my words.

'Because he's been carrying a torch for you for years?'

I shook my head so vehemently I messed up the smooth strands I'd just combed into place.

'God, no. That's not how he feels about me at all. We're just mates. Josh was just pissed off that I hadn't told him about us.'

There was a long pause, and I held my breath waiting for Adam to ask the obvious question: Why hadn't you? I was very glad he chose not to, because I didn't know the answer to that one myself.

Instead, he dropped the towel that was fastened around his hips and returned it to the rail. I felt my heart rate immediately quicken, the way it did every single time I saw him naked. I wondered if it would always be that way. I really hoped it would.

'If you got to know him – when you get to know him,' I quickly corrected, 'I think you'll like him. I know he can be a bit of a prat at times, but beneath it all he really is one of the good guys.'

'Maybe we just caught him off guard or on a bad night,' Adam said reasonably, and I heaved a silent sigh of relief as he turned off the bathroom light and took my hand. I thought the topic was over and done with, but as we walked side by side towards his bed, Adam said softly, 'He didn't look the way I'd imagined.'

Suddenly it wasn't carpet beneath my feet, but quicksand, and if I did the wrong thing, said the wrong thing, an uncomfortable situation could easily turn catastrophic.

'Oh?'

Adam gave a small self-deprecating laugh. 'In my head, I've always imagined him shorter.' He paused. 'Maybe with a beer belly.' He paused again. 'And uglier. I definitely imagined him uglier.'

I laughed, hoping it was the joke it seemed to be, all the while glimpsing an unexpected insecurity in the man I'd fallen in love with that I'd never seen before.

'He's just Josh,' I said, as though that explained everything, even though I knew it didn't. 'He's the boy who showed me how to climb trees and taught me all the best swear words. He had a really shitty start in life and sometimes I think he isn't done yet putting all of that behind him. He'll be a great partner for someone someday, when eventually he does. But it won't be

me. Because I'm off the market.'

Finally, at last, Adam's eyes cleared, and he pulled me into his arms. And as we tumbled back on to his bed, and he began sliding off my underwear, I sent up a silent prayer that Josh was as far from Adam's thoughts as he was from mine.



Josh returned to the kitchen with a surprisingly contrite expression on his face. It was weird how his sheepish charm still had the ability to flip a switch within me.

'I'm sorry, Lily. I didn't mean to be a dick.'

I was startled but found a retort that hit exactly the right note.

'But you just couldn't help yourself, huh?'

He paused for a beat, long enough for me to wonder if I'd misplayed it, then he laughed.

He looked genuinely sorry. 'I don't think living alone has improved my ability to play nicely. I need to work harder on that.'

I shook my head, willing to draw a line under the sour note our earlier conversation had taken, but Josh held up his hand, stalling me. 'For what it's worth, my reaction to Adam was never entirely . . . rational . . . back in the day. I'm not proud of how I behaved in the past, Lily.'

It was a huge admission that seemed to suck all the air out of the room. I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard Josh admit to being at fault. It made him seem oddly vulnerable and more like the boy I used to know.

'I think you were both as bad as each other. Let's just leave it there, shall we?'

And that would have been the end of it, had his eyes not gone to the window ledge, and the polar bear snow globe. I watched his face carefully for a reaction, but there was none. When the silence stretched too long to feel comfortable, I filled it.

'I found that in the back of the kitchen drawer. Does it look familiar?'

Josh shook his head, trying to appear indifferent, but I was an old expert on studying his expressions. He recognised the globe; I knew he did.

'I used to pick them up all the time when Janette was alive,' he said with an attempt at nonchalance. He took his eyes from the globe and swivelled them to meet mine. 'I'm sure if you rifle through other drawers in the cabin

you'll find some more.'

The rebuke – which he'd done little to disguise – stung, but not as much as the realisation that this was one more thing that Josh was refusing to tell me.

'I'm certain I recognise this one,' I said, giving him one last chance to come clean.

But Josh simply shrugged, seemingly bored with the conversation. 'They all look the same to me,' he said, before changing the topic with absolutely no attempt at subtlety. 'I think I'll put on a DVD. Fancy watching a movie?'

I shook my head, disappointed on so many levels it was hard to know what bothered me most.

'No, I think I'll have an early night.'

I left the room with Fletcher padding loyally beside me, and was almost at the bedroom door before realising I'd left my cardigan on the back of a chair. I retraced my steps, but never made it back into the kitchen. For as I paused in the hallway, hidden by the shadows, I watched in fascination as Josh lifted the globe from the window ledge and stood motionless, cradling it within his large, work-callused hands, with an unfathomable expression on his face.

Chapter Twenty Four

It was the day when everything began to feel just a little bit better.

For the first time since my fall, I managed to successfully cross the bedroom without relying on the crutch Josh had made for me, and without wobbling.

The weather was finally beginning to improve. Beyond the curtainless window, sunlight was bouncing so brightly off the snow I'd have slipped on sunglasses – if I'd thought to pack them. The boughs of the surrounding trees were still heavy with frost, but with the morning sun glinting through the branches, they no longer looked oppressive. The raw beauty of the forest where Josh had made his home had never been so clear.

But perhaps the biggest improvement of all was the change occurring between Josh and me. I was beginning to hope we could find a plateau for our fractured friendship, somewhere it could quietly mend. Perhaps it might never be as strong as it had once been, but at least it was moving in the right direction, away from the horrendous words we'd hurled like weapons in that awful row six years ago. That wasn't to say that there weren't still uncomfortable silences and pockets of tension. There were moments when I could swear Josh's eyes were on me, but when I lifted my head to meet his gaze, he was always looking the other way. Something occasionally arced between us that had no voice, no words, but it fizzed through the air, as dangerous as a lightning strike. Thankfully we were both sensible enough to ignore it.

One thing that hadn't improved, however, was the phone signal. No matter how many times I checked – and I checked a lot – the screen on my mobile remained obstinately devoid of the symbol I'd always taken for granted.

From the bathroom came a steady drumbeat of water, which meant Josh was still in the shower. On impulse I decided to surprise him by making breakfast. It was only fair seeing as he'd spent the last thirty-six hours waiting on me hand and foot.

As I reached for my crutch, which was lying across the bed, a beam of sunlight speared through the window, casting a spotlight on the underside of the armpiece. I ran my fingertips over a series of tiny gouges I'd never

noticed before. Dismissing the strange markings, I swung the crutch from the bed like a baton twirler in a marching band. In slow motion I saw it sail through the air and begin its downward descent . . . straight towards a large ceramic lamp on Josh's bedside table. I was already wincing before I heard the resounding crash of the lamp connecting with the hard wooden floor. The sound was eclipsed only by my cry of dismay.

The lamp had the look of something people turn up with on *Antiques Roadshow* and discover it's worth a fortune. *Please don't be valuable*, I silently prayed.

The sound of feet running – no, pounding – down the corridor tore my eyes from the shattered lamp. Josh didn't pause to knock, he just burst through the bedroom door as though the cabin was on fire.

He seemed momentarily startled to find me still upright. His worried gaze then travelled to the floor, where the evidence of my clumsiness was scattered like ceramic roadkill.

I'm sure if he hadn't been practically naked and still covered in droplets of water from the shower, I would have led with an apology for breaking yet another of his possessions, but it was hard to concentrate when rivulets of water were running down the planes of his toned stomach before disappearing into the fabric of a hugely inadequate hand towel that sat like a sarong on his hips. It took a second or two for me to look further north to see how his chest was rising and falling, as though he'd run some distance to reach me. As it was only a small cabin, I assumed that anxiety was the cause.

'Jesus, Lily, I thought you'd fallen over again.'

I swallowed, uncomfortably aware that I'd not been this close to a practically naked man for some considerable time.

'Erm, no. I try to only fall over spectacularly *once* per visit.'

It was clearly too soon for humour because he didn't even crack a smile.

'I thought I was going to find you in another pool of blood on the floor.'

It seemed the wrong moment to remind him that actually it had *never* been blood, just raspberry jam. He really did look very disconcerted.

'I'm sorry, Josh. I'm afraid I've had a bit of a mishap with your lamp.'

'Screw the lamp. It's you I was worried about.'

Interesting.

He was slowly decompressing; I could see that by the way his stomach muscles were no longer clenched in a rigid washboard formation.

'I'll pay for it, obviously,' I said, before thinking to ask, 'Was it

expensive?’ Too late, I realised those questions should probably have been in reverse order.

‘It’s just some old Ming thing that’s been in my family for generations,’ he said casually. I was still so wrong-footed, it took longer than it should have done to realise he was winding me up.

‘It’s not an antique at all, is it?’

At last, finally, he smiled. ‘No, Lily, it’s not. And you know my family history better than anyone. Foster kids don’t usually come with valuable family heirlooms.’

I bit my lip. Sorry for so many things, not least of which was making him remember a past he always tried so hard to forget. But that was Josh. That was what he did. When something hurt him, he deliberately chose to erase every trace of it from his life.

‘I’ll get the broom,’ Josh said, turning way too fast for a man wearing such a skimpy towel. I tried not to look, but I was only human, and it was very hard not to. I cleared my throat, because my mouth was suddenly very, very dry.

‘Erm, why don’t I do that, while you go and get a *much* bigger towel,’ I said, my eyes dropping pointedly below his navel and then instantly darting away as I caught another glimpse of something I was never meant to see.

To his credit, Josh handled the awkward moment far better than I did. He reached for the towel and cinched it more firmly into place.

‘Sorry about that. I don’t think hosts are meant to flash their house guests, are they?’

Thank God he appeared to find it funny. I matched his banter with my own.

‘I think it’s okay if you never actually invited them to stay in the first place.’

He grinned, and after a moment of hesitation I grinned back.

Strangely, it was the grin that haunted my thoughts for the rest of the morning, and not the unexpected glimpse of a body I never thought I’d see unclothed again.



‘You’re moving so much better,’ Josh observed as I went from dishwasher to cupboards, putting things away. After only a few days, I knew the layout of

his kitchen shelves almost as well as my own.

‘I am,’ I said with a lightness of both heart and step that had definitely been missing before. It was amazing, the difference a change in weather had made to my mood. ‘I was thinking I might take Fletcher out for his walk this morning.’

Josh nodded into his coffee cup. ‘Sure. Just so long as I go with you.’

‘I don’t need you to babysit me anymore, Josh. Not now I’m more mobile.’

‘Exactly,’ he said triumphantly. ‘You’re almost better, and the last thing either of us wants is for you to take another tumble and end up having to stay here even longer.’

That *was* the last thing I wanted, but it still stung to hear that he could scarcely wait to see me gone.

‘Besides,’ Josh continued in an entirely different – almost hesitant – tone. ‘Now things are thawing outside, they’ll be clearing the roads and fallen trees in the next day or two. And I still haven’t had the chance to show you around properly.’

‘Well, if you’re sure you can spare the time,’ I said, feeling oddly conflicted about leaving the forest. It was probably frustration, because I’d never managed to get to the bottom of Adam’s final instruction. It felt increasingly likely that I’d *never* discover why my husband had sent me to Josh, or why he’d ever thought I’d need to forgive him.

I pulled on the only clean jumper I had left in my case and ran a brush through my hair, for once not bothering to clip it up. The soft water in the forest had my hair shining in a way even fancy salon treatments had never achieved. Still, good hair was hardly an adequate reason to live in a forest for the rest of your life.

Unsure how the absurd notion of living here permanently had crept into my thoughts, I returned to the kitchen where Josh was waiting for me. He was dressed for outdoors and was holding my coat in readiness for me to slip it on. There was a slight fumble of crutch and sleeves as I wriggled into it. Josh’s hand went to my neck to sweep my hair free of the collar, releasing both the trapped strands and a curious sensation that travelled the length of my spine. My body had traitorously responded exactly as it used to do whenever Adam’s fingers had scraped against my neck. I was furious with my nerve endings for not recognising that this was the wrong man, in the wrong place, and they had no business reacting as they’d done.

With a voice that sound unnaturally chipper, I strode briskly to the door. 'What's the first stop on our tour? Your workshop?'

Josh's brows drew together. I kept forgetting how well we used to know each other; how easily we'd once picked up on every tiny nuance. He'd done such a great job of forgetting me, but unfortunately it seemed he could still read me like a book.

'We can start there if you like, although there's not much to see. Just a load of wood and tools.'

'Great!' I said, sounding so falsely jolly I fully expected him to call me out on it. Weirdly, he didn't, but he did look at me strangely before picking up Fletcher's lead and following me out the door.

The workshop was more cavernous than I'd realised. It felt like a cross between an airline hangar and a meat locker. Josh must have seen me shiver, for he gave an apologetic shrug. 'Sorry. It's always pretty chilly in here.' He flicked on a series of switches and two rows of overhead fluorescents buzzed into life, as well as an electric heater.

The air was fragrant with wood shavings, wax and varnish. It was a subtle aroma that I realised clung to Josh like a signature cologne.

Within the workshop were multiple benches, each containing projects at different stages of completion. I wandered from one bench to the next, recognising several of the pieces in progress from his website.

'These are all really good,' I said, genuinely impressed with his skill. He'd come a long way from a troubled teenager with a penknife and a penchant for scoring his name in tree trunks.

I threw him a sidelong glance and was surprised to see him looking vaguely uncomfortable. Surely he knew how talented he was?

'So, what's under that one?' I asked, walking towards a final workbench, which, unlike the others, was shrouded by a large calico dust sheet.

'Oh, that's nothing,' Josh said, his pace quickening as I approached the mysteriously draped bench. 'It's not finished.'

It seemed unnecessary to point out that neither were the items on *any* of the benches. But they weren't hidden from sight.

'It was a commission piece, but it fell through.' There was a definite uneasy note in his voice.

My curiosity was piqued. 'May I?' I asked, my hand already on the dust sheet.

With an almost tortured look, Josh gave a quick reluctant nod.

‘Lily,’ he said as the dust sheet fell to the ground. There were so many different emotions threaded into the way he said my name, but I couldn’t unpick or identify any of them.

‘Oh,’ I said, taking a step closer to the half-finished crib. It was vintage in design, made from a type of wood I’d never seen before. The grain was beautiful, catching the light and reflecting it like a mirror, but it was the intricate carvings that made the piece stand out. Detailed woodland creatures were chiselled into the wood, chasing each other down one side of the crib; the opposite side had one half-finished carving of a rabbit.

‘That’s beautiful, Josh. It’s not just furniture, it’s art.’

He gave a small grunt, but I thought I’d seen a small glow of pride on his face as he bent to retrieve the dust sheet.

‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘Why did they cancel?’ I already feared the answer to that question would be a sad one.

Josh gave a shrug. ‘I don’t know. They just cancelled the order.’

‘Didn’t you ask why?’

‘It wasn’t any of my business.’ There was an undercurrent in his voice that I took to mean that it wasn’t mine either. But there was a quiet tragedy in the unfinished crib, like a dream that had never been realised. It resonated in me like a sorrowfully tolling bell.

This time it was his turn to be intuitive.

‘I’m sorry. This must be especially hard for you. I know how much you wanted to have a baby.’

Just when you think you’ve packed away all the sharp edges of grief, one of them still manages to escape and slice you. Unwanted tears sprang into my eyes. I blinked them away furiously.

‘It wasn’t meant to be,’ I said. ‘We just weren’t lucky. And then when Adam got sick all those plans were put on ice.’ I bit my lip, because the prospect of having Adam’s child was *still* on ice. Literally.

‘Well, I’m sorry if seeing this upset you. I should probably just chuck it out.’

I shook my head. ‘Don’t you dare. It’s beautiful, and it will be even more so when it’s finished. Promise me you won’t destroy it.’

He gave a slightly bemused smile. ‘I’d forgotten how much you like to champion the most bizarre of causes,’ he teased gently. ‘This is like the hedgehog crossing all over again.’

I laughed, happy the conversation was steering towards safer waters. 'They needed to slow down the traffic,' I said, almost as ardently as I'd done twenty years ago when we'd sat on his lawn making placards for our two-man protest to the local council.

'I still can't believe you got them to put in that crossing.'

'When something's important, you have to fight for it,' I insisted.

Josh's expression was suddenly unreadable.

'Don't bin the crib,' I said firmly.



I'm not sure which one of us started it first. It was a silly little game; a private joke that made us smile every single time. Adam and I spoke about our children, the ones we knew Future Us would someday have, giving them the most ridiculous names.

'I can't wait for the day when Pocahontas scribbles all over this wallpaper with her wax crayons,' I told Adam, 'because then we'll have to change it.'

'Pokey would never do that,' he insisted. 'She'll appreciate quality décor.'

Or . . .

'I don't know how Fletcher is going to feel when Spartacus replaces him as our number one son.'

I'd spluttered out a mouthful of coffee on that one.

'Spartacus?' I exclaimed, when I'd finished coughing.

'I am Spartacus,' Adam declared solemnly, quoting the film's iconic scene. 'Everyone wanted to be him. Great name for a kid.'

But the memory I loved most . . .

'I really hope little Bellatrix grows up to look just like her mummy,' Adam said, after watching me apply my make-up one morning.

'You want to call our daughter the same name as an evil witch?'

'Well, I was considering Hagrid . . . but I thought that might be a step too far.'

But picking out a name for a real-life baby was yet another treasured moment we never got to experience.



After leaving the workshop we headed down one of the many footpaths that threaded through the tall pines. The ground was thick with snow here, where it was protected from the sunlight by a lacy dome of interwoven boughs.

‘Careful,’ Josh cautioned as my crutch skidded away from me. His hand reached out to grab my elbow and he forgot to remove it as we continued down the meandering pathway. And I forgot to remind him.

Eventually we came to the place where he’d been leading me. It was a natural clearing, most of which was taken up by a large lake, whose surface was frozen as solid as an ice rink. Even so, Josh bent down and clipped the lead back on to Fletcher’s collar. It was probably overly cautious, because I doubted Fletcher would do anything as daft as venturing on to the frozen surface.

‘It doesn’t hurt to be careful. A guy I used to know lost his life rescuing a dog who’d fallen through the ice.’

‘How terrible,’ I said, bending down and double-checking the clasp on Fletcher’s collar.

‘Don’t worry. I won’t let anything bad happen to Adam’s dog,’ Josh said solemnly. There was a weight behind those simple words that almost bowled me over.

It emboldened me to risk shattering the convivial mood, but there was an almost church-like feel to this place. The lake, the ice-bedecked trees, and the silence of the forest . . . they made it seem like a confessional.

I didn’t know I was going to ask the question until it came out, almost of its own volition. I didn’t even know it still bothered me. But clearly it did.

‘Why did you do it, Josh? Why did you come and see me right before my wedding?’

‘Lily.’ His eyes pleaded with me not to go there.

But this time I pressed on. I’d be leaving here soon, and he owed me an answer to this question at least, after all these years.

‘Why, Josh?’

‘I . . . It was . . . it was a mistake.’

‘What was? Coming to see me, or what happened afterwards because of it?’

‘All of it,’ he said, his eyes unreadable. ‘It was all just one big, horrible, stupid mistake . . .’

Chapter Twenty Five

SIX YEARS EARLIER

He wasn't meant to be there. But then Josh was good at that. There were a great many places where he wasn't supposed to show up . . . and still did.

Like in the middle of the night when I woke from an old dream and only just managed to stop his name from escaping my lips.

Or crossing my thoughts every time I saw someone with inky dark hair on a street somewhere.

Or in my head whenever I walked past a sycamore tree.

But the one place he really, really wasn't meant to be was standing at the door of my hotel accommodation at the venue where in two days I was going to get married.

'Josh. What the hell?'

'Not quite the greeting I was hoping for,' he said. There was a smile on his face that looked like it wasn't sure whether it should be there. It shouldn't have. Just like the man it belonged to.

'You're not meant to be here,' I said, self-consciously cinching the courtesy towelling robe tighter around my waist. I threw a concerned glance over his shoulder at the hotel grounds, desperately hoping Adam hadn't decided to go for a late-night stroll. His room was in the main building, whereas I was staying in one of the cluster of lodges set among the trees. The neighbouring lodge was reserved for my parents, who fortunately weren't arriving until the morning.

'If I wasn't meant to be here, why did you send me a wedding invitation?' Josh asked, not entirely unreasonably.

'Because I thought you'd politely decline it, which, in case you've forgotten, you did.'

I'm not sure who'd been most relieved when Josh's RSVP card had come back with the Unable to Attend box ticked.

I'd forever be glad that Josh and I had successfully managed to rekindle our friendship, but it had been impossible to ignore the undercurrent of

tension between him and Adam when they'd met again at our engagement party. Of course, Josh hadn't helped matters by turning up more than a little drunk with an equally inebriated, stunning redhead clinging to his arm.

'I'm still torn between punching the guy on the nose for breaking your teenage heart all those years ago, and buying him a drink to thank him for being so blind he still doesn't realise he's let the best girl in the world slip through his fingers.' Adam's voice had been a low murmur in my ear as we'd slow-danced to a romantic song. Josh had been over on the other side of the room, propping up the bar with his date, but I'd felt his eyes on us as we travelled in slow circles on the dance floor. And I was pretty sure Adam had too.

So, when Josh had declined the wedding invitation, it had been much more of a relief than a disappointment.

But here he was now.

'I had to come,' Josh said, looking weirdly nervous as he stood at the door of my lodge.

'No, you didn't,' I said firmly, trying to inch the door shut without him realising what I was up to. He placed one booted foot in the opening, stopping my plan in its tracks.

'Can I come in?'

'No,' I cried, as shocked as any self-respecting Victorian maiden. 'I'm not decent.' I plucked the first excuse that came to mind, despite the fact that the towelling robe was thick and covered me from neck to ankles.

'I've seen you wearing less than that,' he reminded me with a fleeting smile that Victorian Me seriously considered smacking off his face.

'Well, now it's exclusively for Adam's eyes,' I said.

Josh visibly winced. 'Please, Lily. I just want to talk to you.'

'I'm getting married in two days,' I told him, as though that small but important detail might have skipped his mind.

'That's why I'm here.'

Before I could decide if that was enough to let him in, suddenly, above the chirping of the crickets, I heard the whirr of an approaching golf cart. It was how the hotel residents travelled the grounds, and I had a sudden terrifying vision of Adam climbing out and seeing me apparently in the middle of a secret assignation. Feeling as though we were in a French farce, I grabbed Josh's arm and hauled him over the threshold.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do if moments later Adam knocked on

the door, but I had a horrible feeling it might involve bundling Josh into a wardrobe or pushing him out of the bathroom window. Fortunately, when I looked out, it was to see one of the chambermaids behind the wheel of a cart loaded with towels and linen.

I leant back against the door, my heart racing.

‘Just say whatever it is you’ve come to tell me, and then get the hell out of here before Adam actually turns up.’

Josh shook his head. ‘He won’t come here tonight.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Because he’s a traditional stand-up guy. He follows rules, he doesn’t break them.’ *Unlike me* hung on the air, but neither of us acknowledged the unspoken truth of that.

But Josh was right. Despite the fact that we largely split our time between my flat and his, Adam and I had agreed to separate accommodation at the hotel. There was something quaintly romantic in being apart for the two nights before the wedding.

We’d fallen in love with the venue the moment we’d driven up its meandering, tree-lined drive almost one year earlier. It was a beautifully restored stately home that backed on to a river, with the most amazing grounds where weddings could be conducted. Somewhere on the tour of the building, Adam had suggested that we should stay for a few days before the wedding.

‘For a pre-moon,’ he said, drawing me into his arms and kissing me, while the wedding coordinator politely pretended not to notice.

‘Is that even a thing?’ I said, laughing into his shoulder. But I loved the idea, especially after we’d been shown the luxurious spa facilities.

‘It’s our wedding, Mrs Tennant-to-be. We can do anything you want.’

‘Mrs Lily Tennant,’ I said, rolling the name over my tongue as though trying it on for size. For a split second an unwanted memory scythed into my head of writing ‘Lily Metcalf’ all over a school exercise book, never realising it was a signature I’d have no need to perfect.

Now, I pushed away from the door and strode towards the lodge’s compact sitting area.

‘What are you doing here, Josh?’ I deliberately ignored the appealing chintz-covered armchairs, hoping my unwanted guest would realise he wasn’t going to be there long enough to get comfortable. ‘You have five minutes,’ I warned, glancing down at my wrist as though to time him. Unfortunately, I’d

left my watch in the bathroom. He almost smiled at that, and there was a time we'd have enjoyed that moment of comedy. But not tonight.

'Five minutes, then you have to leave,' I repeated, wondering how much damage he could possibly do in just three hundred seconds.

A lot, as it turned out.

'Don't marry him, Lily.'

I gasped.

'I mean it. I know you think you love him, and maybe you do. But not as much as you love me.'

Outrage momentarily stole the air from my lungs.

'What the fuck? What gives you the right to come barging in here forty-eight hours before I'm about to marry the best person I've ever met, talking such utter shit? I thought I'd heard every ridiculous notion in your head but —'

'But you've never heard this.' Josh swallowed visibly, his throat working overtime. 'I love you, Lily. I've always loved you. There's never been anyone else in my heart except you. And yes, I know this is the worst possible time to be telling you this. But better now than after you've gone through with it. I had to come. I had to stop you marrying the wrong guy, even if he is Mr Right, Mr Nice Guy, Mr Good Guy. He's not the one you're meant to be with. You're meant to be with me.'



Pacing helped. I must have completed five circuits of the tiny lounge before I said a single word. Josh didn't speak. He just watched me travel the perimeter of the room like a caged animal. Eventually the rage calmed down enough for me to construct a sentence.

I spun on my heel, catching him momentarily off guard and intercepting a look on his face that threw me off balance. He looked genuinely terrified, like a man whose entire life was hanging in the balance.

'Damn you, Josh. Why the hell would you do this to me now? You've had fourteen years to tell me you had feelings for me, but you've swerved every single conversation that was even remotely personal. In fact, you've made it more than clear that all you've ever wanted to be was my friend.'

'That's not exactly true,' he said carefully. 'There was that moment . . .'

I knew the one he was talking about, and shook my head so that images of

our almost naked bodies didn't intrude into my thoughts.

All at once I was terribly aware that beneath my towelling robe I was totally nude, and just ten feet behind me was a room with a queen-sized double bed. Who was going to stop this madness from spilling over into total insanity? Because someone sure as hell had to.

'I'm marrying Adam in two days,' I said, my voice firm. 'Not because he's my second choice, but because I love him.'

Josh nodded. 'I know that. But you love me too.'

'I've never once said that,' I insisted, like a prisoner pleading the Fifth.

'You didn't have to. I've always known it.'

My cheeks ignited. So much for keeping my feelings secret.

He took a step closer, and I knew I was meant to take a counter one backwards, but my feet felt as though they'd been glued to the floor.

'And the reason I knew it, was because I felt the same. Feel the same.'

Speech was impossible, so all I could do was shake my head helplessly.

'This isn't some out-of-the-blue realisation, Lily. Our hearts decided on this years ago. I'm so sorry I was too stupid to realise it or listen to what I've always known was true. I'm sorry I'm doing this now . . . today. But I'm not sorry I'm doing it.'

I looked up from my intense scrutiny of the carpet, which was the only safe place for my eyes right now.

'We're meant to be together, you and me,' Josh said softly. 'I'm the one you're meant to marry.'

'And what about Adam?' I challenged. 'Because if you think I don't want to be with him, then you're even more deluded than I thought. He's a wonderful person and he loves me so much. I will never, ever, do anything to hurt him. And calling off our wedding would do far worse than that – it would destroy him.'

'More than having him realise one day that you've never stopped loving me?'

I gave a laugh that held absolutely no amusement. 'You really think that much of yourself?'

Josh shook his head. 'No. I don't. I know I don't deserve you, that I'm not worthy of you. Someone as incredible as you shouldn't be in love with an idiot like me. But I think – I know – you are. And I couldn't let you walk down the aisle without letting you know that there's someone else who also wants to spend his life with you.'

It was too much to ask of my knees to keep supporting me, and I collapsed on to one of the chintz armchairs, like a boxer knocked to the canvas.

‘Everything is all booked. Guests are flying in from all over the world. The flowers are being arranged and the best wedding cake I’ve ever made is sitting in the hotel’s kitchen. It’s too late. You’re too late,’ I said with a catch in my voice. ‘My wedding dress is right in there,’ I said, pointing towards the bedroom, where the most beautiful gown I’d ever owned was hanging inside a silk garment bag. ‘My parents have spent an eye-watering amount of money to make this the most incredible day of our lives. You’re crazy to think I’d throw all of that away on . . . on . . .’ I was so angry, so incensed, words were actually hard to pin down.

‘On a love that started when we were teenagers and never went away?’ Josh said gently.

‘On a ridiculous fairy tale that couldn’t and shouldn’t come true.’

Josh dropped down to the floor in front of my chair, and for one dreadful moment I thought he was going to pull out a ring and propose, which would have pushed our situation into one no wedding etiquette book had ever covered.

Thankfully, all he did was reach for my hand.

‘All I ask is that you think about what I’ve said, Lily. There are still two days until the wedding. It’s not too late to change your mind. If Adam loves you as much as I do, he’d want you to be happy.’

Tears were now rolling down my cheeks, and I didn’t think I’d ever loved and hated Josh Metcalf quite as much as I did at that very moment.

‘Please,’ Josh implored, his voice cracking with emotion. ‘Please think about it. Don’t marry the wrong man, even if it is for all the right reasons.’

He left shortly after that with a promise he’d return the following evening. I followed him to the door, on legs that had never felt less capable of supporting me.

He paused for a moment at the threshold. ‘You have no idea how much I want to kiss you right now. But I won’t cross that line because it’s not fair to you.’

‘But asking me to call off the wedding is?’ I said on a bitter laugh.

‘Goodnight, Lily,’ Josh said softly as he slipped out into the inky darkness. ‘Sleep on this and we’ll talk again tomorrow.’

But of course, I didn’t sleep that night. How could I when I was facing

the worst decision I would ever have to make. I was holding a grenade in my hands, and lives were going to be destroyed whichever choice I made.

Chapter Twenty Six

SIX YEARS EARLIER

The whole purpose of visiting a spa was that it was supposed to leave you tranquil and calm, two things I couldn't be further from feeling.

'You're extremely tense,' observed the young woman giving me a massage.

Adam raised his head from the adjacent table, looking so relaxed he was practically comatose. 'Are you feeling tense?' he asked, his voice threaded with concern.

'No,' I denied, praying the woman, who was now attacking the knots in my shoulders with the gusto of Paul Hollywood kneading bread dough, wouldn't contradict me. 'Well, maybe a little,' I conceded. 'Pre-wedding jitters, I imagine.'

It was the wrong thing to say, because it made Adam lever himself up on to his forearms. The woman conducting his half of our couples massage looked vaguely annoyed at the interruption.

'You're not nervous about the wedding, are you?' he asked, seemingly unconcerned to be having this conversation in front of two strangers. It was the third time he'd asked me that question today, and it was still only mid-morning.

'No. Of course not. Why would I be? Why would you think that?' Some distant inner voice was telling me I was protesting too much, and I clamped my lips shut before they gave anything else away. There was nothing I could do about my shoulders, or the rest of my body that kept stiffening into fear-fuelled spasms whenever I thought about Josh's confession the previous day.

I thought I'd done a pretty good job at disguising the turmoil my conversation with Josh had left me in. Luckily it was uncommonly bright for a winter morning, so I'd only looked slightly ridiculous turning up for breakfast with sunglasses on. We were seated directly beside a picture window that looked out on to the beautifully kept hotel grounds, which allowed me to keep them on. But Adam was attentive and observant, two

traits I'd always loved in the past. Today, not so much.

We'd gone for a swim after our massage – my suggestion, which I refused to admit I'd proposed only because scything through the water, doing lengths, made conversation practically impossible.

'Whoa,' Adam had exclaimed, catching up with me as I paused to get my breath at the deep end. 'Are you secretly trying out for the Olympics?' he joked. He reached for my hand where it was resting against the gleaming tiles of the hotel pool. 'God, Lily, your pulse is racing like crazy.'

'It's good cardio,' I said, on a snatched, raspy breath.

His eyes look troubled. 'Just slow down a bit. This is meant to be fun; it's not boot camp.'

'I'm having fun,' I insisted, with such bleak determination it was sure to have worried him. I forced myself to smile, because the last thing I wanted was for him to suspect anything was wrong. Because there wasn't. I wasn't in the middle of the world's most awful love triangle, because my heart belonged to Adam and always would. It was just awful timing that the man I'd secretly loved for practically all of my life had now decided that he loved me too. Well, that was too bad. Too late. Too everything. My eyes were suddenly stinging, and I wondered if I could blame it on the chlorine, as I pushed off from the side once again. 'Just a couple more lengths,' I promised over my shoulder, before dipping my face into the water and silencing all further conversation.

When I emerged from the changing room, Adam was leaning against the wall waiting for me. As I approached, he slipped his mobile phone into the back pocket of his jeans.

'So, what next?' I asked with the kind of cheer that could have got me a job as a children's TV presenter.

'Actually, there's something I need to sort out for later. Would you mind if I left you on your own for a bit?'

I tried really hard not to look grateful, because the mask I was wearing was growing uncomfortably heavy.

'Of course not.'

Adam brought his arm around my shoulders and drew me in for a kiss that felt more than just a quick peck.

He'd spoilt me over the last few weeks with thoughtful gestures and unexpected gifts in the run-up to the wedding. It didn't surprise me that he had another one up his sleeve before the rehearsal dinner tonight. I didn't

deserve him. I truly didn't deserve him, and he definitely didn't deserve to be marrying someone who'd lain awake for half the night thinking about someone else. I was a horrible, horrible person.

'Maybe I'll see if they can squeeze me in for an earlier mani-pedi before Mum and Dad get here.'

'Good idea,' Adam said, and for just a moment I thought there was something in his voice that made it sound like we were both actors in a second-rate play. Then he looked at me and smiled and I knew it was just me, projecting.

'I guess I'll see you later then, after golf.' Adam had booked a round on the hotel's impressive course, which sounded as exciting to me as watching paint dry. 'Unless you've changed your mind about joining me,' he added, his voice warm and teasing. 'You can drive the golf cart.'

'Tempting as that sounds, I think I'll go back to my room after my nails and have a rest,' I said. 'It's going to get hectic later, once everyone starts arriving for the rehearsal dinner.'

I was on edge and fidgeted throughout my appointment at the salon, smudging two toenails and the nail on my ring finger – which I refused to view as an omen, even though it felt like it was.



'Shit. Are you trying to give me an actual heart attack?'

Josh rose from the chintz armchair in my room.

'How the hell did you get in here?' I asked, scouring the room for some sign of forced entry.

'I got the maid to let me in. I said I'd left my key card inside.'

I don't know what shocked me most, his audacity or the lack of hotel security. It was amazing the doors that opened – quite literally – when you looked the way Josh did.

'What if I'd walked in with Adam?' I said, my pulse still galloping at his reckless attitude.

'I took a chance that you wouldn't,' he said with a strange expression on his face.

I shook my head, furious that he was happy to play Russian roulette with my future.

'This is not okay, Josh,' I said, waving a hand to indicate his presence in

my room. 'None of this is remotely okay.'

He was still standing by the armchair, but his feet shuffled now, like he was a child being reprimanded. That got to me in a way I really wish it hadn't.

'If you're here for some sort of answer—'

'I'm not,' he interrupted, looking up from the soft shoe shuffle he was performing on the rug. 'I don't want anything from you, Lily. And especially not an answer.'

A finger of fear ran down my spine. What did that mean? What had he done . . . or worse, who had he spoken to?

'Why don't you need an answer from me?'

'Because I'm rescinding the question.'

'You're what?'

'Rescinding. As in taking it back—'

'I know what the fucking word means, Josh.'

He flinched as though I'd lashed out with whips instead of words.

'I no longer need to know how you feel about me . . . about anything, because I realise I've made a mistake.'

To say the wind was taken out of my sails was an understatement.

'So, you admit that trying to sabotage my wedding was the wrong thing to do?' I had no idea why I was suddenly so angry, when there were so many other valid emotions to be claimed.

Josh shook his head, and the way the winter sunlight caught the ebony strands in his hair was so mesmerising I wasn't looking at his face when he said the words that shattered the heart of the girl I had once been.

'I realised I wasn't in love with you after all.' He paused, swallowed, and then went in for the death blow. 'I never have been.'

'Are you for real?' I cried, leaping to my feet and crossing the space between us in less than a heartbeat. 'What kind of person does this? Do you realise the torment I've been in for the last twenty-four hours?'

He gave a shrug, and something that had been alive for a very long time slowly died inside me.

'Sorry. I got it wrong, and I acted without thinking. But hey, the good news is I came to my senses in time, before any real damage was done.'

'Unbelievable,' I said, enunciating every single syllable. 'You are fucking unbelievable. What the hell was going through that selfish brain of yours?'

He flinched again. 'Nothing. Clearly.'

I waited for more, and it took longer than it should have done for me to realise he had nothing to add. Well, I did.

'This is not how people behave with someone they claim to love.'

'Yeah, well, like I said . . . I'm not in love with you. Saying it out loud yesterday made me seriously think about everything I would have to give up if you and me were ever a thing, and I knew . . .' He faltered, as though searching for his place in a script. 'And I realised that being "fond" of you isn't enough for me.'

'Fond?' I said the word with distaste, as though it was dipped in arsenic. 'Fond wasn't the emotion you claimed to feel about me yesterday.'

'I told you, I was wrong,' he said, his voice rising and sounding suddenly less steady. 'I made a bad judgement call and thought I wanted to be with you. But luckily for both of us I realised in good time that it wasn't true. We can just wipe the last twenty-four hours from the slate and pretend they never happened.'

I was shaking. With rage, with rejection, and with something that hurt like a death.

'I thought I knew you, Josh. Really knew you. But the way you're standing there, saying all this shit to me, not even realising the damage you've done, well . . .' I very nearly started crying then, and it took a strength I didn't know I had to stem the tears before they fell. 'People don't do this to their friends, Josh. They don't do this to someone who's always been there for them. Who let them walk in and out of their life whenever they wanted and never made any demands or expectations. This is inexcusable behaviour. How can you not realise how wrong this is? Were you raised by wolves?'

For the first time there was real and genuine emotion on his face. 'You know how I was raised. Wolves would have been an upgrade.'

Even though he'd hurt me more than anyone had ever done before, I still would have given anything to take back my words. But it was too late. The damage was already done.

'I don't want a life with you, Lily.'

'Well, that suits me fine, Josh, because you were never going to have one anyway.'

His dark eyes glittered. 'No, you would always have picked the safe option. You're too much of a coward to ever take a risk.'

'I'm a what?' I said, even though I'd heard him with perfect clarity.

‘You’re too scared to step outside of the perfect little fairy-tale bubble you live in. And I couldn’t live in your world; it would suffocate me.’

Suffocating him sounded like a pretty good option right then, and it took more restraint than it should have done not to pick up the nearest pillow and give it a try.

‘Fine. Well, I suggest you get your two-faced lying self the hell out of my room, because I’ve got a rehearsal dinner to attend,’ I said, trembling so much he must surely be able to see it.

Josh took a step towards the door, and as he did, I was hit with two thoughts: I was losing him, and I never wanted to see him again for as long as I lived.

‘I don’t think we should see each other anymore,’ he said, turning back and catching things in my eyes I really hadn’t wanted him to see. ‘At least for a while.’

‘Oh, I think you’ve ensured that it’s going to be permanent,’ I said, trying to keep it together for the last few moments of this awful scene. I was so close to falling apart that the only thing holding me upright were gossamer threads of pride. ‘We’re done, Josh. Finished. We were really good friends once . . . but friends don’t do this to each other. You clearly have issues with family and friendship and commitment, and I’m sick and tired of making excuses for you because of your shitty childhood.’

‘Don’t go there, Lily,’ he said, his voice dark and dangerous.

‘Fine,’ I said, mine glacier-cold. ‘Why you’re this way isn’t important, and you know what, I don’t even care. Enjoy the rest of your life, Josh. Just make sure you live it somewhere far, far away from me.’

I thought that had landed somewhere within him, but he walked to the door and never once looked back. He made one last parting comment before he left, and those were the words that I already knew would be indelibly scored across my soul.

‘You’re right. I think it’s better for everyone if we never see each other again.’

And then he was gone.

Chapter Twenty Seven

‘I made a mistake,’ Josh repeated, his words ricocheting among the tall trees and dragging me back to the present. ‘I said something that wasn’t true because I was stupid and petty and scared of losing your friendship.’

‘So you did the one thing that was practically *guaranteed* to make that happen? That row was savage, Josh. The things we said . . .’

Josh ran his hand through his hair, clearly exasperated that I wasn’t dropping the topic the way he wanted me to.

‘I don’t remember half of what was said back then. It was all a long time ago. What I *do* know is that telling someone you love them when you don’t mean it and they’re about to marry someone else is a sure-fire way to ruin a friendship. And that’s what I’m sorry for.’

He lifted his head and there was a rueful look in his eyes.

‘I talked a lot of shit back then. I really thought you’d have forgotten it all by now.’

I thought of all the middle-of-the-night sleepless moments when his words had played like a recording on repeat in my head. I shook my head sadly.

‘I knew from the outset Adam was the right man for you. He was ready to be a husband, a partner for life. He was ready to be a dad, and we both know that’s something I never wanted.’ He gave a humourless laugh. ‘That at least hasn’t changed.’

It felt like a vault door was finally opening up, when suddenly a sound I hadn’t heard for three days echoed in the clearing. My mobile phone had just pinged back to life. My hand dove into the back pocket of my jeans and I pulled it out. Sure enough, in the top corner of the screen there was finally a symbol.

‘We’re back online!’ I cried, so delighted you’d be forgiven for thinking I’d personally invented the internet.

‘That’s great,’ Josh said, although he didn’t look anywhere near as pleased as I was.

Although I couldn’t hide the excitement that tiny sound had ignited, I was sorry it had come when it did, interrupting one of the most illuminating conversations we’d had since my arrival.

I clicked into my messages. There were a couple from Mum and Dad, and several from Raegan. But before I could open any of them the signal vanished.

‘Damn. We’ve lost it again.’

‘It’ll come back,’ Josh said, sounding unbothered. ‘They’re probably still fixing the mast.’

I held out my phone as though he needed to view it for evidence. ‘But I had signal. It was right there.’ I sounded as crushed as I felt.

‘The trees probably aren’t helping,’ he explained, ‘and we’re in a bit of a hollow here. You need height to pick up the signal when it’s this weak,’ he said, his eyes going skyward.

A sudden shiver went through me. ‘I hope you’re not suggesting scaling one of these pines, because my tree-climbing days are most definitely behind me. Yours too, I hope.’

Josh seemed to be wrestling with a decision, but with a resigned sigh he made up his mind. ‘There might be a solution, but it’s about a fifteen-minute hike from here over rougher terrain.’

‘I could do it . . . with your help,’ I said, surprised how ready I was to trust him again. We really had come a very long way in a few short days.

‘Okay,’ he said, holding out his hand. Without hesitation I placed my own within it. Through the wool of our gloves his fingers briefly squeezed mine in the way they used to in another lifetime. I squeezed back.



The forest was growing denser, the pine trees giving way to mighty behemoth oaks and sky-scraping sycamores.

‘Not much further,’ Josh said. It was colder here in the thickest part of the forest where the wintery rays of sunlight were unable to penetrate. I snuggled deeper into Adam’s coat and was rewarded with a sudden and unexpected draught of his aftershave. It felt like he was sending me a message, but I had no idea if it was encouraging me onwards or urging me to retreat.

‘Here we are,’ Josh announced, directing the comment over his left shoulder, for the path had narrowed so much we were now having to walk in single file. Fletcher, who’d dashed on ahead, darted back through the trees, bouncing delightedly between us.

Josh stepped to one side, and I saw we had reached yet another clearing, although compared to the previous ones, this was no more than a large gap in the trees. It was shadowy here, with the ring of oaks blocking out the daylight. At first glance all I noticed were the stumps of several trees, presumably felled by Josh. As my eyes adjusted better to the filtered light, I saw that in the very centre was one enormous tree, its trunk so wide my arms would only have reached halfway around it if I'd been in the mood for a spot of tree hugging. But as my focus sharpened, I saw that encircling the oak was a floating spiral staircase, its treads individually notched into the massive trunk.

My eyes travelled step by step up the staircase until they came to a platform set about six yards above the forest floor, upon which sat a treehouse, so perfect it looked like something out of a fairy tale. There was no disguising my smile as I took in the mini cabin in the sky, with its glazed windows and pitched roof that hung over a narrow wraparound balcony.

'It's a treehouse. You built a treehouse,' I exclaimed in delight, as though he might possibly have forgotten it was here.

'I did,' Josh said, his voice a curious mixture of pride and humility.

I was silent for several moments, taking in the construction above me, while my brain was busy superimposing the sketch he'd drawn on the back cover of my Maths exercise book two decades before. It was hard to be certain, but to me the two seemed to be a perfect match.

'Can we go up there?' I asked eagerly, my frown deepening when I noticed that the first step of the spiral staircase was about four feet above ground level.

'We can't, but *I* can. If you give me your phone, I'll climb up and see if I can get better signal from up there.'

'No way,' I said determinedly, shoving my phone deeper into my pocket in case he had any plans of taking it from me.

'Lily, the steps aren't safe. I haven't built the handrail yet, and the lowest tread is four feet from the ground. You'd never get up there.' He had already approached the bottom step and had his arms braced on its wooden surface as he prepared to haul himself up.

'What? So boys can climb trees and girls can't?' The words sounded awfully familiar, as well they might, for I had a feeling we'd had this exact same conversation about twenty years ago.

Josh paused, his weight still on his arms, as though about to exit a

swimming pool. 'What is it about scaling trees that makes you regress to a stropky teenager?'

'I don't know,' I said stubbornly, dropping the crutch to the ground and walking towards the tree. 'But it's the same thing that transforms you back to a juvenile delinquent.'

There was a long moment of silence as our teenage selves tried to outstare each other through adult eyes. I'm not sure who burst out laughing first. It might have been a photo finish.

'This is ridiculous,' Josh said, getting to his feet on the first step of the spiral staircase and reaching down to offer me his hand. 'If you fall and break your neck, I'm going to have to bury your body in the forest and deny you were ever here.'

'Sounds like a solid plan,' I said.

Josh's hand clasped mine firmly. I was about to remind him I was no longer a skinny eleven-year-old who weighed next to nothing, when he hoisted me through the air as though I was.

'Wow,' I said, seriously impressed with his strength.

'You can compliment me on my gym skills when you're back on the ground in one piece,' he growled, almost as fiercely as Fletcher did at the postman. 'For now, just concentrate on where you're putting your feet, and don't take your hand off the tree trunk.' His voice brooked no opportunity to inject any levity into the situation. He was deadly serious, and a quick glance at his worried features told me he was already regretting having allowed himself to be goaded into letting me climb up to the treehouse.

'Stay,' Josh told Fletcher, who was whining dejectedly as he saw us ascending further up the tree.

Adam's dog obediently dropped to his belly and watched us disappear into the leafy branches.

The climb was neither steep nor particularly arduous. If the handrail had been in place, it would have been a doddle. But my heart was still pounding like a kettle drum in my chest. It didn't help having Josh's right hand firmly planted on my backside.

'You do realise that's even more pervy than showing off your bits this morning,' I told him, feeling the warmth of his palm against my right buttock. I knew he was laughing from the tremor that travelled through his hand and vibrated against me.

'Just concentrate on climbing,' he said tersely, as though I wasn't

perfectly aware that he was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

With a sigh of relief I didn't bother trying to hide, I arrived on the platform and stepped away from his hand. Josh arrived beside me and reached for the handle of the glazed double doors.

'Don't you keep this place locked?' I asked, as the door swung open and I stepped inside the treehouse, before every thought in my head was swept aside by a tidal wave of memories.



'One day, I am going to live in a treehouse,' I said, tipping out the last two pieces of gum into my hand and tossing one to Josh, who was lying beside me on the platform his foster father had built in the sycamore tree in their garden.

If we were on ground level, Josh would probably have attempted to catch it in his mouth, but with no walls around us, fifteen feet above Janette's neatly tended rose bushes, that wasn't such a good idea.

'It will have windows on every side, and maybe even a skylight so I can lie on the floor and look up at the stars at night. And there'll be a balcony that goes all the way around.'

'No furniture in it, then?' Josh teased, his smile warm as he positioned himself on one elbow and looked down at me. My teenage heart skittered in my chest, and for the hundredth time I wished I was prettier, with longer eyelashes, and that I had proper boobs like the rest of the girls in my class. Not that it mattered that I was a late developer, because I didn't think Josh thought of me as a girl at all. Which really sucked, because for the last two years, he was the only boy I'd thought about.

'No. It won't need furniture. Well, maybe there could be a couch in the corner.' I waved an arm towards the space at the edge of the platform. 'Oh yes. It could have a big grey furry throw on it. And the floor would have shaggy sheepskin rugs everywhere. And there'd be gingham curtains at the windows. Red and white ones.'

'I don't even know what gingham is,' fifteen-year-old Josh told me.



I guess somewhere along the line he must have found out, because as my

eyes travelled the treehouse, they passed a comfortable-looking sofa with a grey throw draped over it and cheery, red-checked curtains at the windows.

‘You built it,’ I said in wonder, walking further into the room, being careful to avoid stepping on the sheepskin rugs with my damp boots. ‘You built my treehouse.’

Josh frowned so deeply his eyebrows formed a solid line.

‘I built *a* treehouse. What makes you think it’s yours?’

‘Because this is my treehouse,’ I said, my hand sweeping around the room. ‘This building, the way you’ve constructed it, even the way you’ve decorated it . . . it’s *exactly* the way I described.’

Josh was looking at me as though I was crazy. ‘I truly have no idea what you’re talking about. I built this place as a prototype because I was thinking of branching out into making bespoke treehouses. There’s a big market for them.’

It was a measure of how tense the situation had suddenly grown that neither of us went for the easy quip about ‘branching out’ into treehouses.

‘But everything you’ve done is exactly the way I described it years ago.’ I pointed to each item as though they were exhibits. ‘You have the furry throw over the couch – a grey one,’ I said with extra emphasis. ‘And there are sheepskin rugs on the floor and red gingham curtains. You’ve even put in the skylight I said I wanted.’

Josh sighed deeply, and I wondered if the real reason for his reluctance to let me climb the stairs was because he hadn’t wanted me to see this recreation of my childhood fantasy.

‘I hate to break it to you, Lily, but you don’t own the copyright on throws, rugs or curtains.’

‘But . . . but you’ve done it exactly how I dreamt it would be. Why would you do that?’

‘I don’t know, maybe it’s just a coincidence,’ he said, so emphatically that for the first time I began to doubt myself. ‘Or maybe you kept banging on about how a treehouse should look that you subconsciously brainwashed me into the choices I made when I decked the place out.’

There was something in his words that sort of rang true. I’d seen TV shows where illusionists demonstrated the power of persuasion through subliminal messaging. Was that what had happened here? Possibly. Because anything else would open up an entirely different can of worms.

Why would a man who claimed to have no feelings for you, build your

dream treehouse in the middle of a forest you were never meant to visit?

Chapter Twenty Eight

‘Thank God you’re alright. I was convinced Uncle Billy’s dance moves had persuaded you to run off to Gretna Green with him.’

I laughed, realising how much I’d missed Raegan’s irreverent sense of humour.

‘No such luck,’ I replied. ‘Like I said, I got stranded here by a freak storm and there’s been no phone signal at all until this morning.’

‘Where the fuck are you, then? It sounds like it must be in the middle of nowhere?’

‘It pretty much is.’

I looked out through one of the many treehouse windows. Josh had stepped on to the balcony, presumably to give me some privacy to make my calls. But I still wasn’t comfortable talking about him when he was standing less than ten feet away.

‘And who did you say this old friend is? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about him. Was he at Adam’s funeral?’

I swallowed uncomfortably. ‘No. He wasn’t. We kind of lost touch a while back.’

‘And yet you decided to drop in on him out of the blue?’

‘Something like that.’

I could practically hear the suspicion travelling through the airwaves from Raegan’s house to the forest.

‘I’ll tell you all about it when I get back,’ I promised, already questioning whether I wanted to. What was there to tell anyway, except a whole load of half-baked theories and even more unanswered questions?

‘Just tell me you’re not been held hostage by some creepy cult guy.’

I laughed so loudly that Josh broke away from examining the treetop vista and looked over his shoulder at me. He smiled, and something inside me shifted.

‘Have you spent your time in isolation watching crime thrillers on Netflix?’

‘Maybe,’ Raegan replied, sounding a little defensive, ‘but I still want to make sure you’re safe.’

Of all the things I was worried about after being stranded here with

Josh, my safety was not one of them.

‘I’m perfectly okay, and the road will be cleared soon, so I’ll be on my way back home.’

‘Good. Because I have about a million questions that I’m dying to ask you.’

I laughed, knowing she probably wasn’t joking. MI5 could probably learn a trick or two from Raegan.



The time difference was all wrong for me to call my parents without throwing them into a tailspin panic, so I simply rattled off a message letting them know I’d been enjoying a few days away with Fletcher and apologised in case they’d been trying to get hold of me and had been worried. I didn’t tell them who I was staying with, and for the life of me I didn’t know why.

‘Did you contact everyone you needed to?’ Josh asked, straightening from the spot where he’d been leaning on the rustic balustrade.

‘Yes, I did. Thank you, Josh.’

‘What for?’

I made sure my gaze was locked on his.

‘For bringing me here.’ I paused. Was I going to say it or was I just going to let things lie? Apparently foolish was the new order of the day. I turned around and waved my hand to indicate the treehouse. ‘Thank you for doing this.’

He didn’t blink for the longest time, and neither did I.

‘It’s not your treehouse, Lily.’

‘Yeah. Whatever,’ I said.



Josh took control of our conversation on the trek back, and by the time we emerged from the forest and his home came into view, I knew more about treehouse construction than I’d ever wanted to. As we approached the cabin I was struck by a momentary sadness that I was about to leave the tranquillity of this place and was unlikely ever to return. There was something almost spiritual and rejuvenating about his forest home.

‘I’ve just thought of a great way you could expand Wildwood,’ I said

excitedly, as the idea nudged its way into my head. ‘You could build some more treehouses – not in people’s gardens, you should build them *here*. This would be the perfect location for a luxury forest retreat. You could rent them out for idyllic secluded getaways.’

I was so caught up in the idea I didn’t even notice that Josh was slowly shaking his head. ‘I came here to *get away* from everyone. Not build a load of holiday accommodation so the world could move in with me.’

I followed him from front door to kitchen, talking to his back, for he seemed oddly reluctant to turn around.

‘Why *did* you want to get away from everyone, Josh? What made a sociable guy like you suddenly want to cut himself off from friends and family? From everything?’

‘I’m hardly cut off.’

I lifted my eyebrows tellingly.

‘Okay. Currently we *are* cut off. But this is an anomaly. Normally I come and go whenever I want to.’

‘And yet you don’t, do you? You shut yourself away up here for most of the year, living like a hermit. Why is that, Josh?’

He paused for a moment, still turned away from me. I could practically sense the tension throbbing through his shoulders as he deliberately rolled them before turning to face me.

‘What were you hiding from, Josh?’ I asked softly. ‘Was it me?’

He closed his eyes for a second, as though the sight of me actually pained him. I knew I wasn’t going to like his answer even before he delivered it, because the expression on his face had switched to sardonic amusement.

‘Lily, I’m all for being self-confident, but you really need to get over yourself. First, you’re convinced I built a treehouse just for you, and now you’re accusing me of turning into a recluse just because we ended our relationship.’

My senses went into high alert as he stumbled over the last word in that sentence. Josh sighed heavily and yanked his phone free of the charger wire on the countertop.

‘I’m going back out to see if I can make a few phone calls. There’s a farmer I know who’s got a tractor that could pull that fallen tree off the road.’

He disappeared from the room in a maelstrom of unspoken reminders that my mission here had answered none of the questions I’d wanted it to. All it *had* done was raise a whole lot more.

Josh was gone for so long I could only imagine he was systematically contacting every tractor owner north of the border, hoping to find *anyone* who could rid him of his unwelcome house guest as soon as possible.

Meanwhile I spent the afternoon packing my bag, convinced I'd soon be on my way and refusing to acknowledge why that no longer filled me with the kind of joy that it should.

Josh didn't return until early evening, by which time I was half convinced I'd be eating the meal I'd prepared all alone.

'I'm sorry about earlier,' he led with, walking into the kitchen and then stopping in surprise as his senses took in what I'd been up to in his absence. His nose twitched at the fragrant aroma of beef bourguignon simmering in the oven. Josh's eyes swept the room, noting the table set for dinner, with the tall candles he'd used on my first night here.

'Is it my birthday?' he asked, his lips trying out a smile. 'Or yours?'

I shook my head, knowing he was joking because remembering birthdays had always been a big deal with him. '*It's shit when everyone forgets,*' he'd once said. It had been another of those heartbreaking glimpses into his life as a young boy in care.

'It's been a tough couple of days . . . for both of us,' I said, holding out a metaphorical olive branch. Josh's acknowledging nod showed me he was happy to accept it. 'Also, as this is likely to be our last dinner together, I wanted to make it memorable.'

'I think everything about the last few days has been that . . . one way or the other.'

We stared at each other across the kitchen, both knowing the chasm between us wasn't quite as wide as it had been when I'd first shown up unexpectedly at his door.

'This is my way of saying thank you and letting you know how grateful I am that you gave Fletcher and me somewhere safe to stay.'

Josh gave a rueful smile. 'I was going to say "anytime" but I doubt you'll be passing this way again.'

I shook my head a little sadly. 'No, I guess I won't be.'

He nodded, as though the answer was exactly what he'd expected and hoped to hear. Except it didn't quite match the expression in his eyes.

'Rory is going to be here tomorrow morning.'

'That's great,' I said with a weak smile. I reached for a glass of the wine our dinner was cooking in and took a large mouthful. 'And who exactly is

Rory?’

‘He’s the guy with the tractor. He’ll be clearing away the fallen tree.’

Josh really hadn’t wasted a single moment. By this time tomorrow I would probably be on the motorway and halfway back home.

I’d like to think the meal was as tasty as it smelled, but I found myself too distracted to enjoy it properly. The clock was ticking down on my time here, and there were still so many questions I’d never asked Josh, and probably never would now. Even so, when one unexpectedly slipped out, it took me by surprise that it was from so long ago.

‘Why didn’t you write to me when the Bakers moved away?’

Josh blinked in confusion. ‘What? After all these years, why is that still bothering you?’

‘I’m not bothered,’ I said, dropping my gaze and straightening the cutlery on my plate with ridiculous precision. ‘I’m just curious.’

I heard the scrape of a chair as Josh shifted uncomfortably on the other side of the table. I didn’t know if he was about to reply, but I jumped in with a quick correction.

‘No. Screw that. I *am* bothered. Not for me, but for a fifteen-year-old girl who was desperately lonely after her best friend moved away. A girl who spent the best part of a year waiting to hear from him, and never did.’

I looked up, my eyes stupidly bright with tears for my teenage self.

Josh bit his lip. ‘I’m sorry. I know I said we’d keep in touch . . . but I was scared.’

‘What of? The postman? Me?’

He shook his head and there was real regret on his face.

‘I was scared you wouldn’t write back. That once I moved away you’d forget me, and it was easier to ghost you than to risk being let down again. If I didn’t make contact, then you couldn’t change your mind, and everything could still be as perfect as it ever was. In my head.’

In all the years we’d been friends in our twenties, when we’d talked about absolutely anything and everything, he’d never once admitted this to me. I looked at him now, and for a moment it wasn’t a self-assured man in his thirties sharing the table with me, it was a boy who’d been rejected so many times that one more blow could be the one he’d never get over.

‘It was a self-preservation thing, and I was too young and selfish to realise that in saving myself I was hurting you.’

There was a long moment of silence.

‘I forgive you.’ I had no idea if that was an appropriate thing to say or was even something he needed to hear, but it felt good to finally voice it.

His gentle smile was the answer I needed.

I got to my feet, preparing to clear away our plates, when a sudden bright light streaked past the kitchen window. My head pivoted towards it, just in time to see another blaze of light follow the path of the first.

Josh moved rapidly to stand directly behind me. I could feel the heat of his body as he stepped even closer to peer through the window. When his hand rested lightly on my shoulder, a voice in my head told me to step away, while another – just as strong – told me to lean back against him.

I did neither, because with unexpected urgency Josh suddenly said, ‘Quick, get your coat. It’s a meteor shower.’

I did as he asked and shrugged into my coat. I couldn’t find my gloves, but that didn’t matter because Josh took my hand as we descended the cabin’s snow-dusted steps, and there was a heat that pulsed through him that warmed me like a flame.

‘Does this happen often?’ I asked, my gaze fixed skywards as the white trails of light shot across a sky clearer than any I’d seen before.

‘It’s happened a couple of times since I’ve been here, but never this bright or vibrant.’

It was hard not to ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ as though we were at a fireworks display. My neck was aching from looking upwards, but I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the lights streaking across the inky black sky. Josh’s hand was still linked with mine as we stood side by side, watching Nature at her most miraculous. The realisation that there was no one alive I’d rather share this experience with shocked me a little.

‘It’s like they’ve come out tonight to say goodbye to you,’ Josh said, his voice huskier than usual.

It was the most romantic thing anyone had said to me in a really long time. Perhaps that’s why my eyes suddenly started to sting, or maybe it was just from the intensity of staring for so long at the meteors.

I was searching for the right reply when suddenly the lights were extinguished, not because they were done, but because Josh was now standing in front of me, so close that the vapour of his breath mingled with mine.

His head was slowly descending, so cautiously that I knew he was giving me time to stop this madness. In a way I think he almost *wanted* me to

stop it. But I wouldn't. I couldn't. I wanted him to kiss me every bit as much as I'd done that very first time in the sycamore tree.

My lips parted in a silent invitation. His mouth and tongue were tentative, gentle almost, but mine weren't. They were too busy saying all the things I'd never found the courage to voice and that he wouldn't want to hear even if I had.

He was holding back, I knew that, so I curled my fingers into his shoulders, and then suddenly the fireworks shooting across the sky were nothing compared to those igniting between us. Josh crushed me against him, until every plane of his body was pressed into me. I clung to him as desire, white-hot and molten, travelled through my veins.

I had dreaded my first kiss after Adam. I'd been terrified it would disgust me, or worse, remind me of all that I had lost and somehow erase his memory. But Josh's kiss wasn't like that. It was new and old at the same time. I'd kissed him when he was a boy and then a man, before I'd even known there was an Adam in this world. My body had known and still remembered Josh, and he occupied an entirely different place in my soul than the husband who I had loved – who I *still* loved. It was strange to realise that Josh's kiss was the *only one* after Adam's that wouldn't destroy me.

Which made it all the worse when I felt him gently remove my hands from his shoulders. The cold night air chilled me as he created a void as wide as a canyon between us. My eyes were still dazed with the desire I had given in to. They took a while to clear and finally focus on the face before me, that reflected none of the passion I know he'd been feeling just moments before.

He took yet another step backwards, staggering as though slightly drunk.

'I'm so sorry, Lily. I should never have done that.'

My lips still felt swollen from the pressure of his mouth against them, and perhaps that's why I couldn't persuade them to frame a denial. Or maybe it was the sudden icy shock of his rejection.

'I guess the moment got away from me. The lights, the memories, knowing you're going soon . . .'

A pain, like a knife blade, slid through my ribs, on its way to my heart.

'You kissed me because I'm leaving?'

His brow furrowed and his eyes were filled with confusion. 'Yes. No. I don't know. I just lost control for a moment. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.' He lifted his hands in a gesture of apology, but to me it looked an

awful lot like he was warding me off. 'I shouldn't have done it. It isn't my place to kiss you. I—'

'It. Isn't. Your. Place?' Each word felt like it had been severed by a sword.

'No. Of course it isn't.'

He was so busy digging himself into a hole, he didn't appear to have noticed I hadn't wanted him to stop kissing me.

I slowly shook my head, and the action seemed to make things even worse.

'For Christ's sake, Lily. I'm trying to apologise here. Can't you just let me say I'm sorry and let's move past this.'

The ice on the ground was nothing compared to the ring that was slowly freezing around my heart.

'That's what you want to do? To forget this ever happened?'

'I do,' he said, as solemnly as a wedding vow.

I bit my lip, just in case it betrayed me by trembling.

'Okay then. Consider it forgotten.'

Chapter Twenty Nine

There were voices coming from the kitchen. I only recognised one of them – Josh’s. The others had thick Scottish accents that I thought I might need subtitles to decipher. I lifted my head off the pillow, but the heavy hangover of a largely sleepless night was hard to shake off.

The smell of frying bacon and the sound of laughter travelled down the corridor to the bedroom. It was followed by a series of sharp, excited barks. It sounded like the kitchen was the place to be, despite the ungodly hour. Although, when I checked my phone, I saw it wasn’t early at all.

I wasn’t surprised I’d overslept, having spent a large chunk of the night staring at the bedroom ceiling, thinking of all the things I *should* have said following the kiss. They’d ranged from pithy to pathetic, and in the cold light of morning, it was probably just as well I’d been too shell-shocked to deliver any of them.

I pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt and ran a comb through my tangled hair. The kitchen appeared to be full of men, and all of them were laughing when I entered the room. The amusement died away the moment they saw me and was immediately replaced by an air of sheepish embarrassment. I truly hoped it was because someone had just told a dirty joke, and not because Josh had shared with his mates what had happened between us the night before.

I searched the room for his face among the strangers and it answered my question. From the way he flinched as our eyes locked, I instinctively knew he hadn’t told his friends a thing. *Of course* he hadn’t; not while he was still desperately trying to forget it had ever happened at all.

I took a deep breath and pasted what I hoped looked like a natural smile on the lips Josh wished he’d never kissed.

‘Good morning . . . everyone,’ I said, making sure my greeting encompassed the three burly farmers in the room, who had apparently all received the same memo to dress in a plaid shirt, dark jeans and heavy work boots.

Josh, however, was dressed all in black, which felt oddly symbolic.

He cleared his throat. ‘Lily, this is Rory, Giles and Cameron.’

The men chorused a hello, giving me no opportunity to work out which

name belonged to who.

‘Guys, this is my . . . This is Lily.’

If any of them noticed the stumble as he failed to find a label to fit me, they were too polite to show it.

‘They’ve come to clear the trees that came down,’ Josh added unnecessarily. Did they know him well enough to realise he was feeling uncomfortable? Because to me it was glaringly obvious.

‘Trees? In the plural?’ I asked.

One of the interchangeable farmers replied, and as hard as I tried, I only managed to catch every other word.

For the first time since I’d entered the room, I saw an almost relaxed smile on Josh’s face. ‘Don’t worry, they’re used to having to repeat things for me. It took almost two years before I could make out what people were saying. God knows what I agreed to in that time,’ Josh said, earning himself a hefty shoulder-shove from the man beside him that would probably have toppled someone less muscular.

‘Cheeky bugger.’

That one I got.

Everyone laughed and I joined in, because these men were here today to help me leave, and it wasn’t their fault that I wasn’t entirely sure now whether I was ready to go.

Josh drained the contents of his mug and placed it on a grease-stained plate. ‘Giles said they discovered more trees that must have come down after we drove back on the night of the storm.’ He looked rueful. ‘I had hoped we’d be able to get you on your way this morning, but Rory thinks it might take a little longer.’

I gave what I hoped looked like a casual shrug. Could Josh make it any more obvious that he wanted me gone?

‘Aye, well, we’d better get at it. Pleasure meeting you, Lily,’ said the oldest of the three men, carefully enunciating each word as though I was a foreigner.

‘There’s coffee in the pot and I’ve left a couple of bacon sandwiches in the warming drawer for you,’ Josh advised, reaching for his coat.

‘Oh. Are you going with them?’ I asked as he pulled on heavy work gloves.

‘I am.’ Josh’s eyes were shuttered. It stung that if I’d woken up five minutes later, the cabin would probably already have been deserted.

‘He’s just going to get in the way,’ muttered Farmer Number Two.

‘Or be trying to make a chair out of every branch we cut off,’ his mate joked back with a hearty laugh.

Something inside me shifted as I listened to their good-natured banter. I’d feared Josh lived a solitary and potentially lonely life in his forest hideaway, and while it shouldn’t have mattered to me in the slightest that he had good friends up here, I was glad that he did.

The men left the kitchen in a clatter of work boots and the quiet fell like a curtain as I stood at the window and watched them disappear into the trees. The day felt flat, and I knew I was in trouble when even the bacon sandwiches failed to lift my mood.

Beneath the hot jets of Josh’s shower, I should have felt relaxed in the knowledge that he was unlikely to unexpectedly return. But when I studied my reflection in the steam-free oval I cleared in the mirror, it was like looking at someone I’d never met before. ‘Because him catching me naked would be a bad thing, right?’ I asked the woman looking back at me in the glass. She blinked slowly, and there was something in her eyes that troubled me. Had she seen something in Josh last night that I’d missed? Could a spark from a single kiss actually reignite a long burnt-out fire?

Fletcher was clearly delighted with the extra-long walk we took to pass the time. Although he kept trying to tug me in the direction of the treehouse, I managed to distract him with an energetic game of fetch that my shoulder would probably protest about tomorrow. *Tomorrow . . . when I’ll be miles away from the forest and back where I belong.*

Back at the cabin, with my bags already packed, there was far too much of the day to fill until Josh returned. I didn’t like the way things had been left between us after last night. Our friendship had been all but destroyed by an argument a long time ago. It wouldn’t survive a second onslaught.



It was already fully dark by four o’clock, and I hadn’t seen a soul or been given an update all day. A loud thumping on the cabin door, the kind that threatens to loosen screws from their hinges, had me scurrying into the hallway with Fletcher at my heels.

Stamping snow from his boots on the wraparound porch was the farmer who I’d worked out must be Rory.

‘Well, hen, the road is finally clear for you to be on your way.’

I wondered what the appropriate facial expression should be to that comment, because none of my features seemed to know which direction to go in. Rory didn’t appear to notice, as he was too busy looking curiously beyond me into the shadowy corridor. ‘Tell Josh he owes me more than a few jars for this one.’

I looked behind me, as though I too was searching for the cabin’s owner.

‘Isn’t he with you?’ For some reason, a quiver of fear slid through the armour I’d forged around my heart.

‘Nah. Is he heck. He buggered off as soon as the hard work began. Typical carpenter.’ He grinned broadly enough for me to count all of his missing molars. ‘Said he had something he had to do today.’

‘Did he say what?’ I asked, uncomfortably aware that I sounded like an anxious wife, something I’d strangely never been whenever Adam was late home. But then my husband would always message me if he’d been delayed, while Josh’s phone was infuriatingly still plugged into its charger in the kitchen. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’d deliberately left it behind so I *couldn’t* contact him.

Rory gave an unconcerned shrug. ‘No, he didn’t. Mind you, I was kind of busy with a chainsaw at the time.’

With a perceptiveness I hadn’t expected, Rory laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. ‘Don’t go worrying about Josh now. He knows these woods like the back of his hand. Going off grid is just something he does.’

That was probably meant to comfort me, but it had the exact opposite effect.

‘You don’t think something could have happened to him?’ For some reason the image of the frozen lake popped into my head and refused to disappear.

‘No. I don’t. He’ll come strolling up anytime now, you mark my words.’



I did mark them. I marked them when I dragged my bags into the hallway in preparation for leaving, I marked them when I fed Fletcher his evening meal, and was still marking them when I reheated the leftovers of ours in the oven. The aroma of beef and wine was mouth-watering, but I already knew I

couldn't stomach a single bite.

Panic is a strange dish that goes from a moderate simmer to a raging boil almost without you noticing.

Fletcher looked up at me reproachfully as he watched me pull on my boots and Adam's heavy coat.

'I won't go far,' I promised him. 'I just want to check the surrounding area.'

Of course, if this had been a film, I'd be taking my dog with me so he could follow Josh's scent, but the only thing Fletcher could reliably follow was the smell of kibble, so it was wiser to leave him behind.

'I'll be back soon,' I assured him. 'I won't get lost.' And just to ensure I didn't, I dropped a pin in my location so my phone could lead me back to the cabin, which was a far more reliable tool than leaving a trail of breadcrumbs through the forest, and could have saved Hansel and Gretel no end of grief.



The cold stole my breath away as I stepped on to the porch. Had Josh really believed I'd leave without saying goodbye, I thought angrily as I stomped my way across the clearing? If he was expecting to find his home empty when he eventually returned, he was going to be sorely disappointed. Besides, Rory's parting words were still ringing in my ears.

'If I were you, I wouldn't be thinking of heading back south until daylight, hen. Some of the roads are still pretty hazardous, especially in the dark.'

It didn't take long to check out Josh's workshop, not when I was almost certain I wouldn't find him there. Yet I still looked around hopefully as the fluorescents flickered into life, throwing light into every corner. I walked between the benches, pausing only once beside the one with the unfinished crib. Despite the urgent feeling that I needed to press on with my search, I paused to lift one corner of the dust sheet, smiling sadly at the abandoned commission. Josh might not have finished it, but I saw he'd carved the same curious symbols on one of the crib's runners that I'd found on the underside of my crutch. I never had got around to asking him what they were. A sudden fear that I might never get the chance to rose uncontrollably within me. Ever since Adam had got sick, my fear of losing the people I loved had a habit of blindsiding me.

I was heading back towards the workshop doors when my steps faltered as I realised where my thoughts had unexpectedly taken me. Was my escalating fear for Josh's safety telling me something my head refused to acknowledge? Did I still care about Josh? I swallowed uncomfortably, shying away from the word 'love' as though it could destroy me.

Those were *old* feelings, ones that I'd neatly parcelled away. I'd deliberately kept them shut in the dark, until they'd suffocated from lack of air. I didn't love Josh. I couldn't love him . . . could I? How was that even possible when I was still so very much in love with Adam?

I walked fast across the clearing as if to outrun my disturbing thoughts, but they trotted alongside me, matching their pace to mine. Without conscious thought I was heading for the frozen lake. Josh's cautionary tale about someone falling through the thin ice had haunted me, and even though I was certain he wouldn't have done anything stupid, like trying to cross the lake, I had to go there.

Our footprints from the previous day were still visible in the snow, making it easy to find my way. But that didn't calm the jittery feeling swirling in my stomach as I walked through the trees.

Using the torch I'd brought to light the trail, I reached the lake sooner than I'd expected. The moon was playing hide-and-seek in a sky of scudding clouds, making it difficult to check the lake for the jagged-edged hole I'd half convinced myself I would see in the ice.

My hands were shaking so much it made the torchlight difficult to follow as I swept it across the lake. It took several attempts before I was satisfied the icy surface was intact. I let out the breath I hadn't even known I'd been holding.

Now that my worst-case scenario had been eliminated, the sensible option was probably to return to the cabin and wait for Josh. But this wasn't a night for being sensible.

There was only one other place I felt confident of finding in the dark. The treehouse. As I stood indecisively on the shore of the lake, I felt something pulling me there. Hadn't Fletcher literally tried to do just that earlier today? Had Adam's dog been trying to tell me that Josh was in trouble there? That was either miraculous or totally ridiculous, and how bad was it that I couldn't work out which?

This time it took me longer to find our footprints in the dark. Each time I felt sure I'd gone wrong, I would spot the distinctive imprint in the snow

from Josh's work boots, like a tiny Timberland signpost.

The moon had obligingly found a clear piece of sky to settle in, and when I eventually emerged from the dense thicket of trees my relief was so great my knees were in danger of buckling.

I'm not sure what astounded me most: that I'd actually found the treehouse, or that my instincts had been correct, and this *was* where Josh had headed. I knew he was there from the flickering light filtering down through the branches above me. There was an orange glow dancing behind the treehouse windows, too bright for candles, too fluid to be a torch. It looked like the light from the storm lanterns we'd used when the power had been out.

I took a deep, steadying breath and made my way to the foot of the tree. That's when I got my next shock of the evening. A solid, rustic-style handrail had been constructed and was securely fixed to the floating steps I'd climbed the day before. And at the base of the tree trunk was a new deck-like platform. Josh must have worked flat out from the moment he left the others this morning to have done this. Part of me wanted to ask *why* he'd done it. Another part already knew.

Even with the handrail, the climb still managed to quicken my heart rate as I ascended the tree. The wooden treads deadened the sound of my approach and, unaware that he was no longer alone, I got a truly unguarded glimpse of Josh through the large picture windows. He was facing away from the door, sitting on the floor and leaning against the timber wall with a six-pack of beers beside him.

His head was bowed, and there was something about him that looked defeated. I took a tentative step closer to the door and he must have heard the creak of the platform beneath me, for his head spun around. I saw it all on his face in those first few seconds before the shutters came clattering back down. I saw a depth of sadness I recognised only too well; it had been in every mirror I'd looked in since Adam's death. And then, before he blinked the emotions away, I saw something that answered the questions as to why this treehouse had been built and why Josh was sitting in it in the dark the evening before I was due to leave.

I hadn't seen that look on his face since the night six years ago when he'd pleaded with me not to marry Adam, declaring that however much my fiancé cared for me, he'd never love me as much as he did.

The past was spinning through my head as I reached for the handle and

opened the door. Josh was working hard to rearrange his features, but it was too late. I'd already seen the truth . . . and he knew it.

'You lied.'

I hadn't known I was going to lead with that. The words seemed to come from a place where I had relinquished all control and good sense to what I was feeling in this moment. They were the same feelings that had shaken me six years ago when Josh had told me I was about to marry the wrong man.

He didn't deny it. He didn't even ask what I was talking about. In this one moment, more than any other between us, we were so totally in tune that he knew *exactly* what I was talking about.

'I had to.'

'Why?'

He shook his head. He might not be able to control the truth his eyes had revealed, but he was keeping a closer guard on his tongue.

'*Why* isn't important. I had my reasons.'

'You didn't change your mind. You *did* love me back then.'

There was a raw anguish on his face that he didn't bother trying to hide.

'I did.' He swallowed as though his throat had suddenly tightened up as it attempted to silence what was coming next. 'I still do.'

I forgot to breathe for what seemed like minutes. My head felt like an impossible weight that my neck was incapable of supporting. My knees were similarly affected as they folded beneath me until I was also on the floor, kneeling beside him. My hand reached out for his shoulder, before it froze in mid-air.

'But it makes no difference, Lily. What I feel about you isn't the problem. It never was.'

My arm felt heavy, suspended in between the here-and-now and the what-could-have-been. I lowered it slowly to my side.

'I don't understand.' My voice was small and sounded almost as lost as it had when he'd told my fifteen-year-old heartbroken self it would be best to forget all about him when he moved away.

Except I never did. Even in the Adam years, Josh was always there, locked away in a hidden part of my soul.

His hand reached for mine. I was shocked to see his was trembling.

'I'm not the man you need in your life, Lily. I never was.'

'Wasn't that my decision to make, not yours?'

He winced, and I knew my words, like tiny darts, had found their target.

‘Would you honestly have walked away from Adam, from the perfect wedding, the fancy reception, and the big white dress, just because some loser from your past had finally realised he’d been running away from the best person he’d ever known for most of his life?’

‘You weren’t a loser,’ I defended loyally.

His smile was bittersweet. ‘I wasn’t the right guy. I wasn’t even close. You wanted the whole package. You deserved a guy who dreamt the same dreams as you: who wanted a family, a dog who came running to meet him at the door every night. You wanted someone who would be a father to the kids I knew you were desperate to have. That was never me. But it *was* Adam. Even if I hadn’t told you that I’d changed my mind, that I didn’t love you after all, you would *still* have chosen him.’

His words were tearing into my heart, ripping open a thousand scars.

‘I guess neither of us will ever know *what* I might have said, because you never gave me the chance.’

‘If I could go back in time, Lily, I’d do it all exactly the same. There’s no future for two people who want entirely different things in life.’

I closed my eyes, trying to stop the tears that were determined to escape. But they still managed to squeeze their way from beneath my closed lids. I felt the work-roughened skin of Josh’s fingertips gently brush them away.

‘Don’t cry, Lily. I don’t want to remember you like this whenever I climb up here to feel close to you after you’ve gone back home.’

I opened my eyes, blinking several times until he came into focus.

‘This is *my* treehouse, isn’t it?’

I would remember that half smile until the day I died. ‘You know it is.’

I didn’t plan on making the first move, but my body was already leaning in, leaving my brain far behind. Not that it would have protested too much even if it had caught up.

Still on my knees, I moved in closer and wound my arms around his neck. My lips were on his before he had the chance to protest or push me away. I wanted to think he’d have done neither. This kiss was different from the one the night before. This time *I* was the one kissing *him*, and it was conscious, and deliberate, and in that moment it was all that I wanted or needed. And it didn’t feel as though I was betraying Adam, because perhaps this was why he’d sent me here. It didn’t matter if Josh wouldn’t reveal whatever secret Adam had wanted me to know, or even if there was a secret

at all. Adam had wanted me to fix things with Josh . . . and in this moment, in this perfect treehouse fantasy, it felt as if this was always meant to be.

When I twisted to sit on Josh's lap, his arms went around me, and he deepened our kiss. As his tongue caressed my mouth, I still loved Adam every bit as much as I had ever done. But I also loved Josh.

We kissed like the teenagers we'd once been. And then the hunger and urgency intensified, and I was back there in my student bedroom, wanting nothing more than to feel his naked body against mine. There had been too many moments when we'd almost had this and then let it slip away. But not this time.

My fingers went to the buttons of his shirt. I'd undone three of them before his hands came over mine and halted me.

'Lily,' he said regretfully.

He'd stopped me before. But tonight was different.

'It's okay, Josh. You're not taking advantage of me. I know what this is.'

He was shaking his head, his eyes troubled. 'I don't want to mislead you. I can't give you what you need.'

'I know that.' My voice was surprisingly calm for someone who had so little control over her emotions. Every nerve ending in my body was cleaving towards him. 'But you *can* give me what I need tonight,' I said, slightly shocked by the brazen admission. 'I need you, Josh. Please don't turn me down again.'

Passion blazed in his eyes. 'I don't think I could, even if I wanted to, and God help me, I don't want to.'

This time when I reached for the next button on his shirt, he didn't stop me. He looked down at my hands, his eyes heavy with desire as I pulled the garment free from his waistband and set to work on the heavy buckle of his belt.

He didn't help me. Perhaps he was still giving me time to see if I wanted to change my mind. I didn't. When I'd disposed of the belt, I undid the button on his jeans and reached for the zipper. I paused for a second, my eyes going to his. I didn't realise I was asking for his permission until he gave it with a slight inclination of his head. The sound of the zip was a soft purr, followed by Josh's low moan as my hand slid into the opening.

He was hot and hard beneath my fingers, and as I found a rhythm his breathing grew faster and more urgent as he continued to kiss me.

‘You should slow down,’ he groaned against my lips. ‘If we’re only going to do this once, I want to do it right, and if we carry on like this, you’re going to be really disappointed in about ten seconds or so.’

I laughed softly, even though his words had lasered through the passion. This was a one-time thing. This would never happen again. Tonight we’d let our bodies say everything they’d kept secret for so long, and then tomorrow I would get in my car and drive away from this place, never to return.

I paused for a moment. Josh wasn’t wrong. We were doing this to finally answer the question of what might have happened if we’d gone down another road. But life doesn’t let you rewrite history. If all we had was tonight, then I could make my peace with that.

‘It’s not too late to change your mind, Lily,’ Josh said, his fingers threading through my hair and holding my face close to his. ‘It’s your call.’

‘I want this, Josh. We need this . . . for closure.’

His jaw tightened. ‘Just one chance to get it right,’ he murmured, his hands sliding down to my waist. They slipped beneath the hem of my jumper, and I gasped as his work-callused palms moved slowly up my ribcage and cupped my breasts. This time I was the one who groaned. He released me from my bra and then the rest of our clothes were being tugged and yanked off, to end up all over the treehouse floor.

He was as perfect as a sculpture, and when his eyes travelled over me, I’d never felt so beautiful, because I don’t think anyone had ever looked at me the way that Josh was doing.

‘Tell me what you want,’ he said, his voice hoarse with desire. I ran my hands down his back. And I didn’t compare the breadth of his shoulders or the muscular contours to the man I’d chosen to marry instead of him.

‘I want everything. I want a whole lifetime of making love to you in this one night.’

I loved the way his eyebrows rose at that.

I loved the way he grabbed a handful of sheepskin rugs and laid them on the wooden floor, before gently pressing me down upon them.

I loved the way his fingers found the place that was hot and wet and so ready for him. Sanity returned for one brief second as he positioned himself between my thighs. ‘Condoms,’ I said, hating to shatter the moment, but knowing I had to.

‘We’re good,’ Josh said, his fingers still driving me half-crazy with desire. ‘I took care of things several years ago.’

I knew that should have saddened me, that he felt so strongly about having children that he'd made that decision, but all I could think of was the burning need within me. A need that made me cry out like a wild creature when he finally entered me.

It was everything I had imagined.

It was like nothing I had ever imagined.

Chapter Thirty

His hands felt cold as he reached for mine in the chilly morning. He'd already loaded my bags into the boot of the car and had scraped away the thick rime of ice that had formed overnight on every window. The engine was ticking over, and the car looked warm and inviting, but it was still the last place on earth I wanted to go.

'Shit. This is hard,' Josh said, his eyes watering in the icy wind. Or maybe the weather had nothing to do with it. I was already several steps ahead of him. There was a lump in my throat as large as a piece of coal, and tears were spiking the ends of my lashes.

I nodded. Because I had no words left. I'd used them all up the night before. We both had.

'You know how to get back to the motorway?'

'I've got the route on my phone.'

He inclined his head. There were dark circles beneath his eyes that matched the ones I'd seen in his bathroom mirror. We were like a pair of pandas, about to get separated when one of them was shipped off to a zoo. I almost smiled at that one. Almost.

The cold had eventually driven us down from the treehouse and back to his cabin. I could scarcely remember the walk through the forest. I knew it had taken longer than the journey there, not because we'd taken a detour, but because it was impossible to go more than twenty feet without the sudden need for one last hug, one last kiss, one last goodbye.

'Maybe . . . maybe there could be a way . . .'

 I'd broached hesitantly when the lights I'd left on in his cabin finally came into view.

Josh's arms had tightened around me as he pulled me against him once again.

'Don't, Lily. Don't pin your hopes on me, or us. You've been hurt too much already. Don't let me be the one who'll do it again.'

It was too dark for him to see the tears coursing down my face.

'Perhaps you won't hurt me, and I won't hurt you. Maybe there's a way of fixing this that we just haven't figured out yet.'

The moon came out from behind a cloud. I really wished it hadn't because I would rather not have seen the pain on his face.

‘You shouldn’t change your dreams because they’re different from mine.’

I rested my head against him, wondering how in all the years I’d known him I’d never once realised how perfect a fit we were. The hollow of his neck cushioned my forehead. I felt the brush of his lips grazing my brow.

‘Somewhere out there, there’s a perfect guy for you. And he’s going to be strong and healthy, and he’s going to want to give you all the things that Adam and I couldn’t. There’ll be a houseful of children, and then grandchildren, and fifty years from now, when you’re sitting there holding his old, wrinkled hand, you’ll realise that walking away from me now was the best thing you ever did.’

I sniffed inelegantly. ‘It doesn’t feel like it right now.’

He nodded slowly, and I knew this was hurting him too.

‘I know, Lily. I know.’



We hadn’t made love again. Somehow that seemed to belong only to the privacy of the treehouse. But I had spent what was left of the night in Josh’s arms, lying fully clothed on his bed, beneath a patchwork quilt.

I didn’t want to sleep, because if this was the only night we’d ever be like this, it was a crime to squander it. So we spoke for hours, his arms locked around me, my head on his shoulder, and sometimes I could hear the crack in his voice as we talked about the past we’d wasted and the future we’d never have. His chest hitched a few times and his arms tightened around me, and I knew that whatever it was I was feeling tonight . . . Josh felt it too.

Just before dawn we both dozed off, and when I finally woke, he was walking towards the bed with a steaming mug of coffee in hand.

His hair was damp from the shower and he was fully clothed. I felt a pang, knowing in that moment that I’d never again see him naked.

‘Do you think it’s possible to go back to being just friends again . . . after this?’ I’d asked him in the middle of the night.

He’d taken so long replying I was afraid his answer was going to be *no*.

‘Anything’s possible,’ Josh had said softly, and God help me his words had ignited a candle of hope in my heart that I knew nothing would extinguish. I could say goodbye the next day, if that’s what we had to do, but I had to know there was still a place where he and I could be friends. My

heart wasn't strong enough to recover from another big loss, not so soon after Adam.



'You know where to find me . . . if you need to . . . want to?' It took a huge effort not to add *if you change your mind*. We'd agreed the night before that this was best left as a single, perfect moment in time, but here I was, not yet off his property, and I was already trying to renege on the deal.

'I do,' Josh said, opening his arms. I went into them, knowing this might be the last time I would ever be there.

'If you ever need me, Lily. If you're ever in trouble. If something's wrong . . . then I'll be there in a heartbeat.'

'Me too.' It sounded like my words had been dragged over gravel. I cleared my throat before trusting my voice again.

'Well, I suppose I should be going. I've got a lot of miles to cover.'

'You're sure you don't want me to follow you to the motorway?'

'No. I'm good,' I said, although I wasn't, and neither was he. 'Come here, Fletcher. Say goodbye.'

Adam's dog obediently padded over from where he'd been examining every bush he'd marked with his scent. Josh crouched low and ruffled his ears. 'Keep her out of trouble, my friend. Don't let her get lonely or sad.' Josh looked up from his position on the ground and his eyes met mine, as he gave my dog one last instruction. 'And remember to be nice to the next guy, okay?'

It was too much. It was too close a memory to Adam's final farewell to his pet.

From somewhere I found the strength to take a step towards my car. But before I could climb inside, Josh reached for something propped up against the passenger door. He handed it to me with a crooked smile.

'What? Why are you giving me this?'

He was holding out the crutch he'd made for me.

He looked boyish as he gave a shrug. 'I don't know, but I want you to have it. I know what you're like. You'll trip over something or fall out of a tree, and when you do . . . you'll need this.'

'I don't think I'll be climbing any more trees for the foreseeable future,' I said softly, and as our eyes met I knew my words had transported us back to

our lovemaking the night before. For a cold day I suddenly felt really hot. There was a slight flush to his own cheeks as Josh replied gruffly.

‘Well, you can’t be too careful. Take it, Lily.’

He held out the smoothly carved length of wood and passed it to me like a baton, which felt weirdly symbolic. I was going ahead now, without him. Racing towards a life in which he had no part, because it wasn’t a future he wanted.

I laid the stick on the back seat of the car and then strapped Fletcher into his harness.

Josh didn’t hold me again or kiss me one last time. I don’t think either of us would have been able to cope with that.

‘I will never forget these last five days, Lily,’ he said as he stood beside me by the open driver’s door.

‘Me neither,’ I said on a whisper.

‘We’re doing the right thing,’ he said, and I didn’t know which of us he was trying to convince with those words.

‘We are,’ I said, lying every bit as much as I believe he was.

He watched me drive away, as I’d known he would, and I kept glancing back in the rear-view mirror until the forest stole him from view.

‘Okay, Fletch. Let’s go home, shall we, boy?’

Chapter Thirty One

The smell of buttercream and suspicion was heavy on the air.

‘All I’m saying is that it seems strange that you’ve never mentioned this mountain man friend of yours before, that’s all.’

‘Not really. Like I said, we lost touch, and I hadn’t thought about him in years.’

Raegan remained infuriatingly quiet. That was when I should have changed the subject, instead of digging myself even deeper into a hole already stacked with lies.

‘And there weren’t any mountains,’ I corrected, ‘just a very dense forest.’

‘The forest might be dense, Lily, but I’m not. *Something* clearly happened while you were away.’

I lowered my piping nozzle, as though surrendering a weapon. My hand was probably too unsteady to finish the cake I was icing anyway. I met Raegan’s gaze, pausing for a moment to marvel at the impressive height her eyebrows had achieved. They were practically in her hairline.

‘You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.’

I tried for nonchalance and missed by a mile.

‘There’s really nothing to tell. I saw an old mate, we caught up, and then I came home.’

‘It’s just you’ve been kind of distracted since you got back.’

I shook my head, refuting her words, even though I knew she was right.

‘I don’t think so.’

Raegan gave a knowing nod. ‘So, you *deliberately* iced the customer’s surname on the cake instead of what’s written on the order sheet?’

I looked down at the cake with a cry of dismay. She was right.

‘Oh, bugger.’

Raegan reached for the piping nozzle. ‘Give it here, I’ll fix it.’ She gave a twisted smile. ‘And your language is certainly more colourful since you got back. I’m starting to feel like Mother Teresa next to you.’

I remembered all over again why I’d hired Raegan. Even in the darkest of moments she could always make me laugh.

‘I’m guessing the effing and blinding is also down to the Highlands’

answer to Bear Grylls. I wonder what else he taught you while holding you hostage in the forest.'

She was baiting me, but this time I didn't rise to it.



Of course, Raegan had continued to probe, as I'd known she would. Over mugs of tea and our treasured supply of chocolate Hobnobs, she surprised me by suddenly reaching across the countertop to squeeze my hand. There were at least a dozen silver rings on her fingers, but only one gold band on mine.

'Just tell me one thing, Lily. Is this renewed friendship something to get excited about?' There was a hopeful light glinting in her eyes.

I shook my head sadly. 'No. It was more like closing a door we probably shouldn't have reopened. If anything, it was like laying an old ghost to rest.'

'Interesting choice of words,' Raegan said, and then raised her hands as though warding me off. 'But I won't mention it again.' She took two sips from her mug before breaking her word. 'It's a real shame though. I was kind of hoping a fit, bearded, lumberjack type might come charging through those swing doors and sweep you off your feet.'

I snorted inelegantly into my tea but couldn't stop my eyes from flitting to the double aluminium doors of the kitchen workshop.

'That'll never happen,' I said, drawing a line under the subject.

But I realised my heart had developed an annoying habit of quickening every time my phone received a message, only to plummet in my diaphragm each time it wasn't Josh. And it never would be, because he was keeping to the agreement we'd made when I left.



Even though my mission to get answers from Josh had basically failed, I couldn't help wondering if Adam had had another motive in making me seek him out. Had he wanted my visit to do more than just shine a light on the past? Had he hoped it might also illuminate a pathway to the future? Obviously not one with Josh – I couldn't imagine Adam engineering *that* in a million years. But perhaps he'd wanted to show me the dreams we'd had together might still be possible.



The phone call that pushed me to change the rest of my life wasn't even for me. It was for Raegan.

I should have been alone in the Cupcakes and Rainbows workshop because it was mid-afternoon on a Saturday, and Raegan never worked weekends. But Polly had received a last-minute invitation to a birthday party, freeing her mum to come in and help me with a big order for later in the week.

'If you ask me, Pol's only been invited because a bunch of kids in her class have come down with the pox.'

'"Chicken" or "small"?''

Raegan's tight-lipped expression loosened at that. 'It kind of pisses me off that they only asked the B-listers yesterday. I wanted to say no, but Polly really wanted to go. Apparently, they've hired a bouncy castle to die for.'

'Not literally, I hope.'

Raegan scoffed. 'I don't know this group of mums that well. They're more the "designer gym kits" and the "let's do brunch" gang. Whereas I'm more at home with the "let's go to Costco" crowd.'

'God, is there really that kind of hierarchy in the infant school playground?'

'You have no idea,' Raegan said meaningfully.

It was an arrow straight to my heart, because sadly she was right about that.



'Am I speaking to Polly's mum?' I had no idea who was on the other end of the phone, but whoever it was, they sounded panicked.

'No. I'm sorry, she's just popped out for a minute. Can I help?'

There was a pause that went on for several beats too long.

'Do you have her mobile number?'

'I do, but . . .' I glanced across the room and saw Raegan's fuchsia-pink phone sitting beside her bag. '. . . but she hasn't got it on her at the moment. Can I take a message? She's literally just popped out for a minute to get something.'

The woman on the other end of the phone relayed this to someone who

must have been standing nearby. All I caught was a hurried ‘not there’.

‘Look, I’m a close friend of the family. If Polly’s not well or needs picking up I can—’ I never got to finish my sentence because in the background someone began shouting and I could hear the sound of children crying.

‘None of us has Polly’s mum’s number, you see,’ the voice on the end of the line continued. ‘But then someone remembered she works at this cake place.’

If I’d been standing in front of the caller, I swear I’d be shaking her by the shoulders by now to get the words out of her.

‘Is something wrong? Is there a problem?’ I asked in a voice that didn’t sound like mine at all.

The woman gulped audibly, and my heart began to thump so fiercely it felt capable of cracking a rib or two. Surprisingly my voice was relatively calm as I enunciated in tones that brooked no argument.

‘Please tell me exactly what’s happened, so I can get word to Raegan.’

‘There was an accident on the bouncy castle – well, more of a mishap, really,’ the woman downgraded, which might have been a comfort had it not been for a noise I now heard above the general chaos in the background. It was a siren.

I didn’t remember scribbling down the details across the front of my order book, but I must have done, for the torn-off cover was scrunched up in my hand as I stood waiting for Raegan’s return. I’d already turned everything off and was positioned by the door with my friend’s coat over my arm.

She noticed the darkness of the room first.

‘Did they cut off the electricity again?’ she joked, putting down the four-pint container of milk she’d popped out to buy. ‘They didn’t have any two pints, so I had to get—’

‘Put your coat on, Raegan.’

Her eyes widened, probably because she recognised the tone of my voice. I did too. It was my Adam voice: tight and controlled, and typically reserved for discussing something bad.

‘What’s happened, Lily? You’re scaring the crap out of me.’

I took her hand, more to prevent her from bolting for her car when she heard what I had to say than anything else. There was no way I was allowing her behind the wheel of a vehicle.

‘Someone from the party phoned to let you know there’s been an . . .

incident . . . on the bouncy castle. Polly's had a bit of a tumble and they've taken her to St Luke's to get checked out.'

'Checked out? What the hell does that mean? What kind of an incident?'

I'd never seen the colour drain from anyone's face so fast.

'They think she might have broken her arm.' It seemed safest to lead with that.

'Bloody bouncy castles,' Raegan interjected angrily. 'I warned her to be careful and stay away from the bigger kids.'

Her rage froze when she realised I wasn't done yet delivering the bad news.

'They also said she'd hit her head. *That's* why they thought it best to call an ambulance.'

Raegan, my tough-as-nails, 'take on the world single-handedly' friend, swayed on her feet like a heroine in a Victorian novel. My arm snapped instantly around her waist. She was trembling so hard I could feel every shudder vibrate through me.

'Come on, I'll drive us to the hospital,' I said, urging her through the door.

'No. I should go straight to the party. Polly can't go off in an ambulance all by herself. She's too little. She'd be terrified.'

There was no easy way to say this, so I just had to put it bluntly.

'I don't think she'd know, hon. The woman who phoned said Polly wasn't properly awake.' In truth the woman had said Polly had been knocked unconscious by the fall, but I didn't think Raegan could handle that frightening piece of information just yet.

I drove faster than I should have, almost hoping a police car would pull us over and then escort us to the hospital with sirens blaring. I think I caught the flash of at least two speed cameras on the way, but the fines would be worth it if I reunited Raegan with her daughter even one minute faster.

My friend had been a source of unshakeable support to me in my darkest moments with Adam, and as I sped through the side streets towards the hospital, I only hoped that I could be just as strong for her now that the roles were reversed.

Just let her be all right, I pleaded to a God who hadn't exactly been listening when I'd begged him to help the man I loved.

Raegan, who was rarely silent, said virtually nothing throughout the twenty-minute journey. Out the corner of my eye I could see the tension

thrumming through her, making her legs jiggle so violently that *had* she been driving, the car would have kangarooed all the way to the hospital.

‘She’ll be alright,’ I assured her. ‘Polly’s a tough cookie. She’s practically made from Teflon. Remember that time when she fell off the swing in the park and grazed her knees really badly and *still* refused to go home and get cleaned up.’

Turning reluctantly in her seat, as though taking her eyes from the road would somehow slow us down, Raegan spoke in a voice that seemed smaller than it ever had before.

‘They called an ambulance for her, Lily. A bloody ambulance. You don’t do that for something you can slap a plaster on.’

I grappled for a comforting reply, couldn’t find one, so pressed down a little harder on the accelerator.

‘She’s broken her arm and has a head injury,’ Raegan continued with a hitch of a sob. ‘That doesn’t sound like Teflon to me.’

I swept into the hospital grounds like I was qualifying for the F1. I didn’t bother following the signs for the visitor car park, but drove straight up to the main entrance, which I was pretty sure only emergency vehicles were allowed to do. That was probably another fine in the making.

‘Go,’ I said to the already empty seat beside me. ‘I’ll find you when I’ve parked up.’

I left my car in the hospital multistorey, at a weird angle and straddling two bays; that was probably another infringement. Not that I cared. I’d happily cough up a fortune in penalties today if it meant that Polly was alright.

I ran recklessly down the concrete car park stairs to the ground floor, too impatient to wait for the lift to reach me. The clatter of my boots echoed noisily in the stairwell, but the thundering of my heart was louder. I didn’t know the layout of this particular hospital. It wasn’t one where Adam had ever been treated, but I knew better than to join the long queue of people waiting to be seen at the reception desk.

The Accident and Emergency department was well signposted, so I sprinted down corridors, slaloming past patients in wheelchairs and hospital beds, as though I was on an assault course. Miraculously, I didn’t send any of them flying. I burst through the doors into A&E, scarlet-faced and out of breath, looking more in need of oxygen than half the waiting room.

I scoured the rows of chairs but couldn’t see Raegan anywhere. I hurried

to the desk, raising my voice as though I didn't trust the Perspex screen not to muffle my words.

'My friend's little girl has just been brought in by ambulance. Polly Taylor. Her mum Raegan should be here somewhere.'

Before the receptionist could reach for her keyboard, a young nurse standing behind her put down the pile of folders she was carrying and gave me a sympathetic smile. The woman was a stranger, but I knew that smile and it did little to stop the jackhammer percussion of my heart.

'I just took your friend to her little girl. The doctors are with them now, but I can take you to them . . . if you like.'

I practically vaulted over the desk to get to her, which effectively answered that question.

'How is she? Polly, I mean.'

The nurse either didn't know or was too skilled at hiding worrying information from friends and family. I'd been on the receiving end of both alternatives too many times to count.

'It's the doctors you need to speak to.' She broke protocol for a moment to lay a comforting hand on my arm. 'But she's in the best of hands. The paediatric staff here are amazing.'

Unexpected kindness had always had the power to take me down when Adam was sick, and it seemed it still could. I nodded and fought to gain greater control of my trembling lower lip before we walked through the next set of double doors. I would be no use to Raegan if I couldn't put a clamp on my own emotions and stop thinking that hospitals were places where only bad news was delivered.

We walked swiftly past a row of curtained cubicles. There were ominous moans and groans coming from a couple of them, but muted voices from the one at the end of the line.

'It looks like the doctors are still with her,' the nurse said, bringing us to a halt in front of a nearby row of seats. 'If you wait out here, you'll be able to see your friend as soon as they've finished.'

As much as I wanted to insist that I join the crowd of medics in the cubicle, I did as I was instructed, perching on the very edge of the hard plastic chair so I was ready to leap to my feet at the first twitch of those curtains.

Infuriatingly, the voices in the cubicle were all softly spoken and muted, and although I could make out that several people were talking, nothing was

clear enough to decipher. Instead, I counted the feet visible beneath the bottom of the curtain, trying to decide if the alarming number of medics attending to one little girl was a good or a bad thing.

I was still undecided when the curtains parted with a parrot-like screech of rings on metal. Four white-coated people strode past me, leaving just Raegan and a nurse standing beside a bed that held a version of Polly I'd never seen before.

Polly was a live wire, never still, not even in sleep. I'd babysat her enough times to know that. So, seeing her pale and immobile in the too-big hospital bed, where she looked like little more than a ruck in the blankets, was a real shock. There was a bandage encircling her head, beneath which I could see one hell of a bump, and an ugly purple bruise that went from temple to cheekbone. Her left arm had been splinted but wasn't yet in a cast. My eyes went to her tiny chest, relieved to see its steady rise and fall. But her eyelids were closed, with blue spidery veins visible on the fragile skin that I could swear hadn't been there before.

'How is she?' I whispered.

'She opened her eyes for a moment when I got here,' Raegan said.

It took me a second or two to organise my features so they reflected a more positive reaction. 'That's good. That's very good.'

I think we both knew it really wasn't.

'Did she say anything?'

It took two hard swallows before Raegan managed to get out her reply.

'She sounded confused.' Raegan was biting her lip so hard she was leaving white indents on the tender skin. 'I don't know if she knew it was me, Lily. She seemed out of it.'

'What are they doing now?' I asked, reaching for the hand that wasn't holding Polly's and gripping it tightly.

I saw the visible effort it took for Raegan to formulate a reply.

'They're coming in a moment to take her up for a CT scan and God knows what other tests.' She looked down at the bed and shook her head slowly. 'How did we go from a perfectly normal Saturday afternoon to this?'

A hand squeeze wasn't enough this time, so I put my arm around her shoulders and drew her in for a hug.

'Shit happens,' I mumbled into her shoulder. 'And when it does, it's never to the people who deserve it. But this is just a tiny blip. Polly will be fine, Raegan. I know she will.'

I had a horrible memory of telling Adam exactly the same thing after he got sick, but I refused to allow my thoughts to go down that path.

Footsteps made us both look up to find a nurse and a hospital porter by the opening in the curtains.

‘They’re ready for her in Radiology,’ the nurse advised. Her eyes went to Raegan’s. ‘You can come up with her, Mum.’

Raegan gave an emphatic nod, and I wondered if the nurse realised how many people it would have taken to stop my friend from doing exactly that.

‘But I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to wait back in reception,’ she apologised to me.

‘That’s fine. I’m happy to sit anywhere.’

They were already releasing the bed from the bay when Raegan turned back towards me.

‘Actually, Lily, would you mind going back to mine and picking up some things for Polly? They said she’ll definitely be kept in overnight, whatever the results of the scans, and you know she can’t sleep without Murphy. Oh, and maybe you could bring in her new pink pyjamas – the ones with the rainbows on them.’

She rummaged in her bag and produced a bunch of keys and thrust them into my hand.

‘Are you sure you wouldn’t rather I stayed here at the hospital?’

Raegan shook her head, her focus and gaze back on Polly, who had murmured softly at the movement of the bed.

‘Okay, then. I’ll be as quick as I can,’ I promised, giving her one last brief hug that was cut short as the hospital bed was pushed out of the cubicle.

Chapter Thirty Two

The revolving doors spat me out of the hospital foyer and into the growing dusk of late afternoon. I headed straight for the taxi rank, where I gave the first cab in line the address of my workshop so I could collect Raegan's car. It felt strange driving the unfamiliar vehicle, parking in Raegan's busy street, and then letting myself in to her maisonette, as though I was walking in a pair of shoes that didn't belong to me. Of course, I'd been inside their home countless times, but never without Raegan or Polly. I fumbled clumsily on the wrong side of the hallway for the light switch and hit my hip on a table I'd forgotten was there as I walked down the half-lit passageway to the small kitchen. I threw a longing glance in the direction of the kettle but made no move to fill it. I didn't want to waste a single moment getting back to Raegan. I knew only too well how lonely hospital bedside vigils could be. And my conversation with the nurse who'd escorted me back to the waiting room was still fresh in my mind.

'Are other family members on the way?' she'd asked, looking a little uncomfortable, as though she wasn't one hundred per cent sure she was allowed to ask that question. *'It's just so we know if we should be looking out for them,'* she added in a murmur.

I'd known what she was asking me. But Raegan, who had almost zero filter and would talk about virtually anything, had never once spoken about Polly's father, other than to say he wasn't the kind of man to be anyone's parent. The first time she'd said that my thoughts had gone straight to Josh and his troubled background, and they did again today.

'No. There's no one else. It's just the two of them. Raegan's family all live near Scotland.'

And there was Josh again, front and centre in my thoughts. I shook my head as though to reposition him back in the box where I was trying to keep him contained.

There were two egg-stained plates left over from lunch on the kitchen table, beside a half-drunk cup of coffee and a tumbler with a film of milk coating the glass. I rinsed them and left them drying on the draining board. They'd obviously left in a hurry to get to the party, I realised, as I carried a tub of margarine to the fridge and got sidetracked by a collection of new

drawings displayed on the door with vegetable-shaped magnets. A carrot one secured a drawing of a rainbow and two figures who looked worryingly like aliens, holding hands. I knew from the magenta-coloured hair of the taller ET they were meant to be Raegan and Polly. Beside it was a Valentine's Day card Polly must have made in infants' school, decorated with so much glitter and sequins I was amazed the tomato-shaped magnet could hold it. In the middle of a red crayoned heart was a message in huge letters that I recognised as Polly's wobbly penmanship.

I love my mummy lots and lots.

For absolutely no reason I felt tears prickling the backs of my eyes.

It's just a reaction to the emotions of the day, I told myself as I stowed the Flora back in the fridge. But then the wall calendar got to me just as badly. It was the kind you have printed from favourite photographs, and every month showed a precious memory in the life Raegan and Polly had built together. From fish and chips on a seaside beach to pulling silly faces at each other as they blew bubbles into the sky, it was a catalogue showing how strong their family unit was.

Raegan rarely dated, and whenever the subject came up, she always said she'd never met anyone who was good enough to be in Polly's life. It sounded like a strange excuse to me, and I'd made Adam run through a list of all his single mates to see if there was someone I could introduce her to. I didn't get it then. However enlightened I thought I was, I still believed that a man would complete their little family. How blind was I not to have realised they already *were* a perfectly complete family.

As though I'd had blinkers on, I looked at everything differently now as I climbed the stairs to retrieve the items Raegan had asked me to bring to the hospital. There were hooks on the back of the bathroom door, one up high and one down at Polly level, where their dressing gowns hung. The toothbrush holder held a Barbie model, which I scooped up along with a more utilitarian one. The absence of a third brush or hook didn't matter one little bit. In fact, there probably wasn't even room for another dressing gown on that door, and for the first time I got it. I truly did. And the revelation was so huge it made me gasp and caused my hand to tremble as I reached for Murphy, Polly's beloved bedtime teddy, who was propped up on her pillow,

patiently waiting for her.

I dropped Polly's rainbow pyjamas as well as a set of clean clothes for both her and Raegan into a bag, but for some reason I hung on to Murphy. Before leaving the bedroom, I brought the bear to my face and inhaled deeply, the way I'd once caught Raegan doing when she was making Polly's bed. It was of the few times I'd ever seen my friend blush.

'It just smells of her. It's my favourite smell in the entire world,' she'd said, embarrassed, almost challenging me to laugh at her. I hadn't then and I certainly didn't do so now.

Theirs was a true love story; so strong, so powerful, they needed no one else but each other. And suddenly everything cleared in my head because *this* was what I wanted too. This was my dream, the one that had started with Adam, but still lived on. I didn't need to find the perfect man to be an ideal husband; I'd already found and then lost that. I also didn't need a man who made my pulse race and filled my head with thoughts and dreams that could never be, because I'd found and lost that too.

What I needed to complete my life, my world and my future was already there. Waiting for me. And I knew in this moment that I was ready for the next incredible, life-changing stage of my life to begin.



The paediatric ward was already in darkness by the time I returned, even though it was still only early evening. I whispered a request for directions at the nurses' station and then tiptoed exaggeratedly down the corridor like a bad mime artist.

I didn't like the swirl of uncertainty churning in my stomach as I approached the curtained bed in the far corner of the bay. Through the closed drapes I could see a soft halo of light from the overhead panel. I took a steadying breath, schooling myself to be ready for anything as I gripped the material and drew the curtains apart.

The first thing I saw was a far more recognisable Polly propped up in bed against a mountain of pillows. The bruise and bandage still drew my attention, but beneath them Polly's cornflower blue eyes were no longer shut. True, they were ringed with dark circles and heavy-lidded with exhaustion, but they still flickered towards me as I stepped through the opening.

Beside her, Raegan was holding on to her daughter's hand, with an

expression on her face I'd never seen before. I hadn't known her back then, but I would have bet my bank balance it was the same one she'd worn when they'd placed her newborn infant in her arms five years before.

She looked up, and as our eyes met, no words were necessary. I turned to the little girl who was the centre of her mother's world, and who I'd realised today was almost as important in mine.

'Hey, Pickle, how are you doing?'

'I fell off the stupid bouncy thing, Auntie Lily.'

I pulled up a chair beside the bed and dropped down on to it.

'I heard about that. Seems like a silly thing to do. Why did you do it?'

'I fell off,' she repeated with an exasperated sigh, as though I was the one who'd hit their head. 'And then they had to do photos of my brains, but they don't let you take them home with you.'

Trying very hard to suppress my smile, I looked over at Raegan. 'Everything was fine,' she mouthed silently. If you looked up 'relieved' in a dictionary, beside it would be a picture of my friend's face right now. 'They're keeping her in tonight as a precaution, but we should be able to go home in the morning.'

Raegan gave out a long shaky breath. 'God, Lily. This parenting lark isn't for the fainthearted.'

I swallowed a giveaway gulp and hoped the ward was too dark for her to see the sudden flush that had rushed to my cheeks at her words. But fortunately, her focus was only on Polly right now. There'd be time enough to share my decision with her, but for now I was guarding it close, like the secret it still was.

They evicted me from the ward, in the nicest possible way, very soon afterwards. A fold-out sofa chair and blankets had been provided for Raegan beside Polly's bed, and the best thing I could do was to get out of there and let them both get some sleep.

With Murphy safely tucked away beneath her unbroken arm, Polly was clearly struggling to stay awake.

'I can come back in the morning, or meet you at your place if you like,' I volunteered as I gathered up my bag and coat.

'That's okay. You've done more than enough,' Raegan said. 'I phoned Mum and Dad and they're heading down at first light. They're going to stay with me for a week or so.'

She reached across and brushed a straying strand of hair from Polly's

cheek. 'It'll be lovely to see Grandma and Grandpa, won't it? They'll make you feel better.'

Polly, who was definitely more asleep than awake, gave a wistful smile before murmuring softly, 'So would a puppy.'

Raegan rolled her eyes, but interestingly her usual refusal was replaced with a far more hopeful 'Let's see, shall we?'

As I kissed them both goodbye, she whispered, 'That kid's got me wrapped around her little finger.'

I was smiling as I walked back to the car park, knowing Raegan wouldn't have it any other way.

I phoned my parents when I got home, even though I'd only spoken to them two days earlier. Mum cried when I told her my plans, and my father's voice grew so gruff it was almost indecipherable. Unsurprisingly he blamed it on a cold he was still trying to shake off, but I didn't believe that for a moment.

Chapter Thirty Three

The white envelope was propped up on my breakfast bar. The late August sunshine was hitting it at just the right angle, making it look like my name was illuminated by a spotlight. The envelope felt heavy, even though I knew it probably contained only a single sheet of paper. It was nothing like the stationery I used to send out the Cupcakes and Rainbows invoices. But then you could hardly compare the resources of a humble cake catering company with an exclusive fertility clinic.



'We will write to you each year to see if you would like us to continue to store your frozen sperm.'

'We will. Always,' Adam replied confidently, giving my hand a firm squeeze. The administrator sitting opposite us gave an understanding smile, looking at me with sympathy when my lower lip started to tremble.

'And these are the forms I mentioned earlier,' she said, speaking slowly and carefully, as though we might not have understood what she was saying. 'Please take as long as you need to read them through. Signing them will allow your wife legal access to the frozen sperm in the event of . . .' She'd been doing so well up until that point, but she faltered at the last hurdle.

'My death,' Adam completed, so calmly that I almost smiled, not because it was anything other than utterly heartbreaking, but because here he was, trying hard not to make some poor, unknown woman feel bad. Because all of us sitting at that table knew that, as hard as Adam fought, there was a good chance he was going into a battle he wouldn't win.

The drive home from the clinic that day was tough.

'I wouldn't want to use it if you weren't here with me,' I told the glass of the passenger window. It was the only place I could look where he couldn't see the tears coursing down my cheeks.

'Then don't,' Adam said, taking one hand from the wheel and finding mine. 'We're not committing to anything here. If all goes well with my treatment, we can still make babies the good old-fashioned way. What we've done today,' he continued, his voice gentle, 'is to set up an insurance policy

should things not work out.’ He lifted my hand to his lips and grazed the knuckles with a kiss. ‘It doesn’t mean we have to stop hoping for the best.’



But of course, hoping for the best hadn’t worked out too well. And so now the clinic was writing to ask me the question Adam had already answered.

‘What if we never want or need to use it?’ I’d asked him.

‘Then we just keep it. Doesn’t it have a really long shelf-life?’

Unbelievably, I’d laughed at that. *‘I think you might be confusing it with frozen waffles.’*

He’d smiled then, knowing he’d done exactly what he’d set out to do. He’d brought me back from the ledge once again.

‘Keep it there, Lily. You never know how things are going to pan out, and if you don’t use it, you could always make a fortune flogging it on eBay.’

I slit open the envelope now, nodding slowly as though I was answering a question no one had spoken out loud. I’d been expecting the letter, and I wondered if part of me had been waiting for it to arrive before finally embarking on the course of action I’d decided upon five months ago, when Polly had her accident. It felt like serendipity that the letter had dropped on to my doormat on the same day I’d put aside the last of my uncertainty and decided to contact the clinic myself.

I’d never been one to believe in signs, but suddenly the universe was full of them. Every other woman I walked past in the street was either pregnant or pushing a pram. Had it always been so? I had no idea, but the coincidences were piling up thick and fast. A flyer had dropped through my letterbox about a brand-new nursery that was opening just around the corner from my flat, and then, while channel-hopping TV stations a couple of nights ago, I’d stumbled upon a documentary detailing a couple’s IUI journey.

‘IUI. Intrauterine insemination,’ I said quietly in the empty kitchen. A topic I knew a great deal more about now than I had done just five months ago, when the idea of going ahead and having a baby on my own had first occurred to me in Raegan’s home.

I’d researched the procedure exhaustively and knew the chances of success on my first round of IUI were slight, especially if I wanted to go down the natural path, without the use of hormone injections or drugs. Which was the option that most appealed to me.

Adam had always been a fatalist. *'If something is meant to be yours, it will find its way to you,'* he once said, before pulling me towards him for a kiss. *'Like me finding you on the side of the road.'*

I'd kissed him back and laughed.

'You really do need to find a better way of phrasing that, my love.'

His eyes had twinkled. *'If it's meant to be, then it's meant to be.'*

So here I was, about to apply his totally unsubstantiated theory in my efforts to become a mum. My first attempt at IUI would be drug free and as natural and normal as getting pregnant with your late husband's baby could possibly be.



'Just lie back and relax for about ten minutes or so. Then you can get up and pop your clothes back on.'

Was that it? I wondered, feeling slightly incredulous. I'd had more traumatic visits to the dentist.

I hadn't slept well the previous night – actually, I'd not slept well for the past few weeks if I was being totally honest. I'd been worrying about the procedure, but it had been surprisingly quick, easy, and almost business-like.

'I'd imagined making a baby would be more of a big deal,' I said softly in the empty treatment room.

Ah, those were the days, said the Adam in my head. It was so easy to visualise the twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

I remained on the examination table for exactly as long as I was told to do, and then, feeling strangely surreal, I got dressed and made my way back to the car. The receptionist smiled warmly as I walked towards the exit clutching the bundle of literature I'd been given. I would read it all diligently, but I had a feeling I could probably write my own pamphlet on IUI after all the research I'd carried out over the last few months. The one fact I'd very much like to have forgotten was the low percentage of successful first-time attempts. Unfortunately, that one was stuck in my head and would probably be there for the next two weeks until I was able to take a pregnancy test.

As I walked through the elegantly furnished foyer, I passed several couples waiting anxiously for their names to be called. I felt a twinge not of envy, but more of regret that I hadn't told anyone where I was going today, much less asked them to accompany me. Raegan could easily have been at

my side, and I bet even Andie would have jumped on a plane from her home in New York if I'd asked her. She had when Adam was first diagnosed, and then again when he died.

There was no reason to feel that there ought to be another shadow walking beside mine on the journey back through the car park. And yet I did.

You could have asked him. He said he'd be there for you if you ever needed him, said Adam's voice in my head, so clearly that my steps actually faltered.

'He didn't mean for something like this,' I said out loud, sounding truly horrified at my late husband's outrageous suggestion. Two young women in uniforms bearing the clinic's logo glanced my way.

'Sorry, did you say something?' one of them called across.

I blushed like the idiot I knew I must surely look.

'No, sorry. I was just thinking out loud,' I said, fumbling for my car keys. 'You're going to get me committed,' I muttered to Adam, who'd been far more vocal in my head recently, while I'd been waiting for my appointment at the clinic. I suppose it wasn't really surprising, given that what I was doing was a chance to bring him back to life in the only way that I could.



The trick, I discovered, was to keep busy and not think about how I'd set something in motion that could change the rest of my life. It probably didn't help that I was crossing each passing day off the calendar, like a prisoner waiting for release.

In the days that followed the procedure I found myself wanting to inexplicably share what I'd done with total strangers – perhaps because the thought of sharing it with the people who *really* mattered to me made me nervous.

Although Mum and Dad knew about my plans, I hadn't given them the date of my appointment, because I knew it would make them start worrying about me all over again, and they'd only just begun to relax after eighteen months of being on high alert. But perhaps the real reason was that, for now, this was just between Adam and me, and I really liked that we had this one last secret together.



I double-locked the doors to the workshop, relieved that the day was finally over. I'd stayed later at work than normal, trying to catch up after a taxing afternoon on the phone chasing a missing shipment and dealing with a difficult customer.

The air felt hot and humid as Fletcher and I crossed the car park, and this morning's bright blue sky had darkened and now resembled an angry bruise. It looked like the weathermen had finally got one right. A summer storm was definitely on the way. I glanced up, wondering if we'd make it home before the weather broke.

I'd just parked up when the first drops of rain began to fall. Pulling a reluctant Fletcher behind me, I ran through the splattering rain towards the short flight of marble steps that led to the main doors of my building. They were slippery underfoot and I realised for the first time how awkward they'd be to negotiate with a pram. And after scaling them, I'd still have to tackle three internal flights to reach my flat. Too late I realised I probably should have given more thought to those practicalities before running blithely into the unknown.

Distracted by the question of how I'd cope, I was slow to realise that at my side Fletcher was emitting a low, threatening growl. His attention was firmly fixed on an area of the communal front gardens that fell outside of the pool of the security light.

Instinctively I tightened my hold on my handbag and fumbled for the Yale key on the overcrowded fob in my hand. Fletcher's gums were now exposed in an unfamiliar menacing snarl. I glanced over my shoulder towards the pavement, but the street was unusually deserted.

Relief flooded through me as I finally found the key to the main door, but before I could slide it into the lock, a tall shadow detached itself from the others beneath the trees. Fletcher yanked on his lead with a ferocity that took me by surprise, making me drop the keys. They fell with a clatter into the overgrown bush beside the doorway. I dropped to a crouch, groping among the sodden leaves and soil as the figure Fletcher was growling at took another step towards us.

My searching fingers brushed against something cold and metallic, and with a cry of triumph I scooped up my keys. There wasn't time to open the door and get inside before whoever had been skulking in the trees reached us,

so I adjusted my hold on the longest, sharpest key and gripped it the way we'd been shown at the university self-defence class Andie had made us attend.

I was breathing hard and fast as I turned to face the ominous shadowy figure. Beside me, Fletcher was poised to pounce, his hackles all the way up.

I readied myself to release my first-ever scream, when the breath was stolen from me by a single word. My name.

I gasped, instantly recognising the voice. The shadows morphed into a shape, as into the light stepped the one person who was even less welcome on my doorstep than a mugger.

Claire.



'I thought you'd *never* get home.'

Most people would have led with 'Hello', but then Claire wasn't most people. My heart was still hammering like a wild thing in my chest, which may or may not have been responsible for the sharpness of my response.

'What the hell are you doing creeping up on people in the shadows? You scared me half to death.'

'Did I?' she asked, and although it was hard to tell in the half light, I thought I saw a glimmer of a smile.

'What on earth were you doing lurking there under the trees anyway?'

She shook her head as though it was her lot to have to deal with the most stupid people on the planet.

'I wasn't *lurking*. I was waiting, or rather sheltering. It's raining, in case you hadn't noticed.' She pointed to the sky as though I might not understand the concept of precipitation. 'I was trying to stay dry until you got home.'

'So, you *were* waiting for me?'

I probably deserved that withering look. *Of course* she'd been waiting for me. That wasn't really the question to be asked here. The one I should have gone with was *why*.

'Look, can we go inside, Lily? I'd really like to get this over and done with as quickly as possible.'

I had no idea what 'this' was, but if it had been instigated by Claire, there was a good chance I wouldn't like it.

I reached across and opened the double doors that led into the black and

white tiled hallway of the converted mansion house. Fletcher was still making a low, ominous-sounding throaty rumble, and was staring with distrustful eyes at the unknown woman who followed us into the building. *Good dog.*

I closed the doors behind us and turned to Claire. I had no intention of inviting her into the flat I'd shared with Adam. Whatever she had to say to me could surely be said right here, out in the hallway.

Only it turned out that it couldn't.

'Not here,' Claire said, her eyes flicking towards the door of the downstairs flat which had just swung open. 'You're going to want somewhere more private to hear this.'

She followed me in silence as we mounted the three flights of stairs to my flat, my agitation growing with each storey. But as soon as I unlocked the front door and stepped over the threshold, I instantly felt better. I turned to my uninvited guest, who was looking around the hallway with undisguised curiosity.

'Nice place,' she said, and it was telling that that was possibly one of the most amiable things she'd ever said to me. It made me remember my own manners and try harder not to go into teenage animosity mode, something I had a habit of doing around her.

Contrite, I extended my hand in a belated greeting. Claire and I had never been the type who'd hug or air-kiss. Just the thought would have had both of us grimacing in distaste.

She looked down at my hand, admittedly the one that had been scrabbling about in the earth beneath the bush. Unsurprisingly, she chose not to shake it. I didn't blame her.

'Sorry, I should wash the front garden off.'

I headed for the kitchen, expecting she'd remain in the hallway, but she followed me. Uninvited, she removed her coat and threw it over the back of a chair.

At the sink I gave a small, resigned sigh. It looked as though she was settling in for more than just a flying visit on her broomstick. My lips twitched at this, and for a moment I imagined I could hear Josh, telling me to give her a break, the way he'd done a hundred times before in our teenage years. As much as I didn't want to admit it, I was being inhospitable, and that really wasn't me.

'Drink?' I asked, drying my hands on a fluffy white towel and reaching

for the kettle.

‘I’ll have wine if you’ve got some.’

That sounded more sociable than I really wanted to be, but I nevertheless went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of white.

‘Is this okay?’ I asked, already reaching for a solitary glass from the cupboard.

‘You’re not having one?’ she asked, watching me pour out the Chardonnay.

In truth, I’d never wanted alcohol more than I did right then, but I was still ten days away from knowing if I might be pregnant, and I wasn’t prepared to jeopardize my chances of a good outcome, not for anything, and especially not to keep Claire company while she sat drinking my wine.

‘It’s a bit early for me,’ I said, setting the glass down on the table and pulling out the chair opposite her.

We would probably have been more comfortable in the lounge, but there was a business-like quality to the clean sharp lines of my kitchen that served as a reminder that this wasn’t a normal social visit.

‘So, what’s this all about, Claire?’ I asked, deciding to cut through any attempt at faux pleasantries and get straight to the point of her visit.

For a moment I thought I saw a glint of respect in her eyes. She wanted this over almost as much as I did.

‘You had to go and find him, didn’t you?’ Claire said, leaning back in her chair with the look of a prosecutor at a trial. ‘You couldn’t just leave it alone. Leave *him* alone, could you?’

I hadn’t known the gloves were going to be coming off so soon.

‘I take it you mean Josh.’

The look she gave me would have withered anyone else, but we’d locked horns enough times for it to barely dent me.

‘Of course I mean Josh. He was doing okay. He had things figured out at last, and then you had to come back and screw with him all over again.’

I swallowed uncomfortably, aware I’d flinched at her words.

‘I don’t know what you’ve come here to complain about, Claire, but it really isn’t any of your business.’

Claire slammed down her wine so hard I feared for the fragile stem of the glass. ‘Of course it’s my bloody business. You messed him up six years ago, and just when he was getting a handle on life, moving on, you go charging in like a ballistic missile and he’s right back at square one again.’

My anger was a long, slow boil, but it was already simmering deep within me.

‘Look, Claire, as much as I dislike your interference, I am prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume this home invasion—’ She snorted at that. I took a steadying breath and tried again. ‘— comes from a place of concern for Josh, so I’m willing to tolerate you being rude and even unpleasant to me in my own home. But you’re way out of line telling me that I’ve ever ruined Josh’s life. Okay, things weren’t exactly amicable when we parted years ago, but there was no animosity between us when we said goodbye seven months ago.’

For a fleeting moment I was back there in the clearing outside Josh’s cabin, feeling his fingers winding their way through my hair as he kissed me in the moonlight on the night before I left. It was a memory I still couldn’t let go of.

‘You didn’t shut the door on anything, Lily. And you know nothing about how badly it affected him the last time. And as for closure, how could there be any, when sooner or later it was obvious you’d worm your way back into his life again.’

She made it sound like I’d been on a mission to hurt Josh, and while admittedly we’d been furious with each other when we’d ended things six years ago, it had been completely different this time when we’d parted. It had been the right decision for where we were now – for *who* we were now. But there was no way I was sharing that degree of personal information with Claire.

‘I went to see Josh earlier this year because my husband Adam had asked me to do so before he died. He said Josh had something to tell me.’ I looked down at my hands and saw I was turning my wedding band around and around on my finger. ‘But Josh said he didn’t know what Adam had been talking about. So as soon as the snow thawed and the roads were cleared, I left. There was no big drama. Except the one you’re making right now,’ I added softly, but not soft enough for the woman sitting in my kitchen not to hear.

‘For someone who thinks they’re so damn smart, you really are exceptionally dumb.’ Claire had a unique way of turning every comment about me into an insult. ‘Christ only knows why, but my brother is still in love with you. So much so that he puts you and your feelings above everyone else.’ She shook her head as though such insanity was beyond her. ‘Every.

Single. Time,' she added with disgust.

A silence fell on the room as we stared at each other across the width of the table where Adam and I had shared countless meals, plans, and dreams of forever. It was impossible to say how much I wanted Claire to leave, but she wasn't done yet. Far from it.

'Josh is coming to see you. It's going to be a surprise,' she said, ruining it without even a hint of remorse. 'But before he gets here and says God only knows what, it's about time you knew the truth.'

'What truth?' I asked, sitting up straighter in my chair, because suddenly the whole situation had changed. Even the ions in the air felt different.

'The thing that your husband wanted Josh to tell you . . . I know what it is. And unlike my brother, I have no desire to protect you, or hide something from you that you should have been told years ago.'

Chapter Thirty Four

It was all too much. Too much adrenaline flooding through my veins, too much blood roaring in my ears. But worse than that, it was too damn much to finally hear Adam's secret coming from the lips of a woman who'd never made any pretence about the fact that she hated me.

Without asking, Claire reached for the bottle of wine and refilled her glass before fixing me with the kind of stare a scientist gives a bug, right before they dissect it.

'This goes back to what happened on the weekend of your wedding, at that place on the river.'

'Sonning,' I said softly, my thoughts softening as I thought of the picture-perfect location where we'd chosen to get married. But this was no fairy story, you only had to look at the face of the narrator to know that.

'Josh told me he was going to go and see you that weekend, before it was too late, before you became someone else's wife.' Claire gave a small, humourless laugh. 'I don't know if he was looking for my approval or some other nonsense like that, but I told him straight up that he was making a huge mistake *and* an idiot out of himself.'

'That was supportive of you,' I said, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

'Hell, what did you think I was going to do? He was all set on doing the big Hollywood romantic gesture. He was going to be that lovesick idiot hammering on the glass of the church or leaping up out of a pew when they ask if anyone has any objections to the marriage.'

She leant forward, elbows on the table, putting her face uncomfortably close to mine.

'I tell you who did object. *I* did. I objected that he couldn't think straight where you were concerned. He never could. He still can't,' she added with a bitter twist of her lips. 'Anyway, you know better than I do how it all went down. I know he got there two days before you were due to get married and ...'

She gave a shrug, and I heaved a silent sigh of relief that Josh obviously hadn't told her exactly what had happened on that weekend, when my future could have been rewritten.

Claire shifted on the unforgiving kitchen chair, but I was too close to

finally learning the truth to even think about moving this conversation elsewhere.

‘I know Josh must have been pretty persuasive, because he phoned me that first night to say he thought everything was going to work out.’ Her nose wrinkled, as though she was hearing the news all over again. ‘As you can imagine, I wasn’t best pleased.’

‘I don’t suppose you were.’

‘But then, just twenty-four hours later, he was someone totally different: driving away from that hotel with his heart in pieces . . . and that’s down to you. *You’re* the reason he’s hidden himself away in the middle of nowhere for all these years.’ I took the blow, maybe I even deserved it. But nothing could have prepared me for what she said next. ‘But the person I blame even more than you . . . is your husband.’

‘Adam? What’s Adam got to do with any of this? He didn’t even know that Josh was in the area that weekend. I certainly never told him.’

Claire blew out her cheeks, as though sometimes she truly couldn’t believe how stupid I was. ‘*Of course* he knew.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Because your husband set out to find Josh and told him something – probably the *only* thing – that would ever have made him back down and walk away.’

My brain was still grappling with the fact that Adam had known our wedding had been in jeopardy, so it took several seconds before Claire’s words finally landed in the frozen area of my chest where my heart used to live – before it had relocated to my throat.

‘What did he say? What did Adam say to Josh?’

For a split second there was a look that was almost sympathy in Claire’s eyes, before it was blinked into oblivion.

‘Adam told Josh that you were pregnant. That you were both ecstatic about the news but that you were keeping it quiet until after the wedding. But he thought Josh had the right to know what was going on, given your history together.’

‘What? What are you talking about? Adam never said that to Josh. Why would he?’

‘I don’t know.’ Claire’s lip curled in a snarl. ‘But I do know that Josh was devastated that you hadn’t told him yourself. That after all those years of friendship, you’d let your husband be the one to do it.’

‘But I *wasn’t* pregnant. I’ve never been pregnant.’ Unconsciously, beneath the cover of the table, my hand went to my belly.

‘Well, that’s as may be. But your husband certainly managed to sound convincing. He even offered to show Josh the ultrasound photos on his phone.’

I was shaking my head in denial. What Claire was saying was unbelievable, and so out of character for the man I’d married that she had to be wrong. She had to be. But for the first time that night I heard Adam’s voice in my head. *No, she’s not, baby. She’s telling the truth.*

‘Josh came to see me the following day,’ I said, my voice dull and flat. ‘He said he’d made a mistake. That he’d not been in love with me after all.’

‘Yes, well, he would have said that, wouldn’t he? Because *he* was being honourable.’ The accusation hung in the air like a sword. ‘Josh did the noble thing and walked away to let you raise your perfect little two-point-four family in peace.’

‘But why would Adam have lied to Josh?’ I asked, searching for the answer in the kitchen Adam had painted, with the dripping tap he’d never got around to fixing, and the shelves he’d put up that weren’t perfectly straight.

‘I imagine it was because he knew the best man was going to win. You *were* going to choose Josh, weren’t you?’

It felt as though she’d reached into my chest and hauled out my heart. The pain felt real, because I was right back there again, loving two men in completely different ways and knowing someone’s heart was going to break, and it wasn’t just going to be mine.

‘Josh made sure you weren’t left with any lingering doubts about your decision – *that’s* why he engineered an argument so ugly it would sever every strand of your friendship before he walked away.’

The inexplicably bitter row that had haunted me for years, which had been so out of character and had never made any sense, finally did.

‘My brother stepped aside, because he was the bigger man, the better man, the man who wanted you to have your fairy tale. Your happy-ever-after. Shit, he even started to make you a sodding crib for the baby he thought you were going to have.’

My eyes widened until the skin around them felt stretched paper-thin. ‘An oak crib with woodland creatures carved on it?’

This time it was Claire’s turn to look startled.

‘Yes. He was halfway through making it when he saw some photos of

you and Adam on Facebook taken on a beach someplace. It was obvious from them that you weren't pregnant.'

I shook my head as the pieces began falling into place with horrible clarity.

'Josh thought you'd lost the baby. He nearly went back on his word and reached out to you. Thank God he didn't. He felt a big enough idiot as it was.'

'But when did he find out the truth?'

'When your husband contacted him.'

There was suddenly too much saliva in my mouth. It made speech almost impossible.

'Josh told me he never replied when Adam got in touch with him.'

Claire's face was eloquent. 'Well, it looks like he's almost as good a liar as your husband was. Because they *definitely* spoke. I guess Adam knew he wasn't going to make it and was trying to put things right before he died.' Her eyes narrowed. 'But some things can never be fixed, and your husband should have known that.'

So, there it was. The secret had finally been revealed. The mystery was gone. And soon, hopefully, Claire would be too. She got to her feet, slipping her arms into her coat as she appeared to wrestle with her thoughts.

'There's no point trying to rewrite history. You and I can't suddenly pretend we're friends.'

I looked up, certain I was still wearing my rabbit-in-the-headlights stunned expression.

'No, we can't,' I said quietly, before adding almost on a whisper. 'Although I never quite understood why that was.'

Claire shook her head slowly. 'Like I said, for an intelligent woman, you definitely aren't that smart.'

I let the insult lie, like I'd done so many times before.

'You knew Josh first, you and he already had this really tight bond, and then he became part of my family . . . part of my life . . . and yet the pull of you was always so ridiculously strong, it drew him away from spending time with me, over and over again. Even when he went away travelling, it was always you he visited first whenever he came back. Everyone else got squeezed in afterwards.'

She gave a shrug, like it was water so far beneath the bridge it scarcely mattered anymore, but I could see in her eyes that it still did.

‘Perhaps your Adam felt the same way as I did about you and Josh. Like whatever he did, he could never match the connection the two of you had. Who knows, if I’d been clever enough years ago, maybe *I’d* have done something similar to what your husband did.’

She looked pointedly towards the door, and I realised she was probably waiting to see if I was ever going to get to my feet, but my legs still felt incapable of holding me up.

‘I’ll let myself out then, shall I?’

I nodded dully.

Claire paused just once at the doorway, with a surprising parting remark.

‘You need to fix this, Lily. Like it or not I have to accept that one way or another you’re probably going to feature in Josh’s life for the foreseeable, and for his sake it might be time to finally bury the hatchet.’

It was the closest to reasonable I’d ever known Claire to be, but right now it was lost on me. All I could think, see and taste was a feeling of confusion and betrayal.

I now knew why Adam had begged me to forgive him. What I didn’t know, as I sat for two hours straight in my darkened kitchen, was if I ever could.

Chapter Thirty Five

The café door opened with a jangle from the overhead bell, and I was instantly enveloped in a waft of fried food and warm bodies. I breathed in, practically tasting the calories in the air and an underlying tang of testosterone. The place was packed with its regular clientele: van drivers, cabbies, and builders from the nearby construction site. Every Formica-topped table was occupied, and there was the usual queue at the counter waiting to be served by the café's cantankerous owner, Fred.

I'd introduced Raegan to this place shortly after she'd taken the job, promising that it made the best sausage sandwiches in the entire world.

'Bold claim,' she'd said sceptically.

The fact that we still treated ourselves to a takeaway breakfast from Fred's at least once a week proved me right. We also went there whenever we were hungover, under the weather or needed cheering up.

Raegan had clearly thought me in need of a curative sandwich today after checking out my pasty complexion and the twin dark smudges beneath my eyes.

'You still look pretty awful,' she'd observed with her usual lack of filter.

'Thanks.'

She gave an *'I call it like I see it'* shrug.

'Are you sure it's only a cold? Do you think you should take another test?'

I already had, but it wasn't the kind that told you whether you'd got Covid.

'I did, this morning. It was negative.' That at least wasn't a lie.

'Then there's only one thing for it,' Raegan said, reaching for her purse.

But I got to mine first. *'Good idea, but let me go – the fresh air will do me good.'*

That too was true. My head was so full of cobwebs it felt like a theme-park haunted mansion. That's what happens when you only get a couple of hours' sleep each night, because the rest of it has been spent conducting one-sided conversations with the person who used to share the other half of the double divan.

As hard as I'd tried, I was still struggling to process everything and understand why Adam had kept the biggest secret of all time from me, only to drop it like a bomb when he'd known I could no longer ask him why he'd done it. I'd thought we were better than that, closer than that, and I hated the way I was now questioning 'us' in a way I'd never done before. I was holding up every precious memory to the light, checking it for fault lines or cracks.

A brisk walk across the industrial estate, which was home to both Cupcakes and Rainbows and Fred's, restored a splash of colour to my cheeks, and what the fresh air failed to cure could be fixed by a doorstep-sized sandwich.

I took my place in the queue behind a guy who'd just placed an order that made me fear for his arteries. His waistline suggested that he too was a regular customer.

Unconsciously I ran a hand over my perfectly flat stomach, feeling a twinge of sadness as I realised that, for now at least, that was the way it was going to stay.

It had been far too early to start taking pregnancy tests. Buying *one* would have been bad enough, but I'd single-handedly cleared my local supermarket's shelves of kits over the past week. My good intentions to wait the full fourteen days before testing had gone out the window after Claire's unexpected visit, leaving me with a burning urgency to find out if my first round of IUI had worked. Somehow a pregnancy test had found its way into my shopping trolley the very next day. It had nestled there between a carton of eggs and a bag of Fletcher's kibble, almost daring me to return it to the shelf. I bundled it through the self-service checkout with the speed of a teenage Saturday worker at quitting time.

I hadn't been surprised the result had been negative. It was, after all, still nine days too early to test. Despite what I'd read on the forums I was suddenly addicted to, there's a good reason why you should hold fire and do as the medics recommend. Which made it even more bizarre that I continued to test every single morning after that, until today, Magic Day Fourteen, when it had felt all kinds of different as I waited for the two-minute timer on my phone to tell me I could now check the result.

My hands had been trembling as I'd turned over the stick from its face-down position beside the bath and read the words I'd seen every single morning for the last week. *Not pregnant*. I'd deliberately chosen the kind of

test that actually spelled it out in words, as though I couldn't trust my ability to count the number of vertical lines in a tiny plastic window.

A clicking sound snagged my attention back to the here and now. Fred was leaning across the counter, literally snapping his fingers just inches from my nose, like a hypnotist waking someone from a trance.

'Not got all day, you know,' he said in his usual brusque manner.

I flushed, giving my cheeks some much-needed colour.

'Sorry, Fred. I was miles away.'

'So I could tell. The usual?'

I nodded, pulling a tenner from my purse. At least Fred allowed me to pay for my sandwiches these days. For the first couple of months after Adam died, he'd pushed the notes I'd be attempting to give him back across the counter. '*It's on me,*' he would say gruffly. He'd never once said he was sorry for my loss, or offered me his condolences; he'd just kept paying for my sandwiches, until one day he'd finally started charging me again and I'd realised my period of mourning, at least as far as Fred was concerned, was officially over.

He prepared the two rounds of thickly cut sandwiches of my order with a speed that always made me fear for his fingers, and yet at the last count he still appeared to have all ten. He had a habit of looking straight at customers while he sliced their order, which frankly was as terrifying as it was astonishing.

'You need to get on to site management again about getting your signposts better positioned. I had another pillock wasting my time again this morning asking me for directions to your place.'

The clatter of cutlery on plates and the hum of conversation seemed to fade away. I swallowed because my mouth suddenly felt impossibly dry.

'Someone was asking how to find me?'

'Someone is *always* asking how to find you. The bloody signpost is misleading. Everyone ends up here.'

'Was this . . .' My voice had a parrot-like squawk; I cleared my throat and tried again. 'Was it this morning?'

'I said so, didn't I?' Fred replied.

Actually he hadn't, but I didn't bother pointing that out as he tugged the ten-pound note from my fingers when I made no move to release it.

The customer behind me shuffled forward, clearly impatient to be served. It forced me to fast-forward to the question I *really* wanted to ask.

‘This person. Was he tall?’

‘Everyone’s tall compared to me.’

This was true. Fred was a small man, except for his attitude. That was huge. I rephrased my question.

‘Did this man have dark hair and deep brown eyes?’

Fred paused in counting out my change, and I know if it had been anyone else asking that question, there would have been some snarky retort along the lines that he had better things to do all day than stare into customers’ eyes. But this was me, and although he’d never said a word – and would probably deny it on a stack of bibles – I knew he had a soft spot for me.

‘No. He had bright red hair, a broken front tooth, and tattoos up both arms from his fingers to his neck.’

‘Not really distinctive then?’ I said, pleased with myself for managing to crack a halfway-decent joke.

Fred shot me a grin that was faster than a camera flash. If you weren’t looking hard, you could easily have missed it.

‘No. Not at all.’



‘You have to stop this,’ I told myself firmly as I strode along the rain-speckled pavements to the workshop. Ever since Claire had accidentally on purpose ruined the surprise element of Josh’s impending visit, I’d been catching glimpses of him everywhere. Except it was never him. I’d followed a total stranger who walked like Josh did down the aisles of a grocery superstore, waved at another with the exact same shade of hair who was climbing out of a taxi, and overenthusiastically greeted a broad-shouldered DHL delivery driver seen through the fuzzy pixels of my video doorbell.

To be fair to Claire – something which didn’t always come naturally to me – she’d never said *when* Josh planned on visiting. I’d just assumed it would be soon. It could be ten minutes or ten months from now. I might be pregnant, or even have a baby in my arms by then. I paused for a moment, despite the soft drizzle, because that thought still had the power to stop me in my tracks. It might not have happened for me this first time around, and maybe it wouldn’t the next either, but whatever my feelings were about the lie Adam had told Josh, the dream of having my husband’s baby was as

strong as ever, and I would do everything I could to make it come true.

I jogged the last section of the journey, splashing through puddles in the small parking area which we shared with three adjacent units. It was always busy, usually with customers from the shutter company who were our closest neighbours. Today was no exception, although I noticed with a frisson of irritation that one of their customers had parked directly outside our entrance doors, ignoring the 'Reserved for Cupcakes and Rainbows' signpost.

'Some numpty has parked in our bay again,' I called out as I walked through the doorway, pulling the damp beanie from my head and shaking out the droplets of rain that had still managed to settle on my hair.

Raegan stepped into my field of vision, her features contorting in a weird pantomime of expressions. Her eyes swivelled sharply to the left and her eyebrows did their best to follow.

'I think that numpty must be me,' said Josh, reaching for a set of car keys on the counter and gently dislodging Fletcher's head from where it had been resting adoringly on his knee. 'I'll move it.'

'You're here,' I cried stupidly, as though my thoughts about his visit had somehow magicked him into being. 'Why are you here? Shouldn't you be up in your forest, making stuff?'

His smile was as familiar to me as my own.

'I *am* allowed out for good behaviour every now and then. It's kind of like parole.'

My mouth was opening and closing like a goldfish's. Not my most attractive look, I imagine. 'You never said you were coming.'

In truth, apart from a single text informing him I'd made it home safely, we hadn't communicated at all since I'd left his cabin. Josh was under no obligation to inform me about his plans, but I was still feeling wrong-footed, despite Claire's advance warning.

'It was a last-minute decision,' he said, looking closer to flushing than I'd seen in a long time. 'There's a consignment of oak I'm thinking of buying in France, so . . .' He looked down at his feet as though the script for what he really wanted to say was written on his boots. 'I thought I might stay in the area for a few days first, you know, catch up with family and . . .' He hesitated, and I could see him searching for a descriptor that would fit me. *Good luck with that one*, I thought, because I had no idea what we were to each other. Not anymore. 'Old friends,' he settled with.

'Can I offer you anything? A drink, I mean, like a tea or a coffee or

something?’

I could hear myself babbling, and from the corner of my eye I saw Raegan was getting far too much amusement out of my discomfort. I shot her a glare, but she deflected it with an innocent smile.

‘Your business partner very kindly made me a coffee,’ Josh said, nodding towards an almost empty mug on the counter.

‘Employee,’ I corrected, throwing Raegan a meaningful ‘don’t you have something you ought to be getting on with’ look. In response she pulled up a stool and settled herself down at the counter, with the anticipation of someone about to watch an episode of their favourite show.

‘Do I get a hello hug?’ asked Josh, taking a step towards me and opening his arms in invitation. It was a huge struggle not to launch into them, but I made my feet take it slowly and sedately. I had no such control over my heart, which began beating twice as fast as normal the moment Josh’s arms tightened around me. Mine went around his waist. We both held on for a moment too long for ‘just friends’, but only someone who was studying us intently would have been able to read anything from that. I suspected Raegan was one such person.

‘When did you get down here?’ I asked, stepping out of his hold, which immediately made breathing easier.

‘This morning,’ Josh said, perching casually back on the stool he’d just vacated. ‘I drove through the night.’

‘You must be exhausted,’ I declared, spotting the tell-tale signs of tiredness in the grooved lines fanning out from the corners of his eyes.

‘In a bit of hurry to get here, were you?’ Raegan probed.

‘You could say that,’ Josh replied easily.

‘Don’t you have somewhere else you should be?’ I saw Josh about to reply, but I lifted a hand to silence him. ‘That one was for Raegan.’

‘Nah, I’m good,’ she replied happily.

I twisted, turning my body towards Josh, which deliberately blocked my friend’s view.

‘Where are you staying? With Claire?’ I remembered from conversations we’d had in the forest that was what usually happened when work brought him to the area.

For the first time since I’d walked in, Josh looked slightly awkward. ‘Erm, no, I’m not actually. I’ve got an Airbnb this time.’

Interesting. I didn’t want it to be so, but damn, it was.

Josh gave a yawn that he tried valiantly to stifle and snuck a quick glance at his watch. 'I came straight here on the off chance you might be free for lunch.' His eyes went to the carrier bag with the sausage sandwiches that had filled the unit with the most delightful aroma. 'But it looks like you've already got that covered.'

'Oh no, they're just elevenses. She'll still have room for lunch,' piped up my clearly match-making friend.

'*She* is standing right here,' I said, turning once again to Josh, my voice softer now, 'and as much as I'd really like to catch up, we've got a big order that we have to get finished before the courier gets here this afternoon.'

Josh looked satisfyingly disappointed at being turned down, which I knew would play on repeat in my head for the rest of the morning. Another yawn made me remember just how exhausting the drive down must have been in one hit.

'Besides, what I think you need most right now is to go straight to bed.'

I didn't even need to turn around to know that Raegan's eyebrows would be waggling in delight. 'To sleep,' I added with emphasis.

Josh got to his feet, unable to suppress a roll of his shoulders. They were probably stiff from so many hours behind the wheel, and if he stayed in the workshop a minute longer, Raegan would likely volunteer my services as a masseuse.

'Okay,' he said. 'Then how about dinner tonight? If you're free, that is.'

'She is.'

This time the look I gave Raegan wasn't quite so amiable.

'She is,' I repeated, turning back to the man I was about to send on his way.

'Great,' Josh said, bending to ruffle Fletcher's ears. My dog's tail thumped delightedly against the floor tiles in response.

'I'll walk you out,' I said meaningfully, and this time Raegan knew better than to say anything at all.

Josh waited until we were standing just outside the door, in the softly falling rain, and looked at me with the kind of expression that friends simply don't use with each other.

'We have a lot to talk about, I think,' he said hesitantly, dipping his toe into the swirling waters Claire's visit had muddied up.

'We do,' I agreed solemnly. 'One hell of a lot.'

We agreed on a place and time to meet, and I was glad to see him

climbing back into the car for all kinds of reasons. One of which was that he clearly needed to get some rest.

He tugged on the seat belt, but before snapping it into position his eyebrows drew closer together.

‘Why did your . . . employee . . . ask me if I was the “infamous mountain man” when I got here today?’ His lips were twitching once more, and it was very hard for mine not to do the same.

‘*Ex-employee,*’ I corrected. ‘She’s working out her notice. She just doesn’t know it yet.’

It was good to hear Josh laugh, and I locked the memory of the sound away for no other reason than I hadn’t been entirely sure I would ever hear it again.

Chapter Thirty Six

I scrubbed off the bright red lipstick. It looked too try-hard, and far too much like date make-up. As had the previous two colours I'd applied. It shouldn't have been this hard to get ready for a casual dinner between two people who'd agreed they were just old friends. Except there was a whole unspoken agenda that I suspected we'd be getting into this evening.

Perhaps I should have taken notes from Raegan today, because her interrogation technique had made the Spanish Inquisitors look like they hadn't really been trying very hard.

'So, I'm assuming the two of you slept together when you got yourself stranded in the forest back in February?' It was a bold opening bombshell, and she'd dropped it when Josh probably hadn't even driven off the industrial estate yet.

I set down the sandwich I'd been about to bite into, my appetite suddenly gone.

'Of course we didn't. And how did you get to that after observing us together for all of two whole minutes?'

Raegan shrugged as though she too was amazed at her powers of observation. 'It's a skill. Like a superpower.'

'You couldn't just leap tall buildings like everyone else?' I muttered.

She smiled but said nothing, clearly waiting for more.

'Well, for what it's worth, your spidey sense needs retuning. Josh and I are just good friends.'

'If you say so,' Raegan said, lulling me into a false sense of security in thinking the subject had been dropped. 'But to be quite honest, Lily, anyone could have picked up on the pheromones the two of you were giving out. You could have cut the sexual tension with a knife.' She picked up one we used for smoothing icing and made a slicing motion.

I wasn't even sure why I'd felt the need to lie to her, but it probably had a lot to do with my IUI plans, which I'd yet to share with anyone but my parents. Somehow it felt all kinds of wrong to be talking about Josh in one breath and trying to have Adam's baby in the next.

Now, beneath the unforgiving halogen lights of the bathroom, I studied my finished make-up critically. My lids were shaded in a soft smoky grey,

making my eyes look much bigger than usual. Unfortunately, the same could be said of my lips, which were plumply swollen after being vigorously wiped clean so many times. I slicked some clear gloss on my new pout and hoped it would go down by the time I got to the gastro pub where we'd arranged to meet.

The outfit I'd chosen was left out on my bed, while piled high on the bedroom chair was practically everything else in my wardrobe, which I'd tried on and discarded. I glanced at the clock and bit my lip worriedly, knowing my indecisiveness had made me late. The problem was that virtually everything I'd pulled from its hanger came with an inbuilt memory of Adam. Normally I loved the way even my clothes had a provenance that traced back to him, because it made it feel like he was still walking invisibly beside me. But tonight there would be enough to contend with, without inviting even more memories to join us.

The black jeans and short-sleeved black lace top I'd finally decided on were both new; purchases made since Adam had gone. The thought brought me to a halt as I realised that one day my entire wardrobe would be that way too. He would never have seen me in any of it; never have had to keep a straight face when I asked the classic question about the size of my bum in a new garment. It was a sad thought, and I did my best to shrug it off as I hurried to the kitchen to pour out a bowl of kibble for Fletcher.

'I'm sorry, old friend, but I'm flying solo tonight,' I told my disgruntled dog, who looked unimpressed when I put on my jacket without reaching for his lead. To make it up to him I left him listening to Adam's favourite country music playlist on Spotify.

The pub was only a ten-minute drive away, but I still summoned an Uber. This morning's negative pregnancy test meant it was now safe to drink, and it definitely felt like the kind of night when I might need one.

Josh was already seated at our table when I entered the pub. I saw him despite the crowds at the bar and the full-to-capacity dining area. It was as though there was an invisible pull that snagged me whenever he was within range. Perhaps he felt it too, because without being hailed he swivelled in his seat as I stood in the doorway to the restaurant. He shot a smile across the width of the room that lost none of its potency over the distance.

He was on his feet and holding out the vacant chair for me by the time I'd weaved through the tables to reach him. He dropped a totally friend-appropriate kiss on my cheek. I breathed in the scent of his aftershave and the

applewood aroma of his shampoo. He smelled like the forest where he lived.

I suspected Josh was far better than me at playing things cool. Or so I thought . . . until I noticed he'd nicked himself twice while shaving. I took comfort in those tiny cuts, and wondered if his hands had been shaking as much as mine were right now. Although the idea of Josh being anything other than totally in control was hard to imagine.

He volunteered to fill our water glasses from the jug on the table, which was just as well. Had the task been mine, the place would be awash with Evian and ice cubes. It was hard to dismiss the feeling that tonight could possibly be a turning point for us. I just had no idea in which direction.

A waiter arrived to take our drinks order, and I caught Josh's amused grin when I asked for a cherry cola. It affected me in an area smiles rarely reached. The drink was pure nostalgia, transporting me back to a time when things hadn't been this complicated, and being Josh's friend had felt as easy as breathing.

'You're looking better than you did earlier,' I said, to fill a silence I was afraid might stretch. He glanced down at his black shirt and jeans – clothes so similar to mine it was as though we'd done that weird matching-outfit thing some couples do. *Except you're not a couple*, a voice in my head reminded me.

'What I mean is, that you don't look so tired.'

'I grabbed a couple of hours' sleep this afternoon at the Airbnb,' he said.

I wasn't quick enough to plug the next gap, and an unexpected awkwardness descended like a mist between us. It was as though we were trying to reach each other from opposite sides of a minefield, where one wrong step could blow everything up.

'Why are we here, Josh?' I asked, jumping straight into dangerous waters.

'I could say *because you chose this restaurant*, but I've got a feeling that answer would probably earn me a kick under the table.'

That pulled out a smile. I cleared my throat nervously as though I was about to address an auditorium, instead of the person I'd known for practically my entire life.

'I thought we'd left things in a sensible place back in the forest,' I said, directing my comments to the cutlery on the table, because it was easier than looking into his eyes. 'I'm pretty sure we agreed that for now there wasn't

going to be a next chapter in this story for us.'

'I guess I flipped to the end of the book and didn't like the way it finished,' he said, taking my literary allusion and running with it. 'I thought there might be an epilogue that we hadn't properly considered.'

It was the worst moment to be interrupted, but bad timing had always been a thing with us. We both jumped when a chirpy young voice asked if we were ready to order. Blindly I jabbed a finger at a couple of items on the menu which could have been two desserts and a side order of fries for all I knew. Josh chose almost as speedily. I think we were both keen to pick up the threads of our conversation before it totally unravelled.

Alone once again, he reached for his glass of soda and took a sip before continuing. He had the look of a man who really wished it contained a shot of something stronger. 'When we said goodbye at the cabin back in February . . .' he began, his voice low, 'it felt like we were breaking up. But the thing is, Lily, it couldn't really be a break-up, because we've never actually been in a relationship.'

'We've had a relationship for the past twenty years or so, Josh.'

'That was a friendship, not a relationship,' he corrected softly. He drew his chair a little closer to mine. It was only a matter of inches, but it felt like he was bridging a canyon.

'I've started to think people shouldn't break up without being together first.'

'I assume you don't mean in the biblical sense, because I think we've already ticked that box.'

It was good to lighten the mood and see him smile.

'That wasn't what was on my mind.'

In a way his answer disappointed me. Had he found it easy to dismiss our one night together, or did it haunt his memories . . . like it still did mine? He drew in a deep breath, and it was only then that I realised this was a speech he'd practised before tonight. For some reason I found the idea of him rehearsing it, perhaps reciting it in front of his bathroom mirror, incredibly endearing.

'I don't want to put any pressure on you, Lily. And perhaps you've already moved on – and if you have, I'm happy for you, I really am.' He bit his lip, and I truly didn't think I'd ever seen him look so nervous. 'But I'm having a really hard time consigning this thing to a box labelled "It never would have worked out anyway", and I wondered if maybe – just maybe –

you were feeling the same way.'

I wasn't sure how to answer that, and never got the chance to, as a group of waiters bearing a birthday cake with enough candles to set off every smoke detector in the restaurant approached the table beside ours. They led the room in a rousing chorus of 'Happy Birthday', which I joined in with, despite having no clue who was actually celebrating. Josh kept silent, and I could feel his eyes on my mouth as I sang, making me worry that my lips still looked ridiculously pouty.

By the time the candles had been blown out there was a decidedly jovial mood in the room. And I welcomed it. Part of me wanted to simply enjoy this evening on a superficial level, but it was impossible to ignore the conversation we ought to be having. And it was getting harder to silence the voice in my head – the one that wanted to ask Josh straight out why he'd refused to tell me what had happened between him and Adam all those years ago.

Josh wasn't responsible for Adam's questionable actions, but as my friend he should have told me what had gone down. He should have had my back. I'd trusted them, and in different ways they'd both let me down.

Someone on the birthday party table produced a box of party poppers, and through a colourful rainbow of streamers I saw the waitress heading our way with two steaming plates of food. I was so busy trying to see what I'd ordered, I almost missed Josh's next words.

'But before we say anything else, Lily, I owe you an apology.'

I steeled my features to stay in neutral as I lifted my head and met his worried gaze. He swallowed hard before speaking, and my eyes were drawn to his throat, which appeared to be working overtime.

'I understand Claire came to see you the other week. She had no business doing that.' His words catapulted me straight into a conversation I wasn't sure I was ready to have in the middle of a noisy restaurant.

'Oh. I wasn't sure if you knew about that.'

Josh looked about as guilty as someone who had done nothing wrong could possibly look.

'She accidentally let slip that she'd been to see you.'

'Did she tell you what she said?'

He nodded, caught the expression on my face and then frowned, suddenly hesitant. The landmines were there, right beneath his feet.

'She said she'd warned you not to . . . mess me around.' He gave a half

smile, and I was horribly afraid it might be the last one that would pass his lips for a while. 'Except – you know Claire – she put it more colourfully than that. Anyway, you have my word that it won't happen again.'

I could have left it there; should have left it there. But I didn't.

'Well, you can only let the cat out of the bag once, can't you? It's kind of a done deal after that.'

He looked confused. 'What cat? What bag?'

I knew then, with stomach-lurching certainty, that he didn't know what had happened during Claire's visit. I cast an eye around, almost in apology to our fellow diners. I had a feeling this was all about to go very badly.

Josh leant across the table and snared my hand in his. 'What are you talking about, Lily?'

Over his shoulder I could see the waitress had almost reached us. I caught her eye and shook my head, telegraphing a 'not now' plea. Either this happened a lot, or she could sense the tension that was swirling around our table like a twister. She turned on her heel and returned to the kitchen with our food.

'Lily, tell me.' There was an extra beat between each word, as though he needed to keep them on a tight rein.

I wriggled my fingers free from his. I needed my hands for work, and I don't think he realised just how hard he'd been gripping them.

'She told me, Josh. She told me everything about your conversation with Adam.'

Almost on cue, the party at the adjacent table broke out into peals of laughter. At least someone was having fun tonight, I thought sadly, watching our evening slowly disintegrate in the way I'd feared it might.

Josh looked across at the noisy revellers and then back to me.

'Do you want to get out of here?'

I nodded.

He swept up my jacket from a chair and dropped a handful of twenty-pound notes on to the table.

An evening breeze ruffled my hair as we left the pub. I shivered, but it wasn't from the cold.

'Josh, I . . .' My voice faded away. I had no idea what to say or ask.

'Did you drive here tonight?' His pragmatic question threw me for a moment. I shook my head. 'Then let's take my car and find somewhere quiet to talk,' he suggested, already guiding me by the elbow through the busy

parking area.

I settled into the passenger seat, breathing in the unmistakable aroma of 'new car'.

'Yours?

Josh turned on the ignition. 'No, it's a hire. Mine's in the repair shop with Cameron – one of the guys you met in Scotland. Once I'd made up my mind to come, I didn't want to wait. If you spend too long thinking about things, that's when bad decisions get made.'

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what any of those previous decisions had been.

We journeyed in silence for several miles before Josh once again took his eyes from the highway.

'I need to know where we're going, Lily.'

Ignoring the very obvious double meaning to that statement, I twisted in the passenger seat and peered out of the window, trying to drop myself like a pin on a map.

'If you keep driving, there's a turn-off a couple of miles up ahead that leads to a small boating lake. It's got a decent-size car park that looks out over the water. It should be empty at this time of night.'

'Perfect,' Josh said, his attention returning to the road.

I hadn't been to the lake in years, and when I thought of it at all, my memories were all of Adam and me on summertime dog walks, or picnics on the grass, watching small children gleefully chasing the ducks and geese, and imagining ourselves as those laughing parents one day, playing with our kids and pushing a pram. Perhaps, in hindsight, this wasn't the best location to have chosen.

Josh parked directly in front of the lake, filling the windscreen with a view of water which glistened like jewels beneath the moonlight. I turned to face him and all at once the car seemed to shrink, making it suddenly feel way too small and intimate for two grown adults.

'Shall we take a walk?' he asked.

The night was cooler now, but he didn't reach for the jacket that was lying across the back seat. I recognised it as the one he'd worn in Scotland, and it came with its own flashback memory. I could see him shrugging out of it in a silent wood and slipping it around my shoulders on our middle-of-the-night walk back from the treehouse to his cabin. How long had my perfume lingered on the fabric? Had it faded away like the memory of that night

seemed to have done?

We walked in silence towards the lake, drawn there by the glittering pull of moonlight on water. The ground was uneven, and my summer sandals weren't exactly suitable for off-roading. Josh reached for my hand when he saw me wobble. I should have pulled it free as soon as we were on level ground, but I never did.

The moon was high in a star-scattered sky. It felt like a spotlight illuminating us like actors on a stage. I didn't need its milky white beam to see that Josh was angry. The emotion had turned his face into a miniature Mount Rushmore, all rigid planes and sharp edges.

'You look annoyed.'

'That's probably because I am.'

He turned to me, and his eyes softened. 'Not with you. I'm angry – no, scratch that – I'm furious with Claire. She should never have told you about me and Adam.'

'No, Josh,' I said quietly. 'That was your job.'

He flinched but didn't deny it. 'Now *you* sound angry.' I dodged that one with an eloquent shrug.

'I should probably never have said anything to Claire in the first place.'

'Why did you?' It was a question that had been bugging me since his sister had turned up at my door.

Josh sighed. 'I guess at the time I needed to talk it through with someone who I knew would be one hundred per cent on my side.'

'Oh well, you picked the right girl then.'

'I wasn't in a great place, Lily, after it all went down.' I felt a pang of guilt for the old pain I could never heal. 'And Claire listened and gave me advice.'

'The fact that I'm still alive must mean you didn't take it.'

Josh's sudden laugh startled a small, swooping barn owl. We came to a stop and watched the bird's passage through the night sky. It felt almost magical.

'She's not as bad as you think, you know. Her heart's in the right place.'

It was news to me that Claire even *had* one, but I knew better than to say that to him. She was the closest thing Josh had to a blood relative, and I admired her fierce loyalty. The last thing I'd ever want was to damage their relationship, not when his own biological family had treated him so terribly.

'She never forgave me for moving to Scotland though, and she never

stopped blaming you for that.'

Adam's lie was like a never-ending explosion that was still sending out shockwaves.

'But what about you, Lily? Are *you* still angry with me?'

I could have lied, but this felt like a night where only the truth should be spoken. 'I'm more *disappointed* than angry.'

Josh gave a small smile. 'You're going to make a great mum one day. You're already fluent in the language. Any time I screwed up as a teenager, Gordon and Janette would never say they were angry – even though they had every right to be. They'd always say they were *disappointed*.'

Josh's comment about me being a mum had unwittingly opened a door. Here was my opportunity to tell him about my plans to have Adam's baby. And yet, when my lips parted, I couldn't find the words. Not a single one. This wasn't the right time.

'If it's any consolation,' I said instead, 'I'm nowhere near as angry with you as I am with Adam. I'd give anything to ask him what the hell he thought he was doing. I want to yell at him for not trusting me or trusting our relationship enough with the truth. But more than anything, I want to know why he thought the only way of keeping me was to lie to you.'

I hadn't realised my words had made me cry until Josh delved into his pocket and produced a tissue. I took it and then held out my hand for another. It was already there waiting for me.

'And this is *exactly* why I never wanted you to find out about my conversation with Adam,' Josh said quietly. 'I never wanted to be the person to knock him off the pedestal you had him on. I never wanted to be the one to make you question him, or his actions. Because when all's said and done, he *was* the right man for you . . . At least, he was back then.'

The end of that sentence hung in the air above us like a cloud.

'But why that *particular* lie? He could have said anything, made up any excuse to get you to leave.'

Josh gave a small laugh that held absolutely no humour.

'Do you really need to ask that, Lily?'

We were standing beside the footpath that led to a nature trail, the lake glistening like a pool of diamonds behind us.

'I really do,' I said, turning to face him.

Josh's face was hard to read in the shadows.

'He said what he did because I believe Adam realised the only thing that

would *ever* make me walk away was knowing you were having his baby.'

Chapter Thirty Seven

Sleep took so long coming I almost gave up on it. I'd battled so restlessly with the duvet that even Fletcher had eventually decided the floor was a better place to spend the night. By the light of the moon, through the bedroom shutters I hadn't properly closed, I saw practically every hour on the clock face click over to its neighbour.

I wondered if somewhere in his Airbnb Josh was also lying awake, staring at the same moon and replaying our conversation over and over in his head, the way I was doing.

After our third circuit of the lake, our feet had strayed from the path and led us into the thicket of trees beside it. This time, when Josh took my hand, I knew it wasn't because the terrain was uneven. I looked up at him in the moonlight filtering through the branches like delicate filigree silver. In that moment I felt safer than I'd done in a very long time. I didn't want to compare it to the way Adam had made me feel, because that was different. It always would be. But it felt like I was stepping on to a boat that was sailing gently away from the shore. I could imagine Adam standing on the pier, watching me go and giving that gentle smile that belonged to no one else but me.

'Just so you know, I had this whole speech worked out to give you,' Josh said.

The shadows hid my smile. I'd known it, but only because I knew him, better than even he realised. My life had tangled itself with Josh Metcalf's in my formative teenage years and, despite the passage of time and all that had happened in our friendship, I'd never managed to unwind my past from his.

'Was it a good speech?'

'I was quite proud of it,' he said with a nod.

'Go on then. I'm all ears.'

Josh shook his head. 'Now that you're here, I realise I don't need a rehearsed declaration, because . . .' He gave a small shrug. '. . . because it's you. And it's me. It's always been you and me, Lily.'

'Except when it wasn't,' I quietly reminded him, in case the fact that I'd spent five years happily married and deeply in love with another man had somehow slipped his mind.

Josh's smile was gentle. 'That's true.' The fingers that were linked loosely through mine tightened a little. 'I know Adam is always going to be here. And that's okay, because he's part of you . . . and there isn't a single part of you that I would ever want to change.'

My steps slowed so I could see his face, searching for the doubts that had always been there, but tonight I couldn't find any trace of them.

'I knew I was getting it all wrong as I watched you drive out of the clearing seven months ago. I knew I was making yet another stupid mistake sending you away to find someone else, when even the thought of you in another man's arms sliced me to shreds. I ran after your car as soon as it disappeared out of sight.'

'You did?' I couldn't hide my surprise.

He nodded. 'And then I ran back to fetch my car keys. I got as far as the edge of the dirt track before good sense kicked in. I told myself I was doing the right thing in letting you leave. You wanted a life I couldn't give you, a life I had no experience of. A life you'd already known with a man who'd loved you so much he couldn't bear the idea of you being left alone after he was gone. It takes a big man to admit he was wrong and then try to put things right the way Adam did.'

He gave a small, almost reluctant laugh. 'I liked Adam. I really did. I mean, for a great many years I wanted to kill him in the worst way possible . . . but I liked him. He was a good guy. He didn't deserve what happened to him, but he *did* deserve you. And as I sat there in my car, on the edge of chasing after you, I realised that I still didn't. If I loved you, if I'd *ever* really loved you, I needed to set you free to find someone better. Someone not so damaged.'

He looked down at me and shook his head, almost as though he was disappointed in me.

'You were meant to have found someone else by now. You were meant to be halfway in love with a new man who could give you the world.'

'It was never going to happen that way, Josh. I knew that even when I was leaving your forest. Most people – if they're lucky – get to have one amazing love story in their life. I've already had two. More than that would just be greedy.'

'Do you understand why I've not been in touch with you for all these months, Lily?'

'I do,' I said. It sounded like the vow I'd made to another man a very

long time ago.

‘But I’ve been doing a lot of thinking since February and a hell of a lot of kicking myself for being the biggest fool of all time.’

He looked at me then, as though waiting for me to contradict him.

‘You’ll get no argument from me,’ I said.

‘Anyway, what I realised was that all the things I didn’t know how to do, all the things I was afraid of feeling, weren’t nearly as terrifying as the thought of not trying to make this thing between us work. I know we have a lot to figure out. There’s a lot of baggage – mostly mine – that needs to be unpacked. And I’m still scared there are things you want – that you have every right to expect – that I won’t be able to give you.’

‘You’re talking about a baby?’ I said, my voice trembling with the weight of the secret he still knew nothing about. He nodded, and a spasm of pain passed over his features.

‘Maybe it’s too much to ask of anyone, but I had to let you know how I feel . . .’ He gave the crooked smile that I’d fallen in love with decades earlier. ‘How I’ve *always* felt.’

He didn’t want me to give him an answer straight away, which was just as well because my head and my heart were both in turmoil.

‘I’ve had months to get to this point, it’s only fair you take as long as you need to decide if we’re worth taking one last risk on.’ He reached out and grasped my hands in his. ‘And if you do, we can take things really slowly, get to know each other all over again and see if maybe teenage Josh and Lily were right all along. That we really *are* meant to be together.’



I’d fallen asleep as dawn was creeping slowly through the shutters, still counting all the times I should have leapt in and told Josh about the fertility clinic and the plans I’d already set in motion. But like an actor with terminal stage fright, I’d missed every single cue.

I’d woken early, with a pounding headache and a new resolve. I *would* tell him everything this morning when I met him for breakfast at his rental accommodation.

‘I’ll bring croissants,’ I had told him last night.

We were parked by the pavement, outside the mansion-house flats, in the shadows of the life I’d lived before. I hadn’t invited Josh inside, and I

knew he hadn't expected me to. This was still Adam's home.

But his Airbnb was neutral territory, and I was honest enough to admit that the thought of seeing him in less than ten hours did strange things to my heart rate. And that was even before he kissed me.

With a thoughtfulness and respect that melted my heart, he looked towards my home as his hand gently cupped the back of my neck. He was drawing me slowly closer, giving me all the time in the world to pull away. 'Is this okay?' he asked, his voice low in the dimly lit car. 'Being here? Doing this?'

I nodded.

'Thank God,' he murmured, his thumb lightly brushing against my lower lip, 'because I've been dying to kiss you since the moment you walked into the restaurant this evening.'



I swung my legs out of bed, carefully tiptoeing over a softly snoring Fletcher, and padded barefoot into the kitchen. Working largely on autopilot, I set the coffee to brew, my thoughts still caught between everything we'd said the previous night, and all I still had to tell him. Perhaps *I* ought to write a speech too, I thought with a wry smile as I made my way into the bathroom to brush my teeth.

I winced as I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror-fronted cabinet. Hiding the twin panda rings beneath my eyes was going to require skill and some industrial-strength concealer.

'Moisturiser,' I murmured as I reached into the cabinet for my favourite brand, and then flinched as something from the top shelf tumbled out of the cupboard and fell with a clatter into the sink. I stared down at the oblong box for several moments before plucking it up. With almost comedic incredulity, I glanced up and down at the shelf several times, knowing I hadn't disturbed anything on it.

And yet, somehow, in my hands was an unopened pregnancy test. I'd kept the others in a drawer beneath the basin and couldn't remember moving one rogue box into the cabinet, nor fathom how it had ended up falling into the basin.

I turned the kit over in my hands with the curiosity of an archaeologist on an excavation dig. I didn't need to check the calendar to confirm that,

following yesterday's negative test, my period was now due. *Overdue*, corrected a pedantic voice in my head.

Day 14 following the IUI had been and gone, and after learning ten times over that I was *Not Pregnant*, the idea that I might be was too huge for my sleep-deprived brain to cope with.

Take the test.

Stress could make you late. I knew that. It had happened to me frequently during Adam's illness.

But you're not stressed now. Take the test.

'I am most definitely stressed,' I told my reflection, who was now looking even peakier than it had done just a few minutes earlier.

'Fine,' I said to no one except the insistent voice in my head. 'I'll take the test. But I can tell you now, it's going to be negative, just like all the others have been.'

I didn't need to read the instructions – I could have recited them verbatim if asked. And yet I studied them again as though revising for an exam during those excruciating one hundred and twenty seconds for the result to appear in the window.

Like the tests I'd taken before, I set the stick face-down on the edge of the bath, and when my phone's two-minute timer pinged that it was time to reveal the answer, my hands were shaking in a way they hadn't done on any of the previous mornings.

I blinked as I read the single word that had appeared in the window, staring intently as I waited for the expected *Not* to proceed it. But it never materialised.

I sat down on the edge of the bath, because all at once my legs were incapable of keeping me upright. There was now a second test from the box that was sitting beside the first. They both said exactly the same thing: *Pregnant*.

The odds had always been so incredibly slight that this first unassisted attempt at IUI would succeed, it had never actually felt real. Until now.

'We did it, babe,' I whispered to Adam, hoping that wherever he was he was smiling, because this was what we'd wanted – what I still wanted, I told myself, surprised to find tears were rolling down my cheeks and splashing silently on the two positive tests.

'This is good news. Wonderful news,' I said out loud, because it was, it really was.

So why, instead of Adam's voice in my head, could I hear only the words spoken by another man.

'Adam realised the only thing that would ever make me walk away was knowing you were having his baby.'

Chapter Thirty Eight

The holiday cottages were described online as being an ideal honeymoon location, and as I swept past the main farmhouse and down a winding drive to the four converted outbuildings, I could certainly see why. The Grade II-listed cottages were perfectly located for privacy and were set like tiny Monopoly houses against a backdrop of brilliant green rolling fields.

There was a lot to be charmed by as I approached The Old Dairy, where Josh was staying. Propped up against a post and rail fence was an old-fashioned bicycle, its panniers overflowing with wildflowers and a hand-painted sign attached to its frame, confirming I'd found the right location. It looked like a place where memories would be made.

I pulled up beside Josh's rental vehicle and drew in a deep breath. My windows were wound down and yet my car was still fragrant with the sweet smell of warm croissants and cinnamon buns that I'd collected as soon as the bakery opened.

I was far too early. Josh wasn't expecting me for another two hours. I crunched a pathway through the deep shingles to The Old Dairy's entrance, where late-flowering roses clung to a trellis, scenting the air with their perfume.

As I waited for Josh to answer the door, I took a moment to savour the peace and tranquillity of the surroundings. This hideaway was so romantic that what I was about to do felt like pouring lemon juice on a cut.

He didn't answer my first knock, and I shifted my weight nervously from one leg to the other before trying again, more insistently this time. There was a huge window at the front of the property, but I could see no movement from within. Was he still asleep in the rustic four-poster bed I'd seen in the gallery of photos on the website? The image of his naked limbs entangled in crisp white sheets was infuriatingly difficult to evict from my head.

I jumped guiltily when Josh opened the door, as though my thoughts were written all over my face.

'Lily.' There was both surprise and delight laced around my name. 'Am I running ridiculously late, or are you early?' He glanced down at his wrist as though to check on the watch he wasn't wearing, while I tried very hard not

to react to the fact that *actually* he wasn't wearing much of anything at all, apart from a pair of faded jeans that he'd obviously pulled on so hastily the top button was still undone. That metal fastener drew my eye like the worst kind of magnet.

'Sorry. I was still getting dressed,' he added somewhat unnecessarily, as the morning sun caught his naked torso.

'It's my fault. I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd just . . .' My voice trailed away. I took a step back off the flagstone doorstep on to the shingled driveway. 'I'm sorry, Josh. You weren't expecting me at the crack of dawn. Why don't I go for a walk or something, while you finish getting ready.' As though it was a peace offering, I thrust the bag of warm croissants towards him.

'No, don't be daft, come in,' Josh said with an easy smile. He took the bag of pastries and couldn't resist having a quick peek inside. 'Besides, if you leave me alone with these, I can't guarantee there'll be any left by the time you get back.'

The front door opened into the dairy's open-plan accommodation, which was currently bathed in buttery yellow morning sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. I loved it all, from the uneven brick floor to the criss-crossed beams that were so low Josh must surely have had to duck to walk beneath them.

'Let me grab a t-shirt,' he said, turning towards a door that presumably led to the bedroom. 'There's a coffee maker in the kitchen, but I think you need a degree in rocket science to make it work. But if you're feeling brave . . .'

'Always,' I said, as though I wasn't literally trembling with fear at the thought of the conversation I was about to start. The one that was likely to end us.

As he moved past me towards the bedroom, my attention was drawn to the tattoo inked beneath his right shoulder. I'd seen it for the first time during our night in his treehouse, but for reasons that still made my pulse quicken whenever that memory came up, I hadn't paid much attention to the details of the inking. But I did now. The tattoo covered an old burn scar he'd always had; a scar he'd never wanted to talk about.

With fingers that should have known better, I reached up and lightly traced the outline of the shapes. They looked vaguely familiar. He jerked at my touch and drew in a deep breath, and it took all my control not to run my

hands over the warm skin of his back.

I dropped my hand with a mumbled apology. 'Sorry. I just noticed something – your tattoo is the same as the logo you carve on to your furniture, isn't it?'

He turned around and there was an odd expression on his face. It wasn't quite embarrassment, but it was certainly a close relative.

'I could lie and pretend it was all part of a corporate branding plan, but the truth is the tattoo was a late-night drunken impulse when I was travelling through Asia.'

'Oh,' I said, standing on tiptoe to study what I now realised were Chinese characters. 'What does it say?'

'No idea. I picked it from a chart on the wall because I liked the shapes. But if I had to take a guess, it's most likely Chinese for "Stupid drunk idiot".'

'But then you used it for the Wildwood logo?' I asked, unsure why he still looked uncomfortable. Lots of people got impulsive tattoos; it was hardly something to be ashamed of.

'Like I said, I liked the shape of the symbols.' He reached for the door handle beside him. 'Let me finish getting dressed and maybe we can figure out the coffee maker together?'

By the time he reappeared, wearing a soft grey t-shirt and with his jeans thankfully securely fastened, I'd made us coffee and practised at least half a dozen segues for how to go from *Do you want milk with that?* to *It's not you . . . it's me*.

'You're a genius,' he said, dropping an unexpected kiss on my cheek.

After the intimacies we'd shared, that shouldn't have flustered me. But it did.

'Not really,' I mumbled, opening the fridge and hoping the cool air would chill the blush from my face while I feigned a hunt for the butter that was right there on the shelf in front of me. Beside it was a bottle of champagne and some orange juice.

Josh leant across me, his arm inadvertently brushing against the swell of my breast. Fireworks that had no business being there ignited in every single nerve ending I possessed.

'These were in the welcome pack,' Josh explained. 'Do you fancy a glass with our breakfast?'

His question spiralled me back to the test I'd taken just hours earlier, the one that was going to change everything.

‘It’s a bit early for me.’

‘Maybe later then,’ he said with an easy smile.

I tried to smile back, knowing that for us there probably wouldn’t *be* a later.

We ate at a scrubbed pine table beside the enormous window. Or rather, Josh ate, while I systematically deconstructed my pastry into a messy pile of golden flakes.

‘Not hungry?’ he asked, his eyes narrowing in concern.

‘Not really,’ I said, drawing in a deep breath because I knew the time was finally here. ‘Shall we take our coffees outside? I think we need to talk.’

He followed me out of the front door to a nearby wrought-iron bench draped with a sheepskin throw. The fur had been warmed by the sun, and in other circumstances it would have been the perfect spot to sit and enjoy the September morning.

Josh’s expression had changed from the carefree one he’d worn throughout our breakfast. His brow was now furrowed, and his eyes looked troubled.

‘I can’t help thinking I’m going to regret passing on that champagne. You look like I need a drink to hear this.’

I bit my lip. ‘I think maybe you might.’ I drew in a steadying breath. ‘There’s a lot about you and me that feels like we were always meant to be,’ I began. Josh looked as though he was about to pull me into his arms, but I held up a hand to stop him. ‘But there’s also a lot that doesn’t.’

I paused, like an assailant about to deliver a fatal blow. ‘I’ve always seen children in my future. And you don’t see them in yours.’ I sounded ridiculously like a fairground clairvoyant.

His eyes were soft, kind, and that somehow made it all worse because there was still hope in them.

‘I’ve always known how you felt about having a family, Lily. I can still remember you saying, “*There’ll be a girl called Scout and a boy named Todd and they’ll be the best kids anyone has ever had.*”’

I stared at him in amazement, hearing my teenage dreams being quoted back to me.

‘How on earth did you remember that?’

‘I don’t think I’ve forgotten anything you’ve ever said to me. Because back then, when you talked about the family you wanted to have one day, it seemed like the best fairy tale in the world to a battered and scarred teenage

boy who'd never known what that kind of love felt like and didn't believe he'd ever deserve it.'

My heart broke a little at his words, because you could see that the old pain hadn't entirely gone away. Maybe it never would.

'But things got so much better after you came to live with Gordon and Janette,' I reminded him.

The smile that lit his face was filled with poignant nostalgia. 'They did. Thanks to them I got a glimpse of how it is to be a parent. *And* it didn't hurt that there was a really cute girl who lived next door.'

Crazily, I could feel myself blushing again.

But when he went to continue, I knew I couldn't keep putting this off, there had been enough secrets. I had to think for more than myself now, so when Josh reached for my hand again, I pulled away. I couldn't be touching him when I said this. I just couldn't.

'Josh. I'm pregnant.'

I knew that, for the rest of my life, I'd never forget the kaleidoscope of emotions that travelled across his face at my words, each one worse than the one that had come before. Shock, followed by pain and then regret, before finally, dragged up from some deep well within him, a look that did a fair impersonation of happiness. If you hadn't known Josh since you were eleven years old, that is.

'That's fantastic news, Lily. Why didn't you tell me yesterday?' The sun was in his eyes, but I don't think that's why they suddenly looked watery. 'I'm so happy for you, I really am.' With what seemed like a Herculean effort he put a smile on his face. 'So, who is this new man? Tell me all about him.'

I shook my head. 'It's not like that, Josh. There *is* no one else. I meant what I told you last night.' My hand went unconsciously to my stomach, and I could feel my features softening. 'This is Adam's baby.'

The incredulity was back on his face, but I could hardly blame him for that.

He was silent while I explained the path Adam and I had gone down before his treatment had begun.

'We had all these plans and dreams that he never got to live long enough to see. So now I'm going to see them through alone. But I'm flying blind, because I have no idea if that's what he'd want me to do. There are so many things I still don't understand, so many questions I'd ask him if only I could.'

Josh got to his feet and looked down at me with an expression that

hovered somewhere between guilt and remorse.

‘Wait here.’

Before I had a chance to ask where he was going, he was heading towards the cottage in long confident strides. He was back in less than a minute, an envelope in his hands.

‘This is for you,’ he said, holding out the white oblong towards me. The sun was low, dazzling me, as I reached to take it from him. Was this the speech he kept telling me he’d written? But as his shadow fell across the envelope, I saw my name written on the front, in handwriting I would recognise for the rest of my days.

‘He sent me this and asked me to give it to you after you’d learnt the truth.’ Josh shook his head. ‘It was wrong to keep it from you, I know that, but it felt just as wrong to destroy your memories of him.’ Josh bit his lip. ‘I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn’t.’

The letter was still in that no man’s land between us, but as it transferred from his hand to mine it fluttered wildly in my suddenly trembling fingers.

‘I’ll go for a walk and let you read it in peace,’ Josh said gently. ‘We can talk later, when I get back.’

He turned towards the gate, and I watched Fletcher trot up and fall into step beside him. My eyes followed them until they disappeared from sight, before looking down at the envelope once again. I brushed my fingertips over the ink that had long since dried. I lifted the envelope to my lips and kissed his familiar script, somehow knowing that he’d have done that too before sending the letter on to Josh.

‘Just you and me, one last time, my love,’ I said to the envelope, before slowly turning it over and ripping open the seal.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Hello beautiful,

The sound of my sob echoed in the quiet countryside. Two words in, and I was already in bits.

So, you finally did it. You went to find him. I'm going to hazard a guess here and say it's been a while since I went. I bet you kept putting it off, finding excuses not to search for him, or even considered not doing it at all. I guess none of that matters now . . . you went to Scotland, spoke to Josh, and now you know what happened between him and me.

I've pictured a thousand times or more how you'll react when you learn the truth. There are a range of options: from you wanting to kill me, to you finding a way to forgive me for the way I've behaved. Maybe the best I can hope for is somewhere in between.

I deserve your anger, Lily, and every insult you want to throw at me. Believe me, they'd all be justified, and I've probably called

myself far worse since that day.

I paused in my reading, as though testing my emotional barometer. Did I still feel angry? No. Not so much anymore, but perhaps that's because the rage was dwarfed by the sheer joy of having Adam's voice in my head one last time. This letter was a magical thread tethering me to him again, in a way that nothing else could do. Except the baby, I thought with a sad smile, as my hand went to my belly.

There are two questions I know you'll want answered: why I did it, and why I never told you. God knows there were enough moments when it felt like it was just you and me in the world, and we were titanium-strong and could withstand anything. So why didn't I confess what I'd done?

That's easily answered, babe: I was scared. I was terrified it would change everything and that you'd never look at me, never love me, in the same way again.

I tried to tell you. The first time was on the night of the rehearsal dinner when what I'd done felt like a crime – who am I kidding, it still does. Everyone else had gone to bed, and it was just you and me together in the hotel foyer. I swear the words were right there on

my tongue when you kissed me, and I was scared you'd taste the confession, like a poison that I'd swallowed. But you didn't, you just said something really cute about how many minutes were left until you were my wife, and you looked so damn happy and excited I couldn't bring myself to hurt you . . . hurt us, like that.

That first fail, when I should have owned up and never did, was just the start of it. There were golden beaches where we sat side by side under foreign skies when I could have told you. There were nights when we lay talking in the dark, whispering the kind of nonsense couples do, when I could have begun the conversation, but I always took the coward's way out.

I know I would have told you in the end. I'm sure of it, because even though everything seemed perfect, was perfect, the lie was worse than the cancer that eventually came. It ate away at me little by little. But before I found the courage, I got sick, and when it was clear that I wasn't going to get better, I couldn't

bear the thought of leaving with you hating me for what I'd done.

Tears rolled down my cheeks and fell on to the letter. 'Never,' I whispered. 'I could never have hated you.' My fingertips grazed the paper as though I was caressing his face, forever smooth and unblemished by the lines, creases and wrinkles time never got the chance to leave.

Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me, Lily. I went from being a guy who was in no hurry to settle down, to knowing on that first day that I'd met the person I was meant to find. You were everything I didn't know I'd been looking for. My friends thought I was crazy when I told them I'd found the girl I wanted to marry. You could hardly blame them, because at the time you still hadn't agreed to go out with me. But the first time they met you, they all said the same thing. There was something special between us. Even the die-hard cynics warned me not to screw it up, that I'd be an idiot if I did anything stupid and let you slip away.

Which makes it all the worse that I did something so awful that I was sure I didn't deserve to be yours anymore. When I spotted

Josh acting secretive in the hotel grounds, I knew straight away why he was there. It was my worst nightmare come true: that the man you'd loved first would one day tell you he'd realised you were meant to be with him.

I've never been a jealous man; I hate that kind of possessive bullshit. But the first time we bumped into Josh at the Christmas market, every nerve ending in my body went on high alert. I was confident in our relationship; it was strong, and I knew how much we loved each other. But seeing you and him together tripped an alarm. It wasn't what he said, or did, but there was something in his eyes when he watched you talking, or when you laughed. Everything I felt for you, the depth of my love, was written right there on his face. And the crazy thing is that I don't think either of you realised it. But I did.

There are so many things in my life I'd change if I could. I'd have had piano lessons as a kid, I'd never have had that disastrous mullet as a teenager, or put off visiting my grandfather that last time. But the biggest

regret of my entire life will always be contacting Josh on the day before our wedding. And the things I told him on that day.

My hands were shaking as I set the letter aside, inexplicably afraid that Adam's words had the power to rewrite the past and change so many things that I could never reclaim. I closed my eyes, letting the September sun kiss my face. Somewhere nearby a skylark was singing, just as there'd been on the day I'd first met Adam. I think that's what gave me the strength to read on.

I'm not a liar. But that day I told the worst, most dreadful lie of all. I told Josh you were having my baby. I knew he'd asked you to choose between us and I panicked, fearing you were going to pick him over me, that his hold on your heart was stronger than mine. I lost everything in that moment: the man I was who knew right from wrong, the person you'd fallen in love with, and the guy who trusted you enough to make the best choice for you. I thought you'd pick him, Lily. I truly thought you'd pick Josh.

I shook my head, my throat almost too tight for words.

'How could you not have known that it would have been you, my love? It could only ever have been you?'

Could Adam hear those words as they floated on the soft breeze to the place where he would always be forever young, forever healthy, forever the

right choice for my heart to have made at that time?

I damaged something precious with my actions that day. I made you lose your oldest friend, and that is truly unforgiveable. And the thought of you not having him there to lean on, because of my stupidity, is why I'm trying, in this very clumsy way, to make things right. I think Josh is a good man. A better man than me. I don't think he'd ever have lied the way I did.

I've always believed if something is meant for you, it will find its way to you when the time is right. And if it can't . . . well, maybe a promise and an old letter will help right the wrong.

Be happy, Lily. Move forward. Find love again. You deserve only the best of futures and I'm beyond sad that I can't be there to share yours with you. Trust your heart. Follow it. It will take you where you're meant to go.

Forever, Adam xxx



‘Are you alright?’

It was a good question, and one I had no idea how to answer. I was still caught in limbo halfway between the past and the present, with Adam’s words in my ears and Josh standing there in front of me, his face full of gentle concern. He’d been gone for ages, giving me the time I needed to sort out my emotions, but something told me however long he’d spent walking the hills, it still wasn’t enough.

Josh lowered himself cautiously on to the bench beside me, and Fletcher flopped down at our feet, clearly exhausted from the hike.

‘Did the letter make things better or worse?’ He really had cornered the market with great questions that morning.

‘Hard to tell right now.’ It was an honest answer, but perhaps not the one he wanted to hear.

We were silent for a long time, and when Josh eventually spoke, his voice was low and serious.

‘I hope this little baby knows how incredibly lucky it is to have you as its mum.’

I smiled as I turned on the bench towards him. ‘I think in all the years I’ve known you, that might possibly be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me. Thank you. You’ve no idea how badly I needed to hear that, because now that it’s a reality rather than just a dream, it’s as scary as hell to be doing it on my own.’

‘I apologise for the appalling lack of compliments in the past,’ Josh said, his eyes crinkling into a smile before his face grew solemn. ‘Is doing this alone what you really want?’

‘Well, I’m not entirely alone. Mum and Dad have been longing to become grandparents for ages; they’ll be really involved. And I’ve got friends who I know will be there for me whenever I need them.’

‘But not me?’

His question felt like a trap that I was about to fall into.

‘What do you mean? After everything you’ve always said, I knew how you’d feel when I told you this news.’

There was an expression on his face that I rarely saw when Josh looked at me. Disappointment.

‘Then maybe you don’t know me as well as you think.’

‘Yesterday you said Adam knew the only thing that would ever make you walk away was me having his baby. And now I am.’

‘That was when you and Adam were about to get married. *Of course* I walked away then. I wasn’t about to ruin everything for you by forcing you to choose. You meant too much to me back then to hurt you like that. You still do.’

‘I . . .’ There were too many conflicting thoughts flying through my head to grab hold of a single one. ‘Josh, this is a baby. Adam’s baby.’

‘I know that.’

‘This is *exactly* what you said you never wanted. For God’s sake, you even had a vasectomy to make sure this never accidentally happened.’

Josh bit his lip, guilty. ‘That’s not *entirely* true.’ He gave a rueful attempt at a laugh, before his voice sobered. ‘Physically I can’t have kids, Lily. I got sick when I was travelling – I caught mumps, of all things – really badly. It left me unable to give you the one thing I knew you’d always wanted. A baby. The funny thing is, the news really shook me when the doctors broke it to me. I’d spent my whole life thinking I never wanted to be a dad, but when they told me I never could be, I cried. It felt like something had been ripped out of my hands because I hadn’t been holding it carefully enough.’ He paused and drew in a steadying breath. ‘Not being able to have kids was why walking away from you before your wedding was the right thing to do, and why I didn’t come after you seven months ago. I wanted you to find a way to make that dream come true.’ He shook his head as though the new information still hadn’t found a place to settle. ‘And you have. And I’m happy for you . . . and I’m happy for Adam too.’

And I knew him well enough to see that he meant that. He really did.

‘But do I wish it had been me and not him? Hell, yes.’

My head was spinning, unable to reconcile the man who’d never wanted a family with the one who was now saying everything I’d always wanted to hear.

‘What happened to make you change your mind?’

This time his eyes were full of a thousand memories as he looked at me.

‘You. You happened. You came charging back into my world and made it impossible for me to carry on pretending that I could live the rest of my life without you in it.’ He drew in a deep breath. ‘And then something happened when I visited Gordon at the home recently.’

‘The dementia has taken almost everything from him now. Each time I see him it’s a little worse than the last. Most times he doesn’t know who I am, and it’s too confusing for him if I keep correcting him. So, I let him think

I'm someone else's relative or visitor. But when I went to see him last time, one of the carers asked him who his visitor was, and . . .' Josh's voice broke, and I loved that he didn't even attempt to hide the depth of his emotion. 'He said, "*This is my boy. This is my lad, Josh, and I'm so proud of him.*"'

My hand went to my eyes to wipe away the sudden tears that his story had prompted.

'And in that moment, I knew that it didn't matter that I wasn't his flesh and blood, that I didn't look like him, or that he'd never known me as a young child. He'd been there for me in a million different ways. He was my father in every sense of the word that truly mattered. I called him Dad rather than Gordon for the first time that day. I'll do it now, every time I see him.

'And that's how I know that, if I ever get the chance, I *could* be a good dad. Because I had one hell of a role model.'

We were both quiet for a long moment, trying to corral our emotions.

'You don't have to do this alone, Lily. Unless that's the way you want it. I could be there for you – for both of you – in any way you want me to be. And it's okay if that's only as your friend. I'll understand if you need it to be just about you and the baby and Adam for now. I get that. I'll be whatever you want, whatever you need. I can be the best damn uncle this little one could ever have. But if you want me to be more than that . . . then I'm in, Lily, I'm all the way in.'

'I'm always going to love Adam, Josh.'

'I know that.'

My eyes were on his, and the words that tangled all three of our lives together couldn't be held back any longer. 'But I love you too, I always have, ever since the first moment you tried to evict me from that tree.'

His smile was slow in emerging, and it grew so bright it was like looking directly at the sun.

Josh's voice cracked again with the weight of his words and his eyes were filled with tears I'd never seen him shed before. 'I fought being in love with you for so long, Lily; I just can't do it anymore. I'm done. I don't know what forever feels like. But I do know there is no one on earth I want to share it with except you. We can take this thing as slow as you want or need. But this time I'm not walking away.'

He was on his feet now, standing before me, with a vulnerability that I'd never seen before.

'I want to be the person who gets to see you grow old. I want to be the

person this little baby can always turn to. And I want to be the man Adam trusted me to be when he told you to go find me. All *you* have to do is tell me what it is that you want.'

It was the easiest question I'd ever been asked, and as I got to my feet and walked into his arms, I knew I was taking the final steps on a journey that had begun with a promise I'd made to another man.

'It's you I want, Josh. It's us. I want us.'

And then he kissed me.

Chapter Forty

SEVEN MONTHS LATER

The lounge looked good – actually, the whole flat looked good. Every surface gleamed and you practically needed sunglasses to combat the reflective glare off the high-gloss kitchen cabinets. The letting agent had staged the apartment before filming it with a passion that made me wonder if she'd always hankered after a career in Hollywood instead of property management. She'd certainly worked her magic, because within hours of the mansion-house flat being listed for rent, there had been a flurry of interest from potential tenants.

I walked from room to room now on a waft of expensive scented candles, which the agent had tactfully suggested I might like to use.

'That'll be because of you,' I'd told a clearly unconcerned Fletcher. He wasn't here this morning, but was enjoying some park time with Raegan and Polly and their new puppy. Josh wasn't here either, although he had volunteered to reschedule his plans if I wanted him at my side.

'I kind of need to do this by myself,' I said, with a tiny frisson of concern in case he felt like I was shutting him out. I should have known better.

'I understand. It's going to be hard letting go of somewhere that holds so many memories.'

It was. I felt the enormity of it again as I walked from room to room, seeing in each one a flickering vignette from the past. In the kitchen I visualised Adam at the hob, a rude slogan apron knotted at his waist, and every pot we possessed piled up beside the sink. I scanned the room and found a younger me, hazy and sepia-coloured, laughing as she sipped on a glass of wine as the offer of assistance was refused. '*I've got this,*' the Adam mirage said with a cheerful grin, even though he patently had not.

My steps took me past the doorway to the lounge, where the cream settee, its cushions freshly plumped for the potential tenants, momentarily bore an Adam-shaped indent in his favourite seat. I blinked and the cushion

was flat again.

A quick, last-minute inspection of the bathroom had me making a sound halfway between a sob and a laugh. Because there we were, for a fleeting second, in the oversized shower cubicle, limbs slippery with soap, hearts pounding with desire, laughingly declaring that shower sex was nowhere near as easy as it looked in the movies.

The bedroom I avoided for obvious reasons, because even though the wardrobes had long since been emptied, and the drawers on Adam's side of the bed were now bare, this was the room where his presence lingered most. It was why Josh had never stayed here, despite having spent almost every weekend with me for the last seven months.

He'd reached an arrangement with the owners of the farm and had taken out a long-term let on The Old Dairy, which was where Fletcher and I spent much of our time. My dog loved the freedom of the open fields, and the ever-present possibility of catching a rabbit – even though we all knew he'd never even get close to one. And I loved it because it was the place where Josh and I had first laid the foundation stones of our future.

My phone vibrated against my hip, and the baby responded before I could with an indignant kick against my ribs. There was far less room for the creative gymnastics I'd experienced in the second trimester, but there was still a feeling of wonder every time a miniature elbow or a tiny knee reminded me that I was on the final home stretch of my pregnancy.

Of course, the indigestion, aching back and multiple trips to the loo during the night were pretty accurate reminders too. I stole a glance in the hall mirror as I walked past it now, smiling as I saw the changes to my body, which Josh claimed only made me more beautiful. He was pleasantly biased.

We'd taken things very slowly in our relationship after that first visit. There were years of gaps in our history, and we'd taken time to rebuild all the bridges that we'd once let burn to the ground. We were stronger now because of it, I knew that, but it always made me happy to hear that realisation echoed by the people who were important to us.

My dad had called Josh 'son' for the first time on our last Sunday lunch visit, and I knew how much it had meant to Josh, because he hadn't been able to say anything for several minutes afterwards.

'Adam's going to be a hard act to follow,' Josh had told me the first time I'd taken him home, which in itself had felt odd, considering the number of times we'd been in and out of each other's houses during our teenage

years.

‘God knows how the next one is going to cope after you,’ I teased, enjoying the smile that crinkled the edges of his eyes as he pulled me in for a kiss.

‘Not going to happen. You’re stuck with me now,’ he said. Our lips had still been locked when my dad opened the front door, and that should probably have felt all kinds of awkward, but strangely it didn’t.

It was months before Josh had told me about his plans to act upon a suggestion I’d made. ‘What suggestion?’ I asked, wondering if baby brain was the reason why I had no idea what he was talking about.

‘What you said to me last year, about turning a section of the forest into a luxury treehouse retreat. Now that I’ve seen what Eddie and Cath offer at the farm cottages, I think we could do that in the forest too.’

More than the enthusiasm in his voice, or the light of excitement in his eyes, I loved the use of ‘we’ instead of ‘I’.

My only concern was how much extra time he would need to spend in Scotland with the new enterprise, but Rory had been keen to go into partnership with him, and Rory’s wife – who used to work in hospitality – had practically begged Josh to let her manage the new business for him when he relocated down south again.

Everything had fallen into place, *we’d* fallen into place, and the time had come when I’d finally had to admit that climbing three flights of stairs to reach the mansion-house flat felt more like a daily ascent up Everest. The baby was due in six weeks, and just when we were beginning to panic about where we’d live, a beautiful timber-framed house, not far from The Old Dairy, had come on to the market. The building had a rustic charm and there was a huge garden where a dog and a child could one day run side by side and play. But more than that, the garden had a huge sycamore tree. We’d come to a halt directly in front of it during our first viewing of the property. Our eyes had travelled from the base of its trunk right up to the uppermost branches. It was almost identical to the one we used to climb as children.

Josh’s hand had found mine, or mine had found his, and without any doubts or hesitation we’d shared a look that meant only one thing. ‘We’ll take it,’ Josh had told the slightly bemused estate agent.

Leaving the flat would be hard, but deciding to rent it out rather than sell it allowed me to feel like Adam was still with me. Another sharp kick, this time in the region of my bladder, was a timely reminder that a part of

Adam was *always* going to be with me.

The front door buzzer rang, and I crossed to the intercom to release the latch, consciously trying to walk and not waddle. Josh might find my duck-like gait delightful, but I remained in doubt.

The letting agent had been surprised when I'd insisted on showing the flat myself. But it was important to me that the right people came to live in the home my husband and I had shared.

'The Zhengs are a charming couple. They're from Beijing, and his company have relocated him here for two years. They loved the look of the place on the video, and they can move in straight away.'

Two minutes into the viewing and it was clear that Mr and Mrs Zheng were entranced by the flat. I could see their excitement growing as I led them from room to room, and it was obvious how much they wanted to call this place their new home. I was glad; I wanted the new residents to be as happy here as Adam and I had been when we'd first moved in.

'This is exactly what we were hoping to find,' Mr Zheng told me delightedly. His wife was somewhat quieter, but I could see she felt the same.

They followed me into the master bedroom, where I opened cupboard doors and did my best to sell them something they'd already mentally decided upon. They paused in the corner of the room to admire the beautiful crib that Josh had completed for me. He'd brought it down from Scotland months ago, and although I was probably biased, I thought it was the best thing he'd ever made. He could probably have earned a fortune selling similar cribs, but he was adamant that this was to be a unique, one-off piece, just for me.

'This is exquisite,' Mr Zheng said admiringly, running his hand over the intricate carvings of the woodland creatures.

'Thank you. My partner made it,' I said, hearing the pride in my voice.

'He is extremely talented,' Mr Zheng said, straightening up and giving me a warm smile. 'And you are having a little girl. Congratulations.'

My confusion must surely have been written all over my face.

'Actually, we don't know the sex of the baby. We decided to leave it as a surprise.'

This time it was Mr Zheng who looked confused. 'I'm sorry. I just assumed you were having a little one called Lily.'

'Lily is *my* name,' I said, feeling my heart take a tiny skip, almost as though it knew what was coming next.

Mr Zheng looked a little flustered as he bent to the crib again and ran his hand over the Chinese characters that Josh carved into every piece of Wildwood furniture. The same characters that were inked over the scar on his shoulder.

‘I’m sorry. My mistake. But this,’ he said, running his fingers slowly over the carving, ‘. . . this says “Lily”.’

Every piece Josh had ever made, going back years and years. Every single piece had my name on it. It wasn’t a random symbol like he’d told me; it was a heartfelt declaration, a testimony to his feelings, and it brought a lump to my throat.

I truly hadn’t thought it was possible to love Josh any more than I already did.

But I was wrong.

Chapter Forty One

Josh's footsteps were heavy as he retraced his route down the hospital corridor. He'd been awake for thirty hours straight and couldn't remember ever feeling this exhausted. He gave himself a shake, managing to spill a sizeable amount of the vending machine coffee he'd just gone to fetch. He was only carrying a single beaker as Lily was currently nil by mouth. He didn't count the tiny slivers of ice chips that he'd been gently sliding between her lips, like a parent bird feeding its fledgling.

He fixed a smile on his face as he approached the door to the room she'd been allocated. He didn't want her to see the concern that was etched like wrinkles on to his face. Today was so much harder than he could ever have imagined.

For about the thousandth time, he wished there was a way that he could magically swap places with her. He was strong, ridiculously sturdy. He could take it. What he couldn't take was seeing the woman he loved in pain like this.

There was probably a whole range of powerful analgesics Lily could have taken to make this whole thing easier, but she'd refused them with a vehemence that had surprised him.

'I don't want to be drugged up to the eyeballs or spaced out,' she'd said with an odd expression on her face, as though she was hearing an echo from her past.

Josh considered pointing out that the doctors weren't trying to get her hooked on hard drugs, but decided he'd be better advised to let Lily decide how she wanted to handle everything. She was the one going through it, and it didn't really matter how many books Josh had read in anticipation of today – and he'd read a lot. Nothing could ever really prepare you.

One of the nurses slid into the room in his slipstream, giving him a quick smile before going over to check on her patient. Mercifully, Lily had drifted into a much-needed light sleep in his absence. Josh looked down at her with the same gut-wrenching pull of love that had tugged at his heart for almost all his life.

He was still staring down at her when the nurse plucked a tissue from the box beside the bed and pressed it into his hand. Josh studied it as though

he had no idea what it might be or why he'd been given it, until the nurse lightly touched her own dry cheek with a forefinger. He shook his head. How had he not realised he was crying?

'How are you doing, Mr Metcalf?'

It didn't seem to matter how many times he'd told them to call him Josh, they never did.

'I'm fine.'

'You're looking a bit tired,' the nurse said sympathetically.

Josh shrugged, and every muscle in his neck protested at the movement. *That's what happens when you spend an entire night in an uncomfortable hospital chair beside your wife's bed*, he thought.

'It's taking so long . . . is that normal?' he asked, hearing the question in his own head and feeling vaguely horrified in case the nurse thought there was somewhere else he needed to be. Josh had no intention of leaving Lily's side for a second longer than he had to. It would probably take a SWAT team to get him out of her room.

'It can be quite protracted,' the nurse said, biting her lip as though apologising for Nature, who had her own agenda as far as these things were concerned.

The young woman left, with a promise to bring Josh some toast, which he already knew he wouldn't be able to eat. He eased himself slowly on to the chair, trying very hard not to wake the woman sleeping in the bed. Even though he knew he should probably let her rest, Josh couldn't resist reaching out for the hand he'd held a thousand times before.

The fear that he wouldn't be able to do that anymore shuddered through him like a bomb blast.

Lily's hands were still beautiful, long fingered, with perfectly shaped oval nails, but the skin was thin now, marked with the passage of time. It was no longer smooth, and beige splotches marked the space across her knuckles, as though she'd been carelessly painting something in a particularly ugly shade of brown.

His own hands bore similar age spots.

Josh threaded his fingers through Lily's, annoyed with himself when it caused her eyelids to flutter open, and yet also pleased because the time left to look into her eyes was slipping away faster than sand in an hourglass.

'Hello, you.' Her voice sounded the same, or at least it did to his ears. Like musical notes of a favourite song, the cadence was a balm on his soul.

‘Hello, beautiful.’

Lily smiled gently at the endearment, which he still used even though her seventieth birthday had been and gone several years ago.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asked, almost too scared to hear her answer.

‘Better. I think I’ve turned a corner,’ she said, and from God only knows where, she managed a wicked twinkle in her eyes.

She was lying, obviously. They both knew that. But she *was* stronger than him . . . and was handling this awful situation so much better than he was. And perhaps with good reason. ‘*It’s not my first rodeo,*’ she’d told him sadly ages ago, when they’d both realised how this was going to end.

Behind him, Josh heard the sound of the door being gently eased open, and assumed it was yet another member of the hospital staff, until a strong hand was laid on his shoulder. It squeezed gently, somehow imbuing a hundred different emotions into the flexing of the digits. The one Josh felt most powerfully was love.

He looked up into Adam’s face and smiled.

Todd leant past him and bent down to Lily, dropping the lightest of kisses on her cheek.

‘Hey, Mum, how are you doing?’

‘Peachy,’ Lily said, her face softening the way it had done for over forty years whenever she looked at her son.

The first time Josh had witnessed the phenomenon had been in a room not dissimilar to the one they were currently occupying. A slippery, squirming infant, still slick with blood, as though he’d fought a battle to get there, had been placed into Lily’s outstretched arms and her face had transformed into an expression that Josh had thought only angels wore. He’d never seen anyone fall in love before, never witnessed the moment when one soul connected with another and formed a bond that could never be broken.

Josh had always suspected it would be that way for Lily the first time she laid eyes on her child. What he hadn’t known – what he’d never even dared to hope for – was that it would be exactly the same for him. But it had been.

Todd reached into the canvas record bag slung over his shoulder and passed Josh a large leather-bound book. ‘I think this is the one Mum was asking for.’

Lily’s eyes had once again fluttered to a close. It was happening all the time now.

Josh took the photograph album from his son's hand and looked down at the unfamiliar book, fairly sure he'd never seen this particular volume before.

'It was at the back of Mum's wardrobe and not in the loft with the others,' Todd said with an indulgent shake of his head. 'Incidentally, there's an awful lot of stuff up there.'

'You say stuff, I say memories,' Josh replied, his eyes going to the hospital bed. 'Pretty amazing memories,' he finished, his voice a little hoarse.

Lily's eyes were still closed, but her parched lips curved into the semblance of a smile. Josh lifted the hand he was holding and pressed a kiss on to the hot, dry skin. Todd, who'd had a front row seat to a love story so powerful that not even his mother's passing would end it, felt something begin to unravel within him. He was horribly afraid that if he started to cry now, he might not be able to stop.

He had no idea how his father was going to cope with losing her. He had no idea how he would either. All at once Todd wished he hadn't told his wife, Lucy, that it would be better if she and the twins stayed at home. He needed them now, and he suspected that Josh might too. The man sitting opposite him, who'd never fathered a child of his own, had turned out to be a pretty amazing dad and grandfather.

'Have you eaten anything today, Dad?' Todd asked now, his expression darkening with concern as he studied the older man properly.

'I'm not hungry, son,' Josh murmured, his own eyes fixed on Lily's face. He knew every line, every freckle, every curve. He knew when she was in pain, however much she attempted to hide it. And it was bad now. Really bad.

Lily's eyes fluttered open and scanned the room as though looking for someone.

'Lucy and the girls are at home,' Todd said in a rush, the panic of a ticking clock on its final countdown making his voice sound strange.

'Can you go and get them?'

Todd's eyes darted from his mother's face, the skin scarily translucent, and then flashed to Josh's and finally to the clock on the wall. His reluctance to leave was etched into every feature.

'Please, Todd,' Lily said, her voice more of a croak now than it had been just an hour earlier.

'Okay,' Todd said, getting to his feet, and crossing to the door on legs that appeared weirdly jerky. 'But it's going to take me a while to get there

and back.’ He paused as though waiting for one of his parents to object, but neither did. ‘Alright then. I’ll be as quick as I can.’

He went to leave but paused for a long moment with one hand on the doorknob. Slowly he turned back around, and Josh saw the tears coursing silently down his cheeks. Todd returned to the bed and Josh stepped aside as his son gently slid his hands beneath Lily’s bony shoulders and hugged her before pressing a kiss on to her cheek.

‘I love you, Mum.’

Lily’s face was serene as she stared up at her only child. ‘I love you too, Todd. To the moon and back.’ They were the words she always used to say to him as a child before leaving his room each night, and if Todd didn’t get the significance of why she was saying them now, Josh definitely did.

As the door of the room closed, he heard Todd’s broken sob before his hurrying feet carried him away.

‘He didn’t need to be here for this,’ Lily said, her eyes burning with an intensity that was greater than even the pain Josh knew she was in.

‘Let me get someone to come and see if they can give you something,’ he begged, his hand hovering over the call button.

‘No, my love. I don’t want to miss a moment of being here with you.’

‘What can I do?’ Josh asked helplessly, knowing he was surely letting her down by crying again, but he just couldn’t help it.

‘Nothing. You’ve done it all. You’ve given me everything I ever wanted or needed. All I need now is to know that you’re here.’

‘Always,’ Josh said brokenly. He bent his head to the bed as though praying, even though he knew that this time it wouldn’t be answered.

‘Do you want to look at the photograph album?’ Josh asked, his hand already reaching out for it.

Surprisingly, Lily shook her head. ‘It’s not for me, my love, it’s for you,’ she said, her voice noticeably weaker. ‘Look at it,’ she urged, her eyes already closing.

Josh did as she asked, his hands not entirely steady as he began turning the pages. By the third or fourth he knew why Lily had asked Todd to bring this album, which Lily must have secretly compiled from hundreds of old prints. Unlike their other albums, which featured family members, beloved pets, and friends, this one held photographs of only two people: Josh and Todd.

On the opening page was their very first photo together, taken when

Todd was only minutes old. They spanned his early weeks and so many firsts that Josh could hardly see through a mist of tears. First tentative steps, with Todd's pudgy little hand gripped firmly in Josh's. There they were again at the local swimming pool when the instructor had slipped off Todd's armbands and launched him towards Josh's open arms. He laughed out loud at the snap that captured him running like an idiot behind Todd's bike as the little boy pedalled it unaided for the first time.

They looked nothing like each other. Todd was, and always had been, the image of his biological father, Adam, but the triumphant expressions on Josh and Todd's faces were identical in snap after snap.

By the time Josh had travelled the pages of father and son cub camps, Saturday morning football practices, and holding the runner-up trophy together as though it was the FA Cup, Josh knew why Lily had made this album and why she had waited until now to give it to him.

'You've been a wonderful dad,' Lily said, her hand reaching once again for Josh's. 'You couldn't have loved him any more than you did, it simply wasn't possible. And I wanted you to have this' – her eyes dropped to the album – 'to remind you that there are so many good things still to come for the two of you. Todd's going to need his dad now, and I need to know you're going to be there for him. I need you to promise me you'll be strong. I can't be there for him and our amazing grandchildren, so I'm relying on you to be there for both of us. Will you promise me you'll do that?'

'I will,' Josh said, drawing in a deep breath as though needing to find one last draught of strength to get through what he had to say. 'But I need you to promise me something too.'

Lily turned her head on the pillow, and even that slight movement caused her pain, he could see it in the way she flinched.

'I know you're worried about me, but I want you to promise me that you'll stop doing that.'

'I can't,' Lily said simply.

Josh gave a ghost of a smile. He'd expected that would be her answer. But he had absolutely no idea what her response would be to his next request.

'I want you to promise me something else. I want you to go and find Adam.'

Lily's eyes were impossibly wide as she looked at her husband, who was gently nodding his encouragement.

'I need to know that when we say goodbye you're not going to be on

your own, because I couldn't bear the thought of that. But I know Adam will be there to look after you . . . He's been waiting for so long to be with you again, Lily. This is his time now. Promise me you'll go to him.'

There was shock on Lily's face, but it was lost under the weight of what she felt for this man who'd spent almost his entire life loving her.

'Find Adam. Make sure you let him know that you forgave him a long, long time ago, and that everything worked out exactly as it was meant to.'

Josh leant forward, pressing his lips to Lily's for what he now knew would be their very last kiss. 'Let him love you again, Lily, but never forget that I do too, so don't go rushing too far ahead, because when the time is right, I'll catch up with you. That's *my* promise.'

The shadows grew longer as the day slipped slowly away, and as it did Josh kept hold of Lily's hand. He knew it so well. Blindfolded he would find it among a thousand others.

He'd held it for the first time when they'd climbed the sycamore tree.

It had gripped his as Todd came into their world . . . and completed it.

And he'd held it with pride and love when he'd slid a gold band on her finger.

This was the hand he'd been born to hold.

And he was still doing so when Lily's eyes found his for one last smile that Josh locked away in his heart like a gift, before she left him with a breath as soft as a sighed farewell, or a gentle hello.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Author photo: © Hannah Cousens 2017

Dani Atkins is an award-winning novelist. Her 2013 debut *Fractured* has been translated into over twenty-three languages and has sold more than half a million copies.

Dani was born and has lived in various parts of Hertfordshire all her life. Before the arrival of her two children, she worked for many years as a secretary/PA in London in a range of diverse organisations, including the BBC, a car dealership, and an international engineering corporation. Books were her constant companions on the daily commute, and she never let go of her secret dream that one day she too might become an author.

A long and happy marriage, two children who have now grown up and left home, and a great many much-loved pets later, Dani still has to pinch herself to realise that she is now, quite literally, living the dream.

Dani and her husband live in a 350-year-old cottage and share their lives with a Siamese cat and a very exuberant and demanding border collie, who kindly allows them to live with him. Dani's perfect day would include a long visit from her children, a roaring fire in the fireplace, a good book, a film everyone wanted to watch and an obscene amount of chocolate.

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