

The COSY CANAL BOAT DREAM

'Full of warmth, fun and feel good factor'

KATIE FFORDE



CHRISTIE BARLOW

Christie Barlow

**The Cosy Canal Boat Dream: A
funny, feel-good romantic comedy
you won't be able to put down!**

Аннотация

****You can pre-order best-selling author Christie's brand new heartwarming novel now****Welcome to the Little Rock marina – where hearts are healed and dreams are made...For the last two years Nell Andrews has been struggling to stay afloat. As her life tumbled down around her, the only safety net has been her cosy canal boat, The Nollie. Tucked away inside, Nell has found a place to heal her broken heart. And now she's ready to move on and follow her dream... Gorgeous Guy Cornish, with his easy Irish charm, makes him an instant hit with everyone at the marina, and the perfect person to help Nell with her project. But Guy has his own reasons for being at the marina, and a past that threatens to sink Nell's dream...

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The
COSY CANAL
BOAT DREAM

CHRISTIE BARLOW



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For Agnes Barlow,

The brightest star shining in the sky.

Prologue

Little Rock Marina was a beautiful place to live; linked to the Trent and Mersey Canal it was home to two hundred narrowboats and set in a ninety-acre woodland. Small boutiques, coffee shops and all things crafty adorned the jetty. Nell Andrews' narrowboat was moored in a fantastic spot on jetty number ten, right in the heart of the marina, overlooking the popular deli. To the right of the deli was the butcher's and to the left, a gift shop, which could only be described as an explosion of all things floral and shabby chic.

Just a little way up the towpath was The Waterfront, an historic-looking pub with its reclaimed timber and brick, and a beautiful place to sit in the summer, overlooking the water, when the whole place became a hive of activity with dog-walkers and narrowboat enthusiasts.

But Nell and Ollie's favourite time of the year had always been winter. Once December arrived they'd enjoyed early-morning frosty walks around the marina, finding the twinkly lights that were decked on the roofs of the boats magical. In the dark evenings, they'd loved battening down the hatches and cosying up in front of the log burner, feeling content inside the 'Nollie', a name Ollie had come up with for their floating home.

Nell and Ollie's boat had been moored at Little Rock Marina for all of their married life. They'd met at college, aged

seventeen, and the moment Nell had clapped eyes on Ollie, with his blonde corkscrew curls and infectious smile, she'd fallen in love. At the time, he'd been training to be a mechanic and she was studying business. Ollie's passion was to tinker with engines; he was always at his happiest when covered head to toe in greasy oil, with his head under a car bonnet, and he'd opened a small mechanic's yard on the edge of Heron's Reach, a picturesque village, which was a stone's throw away from the marina. It didn't make a lot of money, but it had been enough to keep their little home afloat.

In the past five years there had been nothing more appealing than waking up, throwing open the doors of their little narrowboat and watching the world float by. But recently things had changed for Nell. Now, as she clambered up on to the deck and stared vacantly at the clouds sporadically dotted in the sky, she allowed her mind to drift along with them. With one hand she clutched tightly at the grey woollen blanket draped around her shoulders and with the other held a steaming mug of tea. As she blinked back the tears and stared out over the tranquil marina, Nell knew that today was going to be one of the most difficult of her life.

Two hours later, Nell flicked up and down her clothes rail trying to decide on an outfit. She knew it was silly to worry about what she was going to wear; Ollie wouldn't mind what she was wearing when she said goodbye. She took a deep breath, smiled and glanced over at his overalls hanging on the back of the door.

Once his yard had finally been sold, his overalls were all she'd kept. She couldn't bear to part with them.

Finally, she set off up the towpath, her bag slung over her shoulder and her hands buried deep inside her coat pockets. She knew that the perfect place to lay Ollie to rest was on the other side of the marina, just by the lake. Over the wooden bridge there was a huge willow tree that adorned the bank and underneath its graceful foliage of arching branches was a bench where Nell and Ollie would sit talking for hours, watching the world go by.

Everywhere was peaceful, the ancient oak trees that flanked the gravel path swayed and the colourful daffodils danced in the light breeze as Nell dabbed her eyes with a tissue. She was struggling to accept that Ollie had truly left her, but she knew that however hard it was, it was time to move on.

She was on her way to meet her mum, Gilly, who she'd spotted in the distance standing on the little wooden bridge, throwing bread to the mallards below.

'Come on, Nell Andrews, be brave! You can do this,' the words whirled around inside her head.

Her mum swung round and smiled warmly towards her daughter, 'Morning, you okay?' she asked, throwing her arms open wide and giving her a hug.

'Not really,' Nell answered shakily, her eyes finally unleashing the tears she'd bravely been trying to hold back.

Gilly rubbed her arm, 'It's going to be alright, you know, in time. Come on,' she encouraged.

Nell could only manage a nod, not trusting herself to speak. They linked arms and slowly walked over the bridge towards the huge willow tree and perched on the wooden bench underneath it. Nell clutched her bag against her chest, feeling close to Ollie for one last time. For a moment neither spoke; they just stared out over the tranquil water of the lake, Nell lost in her own memories.

It had been six months since the decision was made to switch off Ollie's life-support machine, and she still missed him dreadfully. The pain twisted in her heart; it was still raw and never went away.

Every time Nell thought of Ollie, her eyes brimmed with instant tears. She remembered the night of the accident as though it was yesterday, and could still hear Ollie's voice swirling around inside her head, 'Gherkins, you want gherkins? Are you sure you aren't pregnant?' He'd joked.

'Of course I'm not, it's just that I've picked up some of those fancy biscuits from the deli and I could murder a slab of Stilton and pickles to go with them.'

'Your wish is my command,' he'd laughed, picking up his keys and kissing Nell lightly on top of her head.

'I'll be ten minutes max.'

He'd climbed on to his motorbike and pulled on his helmet. Nell had watched him disappear into the foggy night from the window of the boat. Once the roar of his bike had petered out she'd switched on the TV and thrown some more logs on to the fire. She'd drifted off to sleep and the next thing she knew she'd

heard footsteps and a rap on the door.

Ollie hadn't been gone nearly ten minutes; in fact he'd been away for over two hours.

The moment she opened the door her heart had sank and she knew Ollie wasn't coming back. There, standing on the deck of their narrowboat were a couple of policeman, who'd informed her that Ollie had been knocked off his bike by a lorry. From that moment on, Nell's life had descended into complete darkness.

Nell turned towards her mum, 'I can still smell him at times,' she said, her voice barely a whisper, 'Is that madness?'

'No,' Gilly answered softly, feeling her daughter's pain.

'Sometimes, I wake up and I actually think he's still there, lying next to me and then I remember – he's never coming home. My life feels so dark all the time.'

'You will get through this and be happy again,' Gilly rested her arm around her daughter's shoulders and pulled her in close, 'I promise.'

'When?' Nell's voice faltered.

'One day,' was the only comfort Gilly could offer. Her own heart was breaking seeing her daughter in so much pain. 'Are you ready?' she asked tentatively.

Nell nodded and bit down on her lip before looking up at the sky.

'I love you, Ollie Andrews, with all my heart. The love we shared was so special,' she paused, 'Thank you for choosing to marry me and loving me so unconditionally,' the words tumbled

out of her mouth.

Nell's eyes glistened with tears as she reached inside her bag and took out the urn. She stood up and clutched it to her chest, her hands visibly shaking and her legs trembling as she slowly walked towards the water's edge.

'This is our special place and I promise I'll visit all the time. You just try and keep me away,' smiled Nell through her tears.

She unscrewed the lid and scattered Ollie's ashes into the air, 'Goodbye, Ollie. I'll love you forever.'

'Goodbye, Ollie,' Gilly whispered, standing by her daughter's side.

They clung to each other as the tears freely flowed down their cheeks. Nell wished with her heart that Ollie was still here but that was one wish that would never come true.

Chapter 1

Two years later ...

Nell heard the creak of the door and looked up, startled, ‘Hey, I can’t believe you’re up so early. I noticed the light on.’

Bea was standing in the doorway of the Nollie, her breath misting. She was wrapped up tightly in her duffel coat, sporting a warm smile and clasping a white paper bag.

‘Come on in and shut the door, it’s freezing out there.’ Nell smiled up at her best friend.

Bea unbuttoned her coat and scooted over to the seat next to her.

‘I couldn’t sleep, I’ve had a bit of a restless night,’ admitted Nell.

Bea touched her hand affectionately, ‘Ollie’s birthday?’ Her voice was suddenly wobbly.

Nell met her gaze and they shared a sad smile.

‘Yes, Ollie’s birthday. The first of February.’

For a moment, they sat in silence, ‘Cuppa?’ Nell asked. ‘I think I can squeeze a couple more cups out of the tank and have a shower before the water needs filling up this morning.’

‘Yes please, and in there is a couple of warm croissants,’ Bea slid the paper bag over the table towards her.

‘Have you already been to the deli?’

She nodded, 'I couldn't sleep much either. I'm way ahead of schedule today.'

Bea owned the delicatessen in the hub of the marina called The Melting Pot, which was famous for its hot chocolate, savouries and scrumptious homemade cakes. Nell used to work for her part time, taking care of the accounts, but since Ollie had passed away Bea had taken her under her wing and she now worked for her full time behind the counter of the deli, serving customers, which was a welcomed distraction.

From the first day of high school Nell and Bea's friendship had been cemented over a pair of laddered tights. Bea had saved Nell with a spare pair she'd whipped out of her bag and from that moment they'd become best friends. They'd sat next to each other for the next five years, then from the age of eighteen frequented the local pubs together. Bea had attended catering college and spent most of time testing out new recipes on Nell. Her work ethic was faultless and she'd soon landed a job alongside a well-known chef in the city of Lichfield. This had been Bea's ticket to freedom, and she had escaped her suffocating parents, flown the nest and rented a flat above the delicatessen at the marina.

When the owners of The Melting Pot had decided to sell the business, Bea had immediately snapped it up for herself, whipping it into shape with counter array of cakes, speciality cheeses and flapjacks to die for.

Nell had beamed with such pride for her friend on her first day of opening – the deli was a dream come true for Bea.

Bea was married to Nathan and they had one five-year-old son called Jacob, who was the cutest thing Nell had ever set eyes on. But as his godmother, Nell knew she was biased.

When Ollie had been alive, the four of them had been firm friends and had enjoyed most weekends in each other's company, rambling around the marina and eating Sunday lunches at The Waterfront. Life had been perfect.

'What are you doing after work today?' asked Bea, 'Would you like to come over to the cottage for your tea? Jacob would love to see you.'

'I'd love to see him too, but I'm having tea with Mum, after we've visited the lake.'

Bea nodded, 'How is Gilly? I've not seen her for a couple of weeks.'

Gilly lived down the lane from Bea in Bluebell Cottage, the same property in which Nell had lived for the whole of her life. Gilly was the proud owner of a vintage bicycle with a basket and a bell and could often be seen cycling around the marina.

Nell rolled her eyes and smiled, 'She has her hands full at the moment!'

'Intriguing. What's she up to this time?'

Gilly, who was in her mid-fifties, but appeared much younger than her age, had been drowning in her own grief. Her husband, Nell's father, Benny, had unexpectedly passed away from pneumonia five years ago – an event that had rocked their world. Since then Gilly had thrown herself wholeheartedly

into every local crafty organisation in the village, from basket weaving, painting antique furniture and had even joined the pottery club.

‘Last week she was ferreting around in the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden when she found a tabby cat curled up in an old blanket on top of a bag of compost. She took it into the cottage and made it up a bed in front of the Aga. She thought it seemed a little unwell and a little plump and decided to make it an appointment at the vets for the following morning. There was no collar or tag. She didn’t even know its name, but by the time next morning arrived Mum found three extra bundles of fluff curled up next to the mother.’

‘Kittens?’

Nell nodded.

‘How wonderful!’

‘The little mews made my heart melt; utterly gorgeous to say the least.’

‘What’s Gilly going to do with them?’

‘She’s placed a notice in the vets and the local post office, but as yet no one has come forward to claim her. At the moment she’s named her Rosie, because she was lying on the bag of compost she uses to plant her roses, and knowing Mum I think she would be quite happy to keep them all!’

‘Maybe I could talk Nathan into homing one. I just need to make him think it’s his idea and we’d be on to a winner,’ she grinned. ‘Jacob would love a kitten.’

Nell smiled at Bea. She pictured her curled up in front of the fire after a long hard day at the deli with a kitten snoozing on her lap.

They both finished their tea, then Bea glanced at her watch, ‘The scones are due out any minute; I’d best nip back to the shop.’

‘What time is it? I feel like I’ve been up for hours.’

‘Just gone 6.45.’

‘I have been up for hours.’

‘I can easily sort out some cover if you don’t feel up to coming in.’

Nell shook her head, ‘Thanks, but I need to keep busy. I’ll be along as soon as I’m ready.’

Bea gave her a quick hug before flicking the latch and stooping down to climb through the door. Her footsteps echoed on the plank that connected the towpath to the boat as she ambled across towards the deli.

‘Right, Nell Andrews, it’s time to paint a smile on your face, life must go on,’ she murmured to herself, unconvinced, standing up and running her hand over Ollie’s photograph while she blinked away the tears. Birthdays and anniversaries always hit her hard.

Five minutes later, she stared at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. ‘Jeez, Andrews,’ she said out loud, smoothing down her wild hair and washing away the smudged eyeliner.

‘I really need to learn to take my mascara off before climbing into bed,’ she muttered, reaching for her wash bag. Then, just

like every morning, she took out her pack of contraceptive pills. She stared down at Tuesday's pill in the palm of her hand and suddenly had no idea why she was still taking these little pills after all this time. Everything had carried on in the same routine for the last two years. Her life had been on auto-pilot and she'd never wanted to completely let go of it, up until now. Even though Ollie wasn't coming back, she felt strong enough to look towards the future. Nell switched on the tap and made the decision to swill the pill down the sink.

After a quick shower, she twisted her blonde hair up into a bun, threw on her favourite jumper and dabbed on a smidgen of lipgloss. She was ready to face the world. Once outside, the cool morning breeze whispered around her ears as Nell stood on the deck of the 'Nollie' and breathed in the early morning fresh air.

She glanced across towards the blue and gold lettering of a neighbouring boat, 'The Old Geezer'. Fred Bramley had been their neighbour since they'd moved on to the 'Nollie'. Nell found him an interesting character with his grey bushy eyebrows and matching beard. He always wore a flat cap and a nattily kempt white cable knit that resembled a cricket jumper. He was retired and spent most of his days sitting on the deck of the boat fishing, even though in all these years she'd never actually seen him catch anything. For a brief moment the doors of the flagship opened and Fred appeared on the deck clutching a mug of tea.

'Good morning,' chirped Nell, catching his eye.

He tipped his cap in acknowledgement. He was a man of few

words but always gave a nod and a smile.

‘Have a good day,’ Nell called cheerfully before he disappeared back inside his boat. She gazed across at the other narrowboats with their brightly coloured names and flowerpots scattered on the roofs. Even in winter the marina was arrayed with colours that glistened in the early morning frost. This morning there was a chill in the air and, according to the weather forecast on the radio, it threatened snow.

‘Happy birthday, Ollie. I miss you so much,’ she whispered up into the grey sky.

As she stepped down onto the towpath she stumbled, then heard a loud yelp as she was knocked clean off her feet and landed with a bump.

‘Ouch.’

‘You okay?’

Startled, she looked up and then was yanked to her feet by two strapping arms.

‘Down boy, sit still.’ The man’s voice was firm. He clipped a lead on to an excited red setter, whose front paws excitedly danced.

Feeling like a fool, Nell swallowed, ‘Handsome dog.’ She had no idea where either of them had sprung from. A second ago, there’d been no one even in sight.

‘Killer dog this one. Not one for making friends,’ the man replied, with a massive smile etched on his face.

‘Really?’ she answered slightly bewildered. The dog looked

harmless enough to her, in fact kind of dopey.

‘Yep, really, trained to kill, this one.’

Nell took a step back but didn’t take her eyes off the dog.

‘Watch this,’ the man cleared his throat. ‘Roll over.’

Immediately the dog dropped to the ground and swiftly rolled on to his back and waved his gangly legs into the air.

‘Killer dog, indeed,’ she chuckled.

‘Daft as a brush,’ the man replied with a playful grin. ‘I’m sorry, we weren’t looking where we were going.’

‘No harm done,’ replied Nell, brushing down her coat.

‘Are you sure?’

She nodded, ‘No broken bones, this time.’

The man was of average height, and as he raked his hand through his dark floppy fringe and pushed it to one side, Nell noticed his glistening hazel eyes. ‘Let’s hope there isn’t a next time,’ he smiled.

They held each other’s gaze for a moment longer than necessary and for the first time in a long time Nell felt a strange sensation, her heart gave a little flutter.

‘Your accent, Irish?’

He gave her a lop-sided grin, ‘It sure is.’

‘Not one you often hear around here.’

Nell was just about to introduce herself properly when his phone rang and he delved into his jacket pocket. ‘Excuse me,’ he smiled, glancing at his screen, then answered the call. Nell watched as he strolled up the path towards the boathouse.

He flicked a glance over his shoulder and caught Nell's eye, then waved his hand above his head. Who was that handsome stranger? She hadn't seen him around these parts before.

She was just about to make her way to the deli when she remembered she needed to refill the water tank.

Damn.

If she didn't fill it up now she'd be kicking herself later, especially if the weather turned any colder today. Unravelling the hosepipe from outside the marina shower block she stretched it towards the water tank of the 'Nollie'. After hooking up the pipe to the tap and dangling the hose inside the tank, she switched it on, then stood and waited.

'Aunty Nellie!' She heard a squeal.

Spinning around she spotted her five-year-old godson in a pair of bright-yellow wellies clomping up the wharf, with Nathan quickly following behind him.

'Aunty Nellie, look at my new wellies,' Jacob screeched to a halt in front of her.

'Wow!' She squatted in front of him for a closer look. 'Two questions, Jacob Green. Have you grown and do you think I can borrow those wellies?' asked Nell beaming.

Jacob giggled, 'Don't be silly, Aunty Nellie, they'll be too small for you!' His eyes sparkled, then he giggled as Nell scooped him up in her arms and hugged him tight.

'Daddy said you may need extra hugs today,' Jacob said, and that familiar feeling of grief rushed to the surface as she placed

Jacob firmly back on the ground.

‘Jacob,’ Nathan interrupted.

‘Are you sad today, Aunty Nellie?’ Jacob asked, pulling at her scarf and ignoring his dad.

‘A little,’ she murmured, pinching her thumb and forefinger together, ‘But all the better for seeing you,’ throwing her arms open for another hug and burying her face in his mousy locks. As he pulled away, tears threatened in Nell’s eyes. Nathan leant forward, squeezed her arm and pressed a swift kiss to her cheek.

‘We all miss him,’ he whispered softly in Nell’s ear.

She nodded and smiled. ‘So, Jacob, where are you off to this bright and early?’

‘Before-school club. It’s the only time Daddy can take me today.’

‘Day off work. I’m off to a trade show,’ Nathan answered. ‘I’m still searching for the parts to the ...’ he hesitated.

‘Motorbike,’ Nell’s voice faltered. She had a sudden flashback of Ollie and Nathan stooped over the lump of metal, building the old machine.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,’ Nathan said, gently touching her arm.

Over four years ago, Ollie and Nathan had decided to build a motorbike from scratch. The pair of them had spent hours in the shed at the bottom of Nathan’s garden working on the machine together. It was at times like this Nell missed washing his greasy overalls and hearing all about the mechanical parts that

they needed next, even though she'd no idea what any of them did or what they were for.

'You haven't upset me. I'm doing just fine. Good memories are what I need to cling on to, especially on days like today,' she said suddenly, swinging her head around and remembering that the hosepipe was still attached to the water tank.

'I think the tank's full. Jacob, are you strong enough to switch off the water?' she asked raising her eyebrows in the direction of the tap.

'I am, Aunty Nellie,' he saluted heartily.

Bea spotted them from the deli window and joined them outside. Everyone smiled as Jacob clumped towards the tap. He grasped it with both hands and spun it around until the water stopped.

'All done!' He shouted triumphantly.

Nell gave him the thumbs-up and pulled the hose from the tank.

'Will you ever live in a proper house, Aunty Nellie?' he asked her and she cupped her hands around Jacob's bright-red chubby cheeks.

'I love my floating home,' she answered, planting an enthusiastic kiss on top of his head.

Tears threatened again, thinking of Ollie and how proud he would be of Jacob, who was such a bundle of fun and growing into a remarkable young boy.

'Right, young man, say goodbye to Mummy and Aunty Nellie.

Let's get you off to school.'

Bea kissed his cheek then swung him round before planting his feet firmly back on the floor.

'See you later, alligator,' Nell smiled, holding up her hand for a high-five.

They both stood outside the deli and watched Nathan and Jacob walk hand and hand up the wharf until they disappeared.

Nell felt a pang of sadness, 'I only have one regret in life so far,' she said sadly.

'Which is?' Bea answered softly.

'That we never got round to having children,' she replied, wiping away a tear. 'I always hoped to be a mother.'

Bea placed her hand in the small of Nell's back as they walked inside the deli. 'You'll make the perfect mother one day.'

'Maybe one day.'

'Definitely one day,' Nell reassured her.

Chapter 2

The morning had passed quickly and by lunchtime the deli was pleasingly heaving with customers. There were the regulars who lived on the canal boats who placed frequent orders and those folks who were just passing by. Today everyone seemed in good spirits despite the miserable grey February weather outside.

Nell heard a clonk on the deli window and looked up to see her mum sliding from the saddle of her bike. She balanced the handlebars against the window and grabbed her purse from the basket. Catching Nell's eye, she waved.

'You've got to love the smell of freshly baked bread,' she beamed, swinging open the door to the deli and sniffing the air. 'Pop one of those bloomers in a bag for me, love.'

'Good afternoon, Mum,' said Nell, smiling, reaching for a lightly baked loaf. 'Not too dark,' she added quickly.

'Are you trying to suggest my bloomers are burnt,' Bea chuckled, scooting towards Gilly and kissing her on both cheeks.

'Absolutely not, wouldn't dream of it. Oh and one of those iced buns too.'

Nell reached into the glass cabinet, which was bursting with mouth-watering cakes and pasties while Gilly rummaged around in her purse.

'They are on the house today, Gilly!'

'Very kind of you, Bea, thank you.'

'You're welcome. I hear you've gone and gotten yourself some very cute additions to your household.'

'Indeed, you must bring Jacob over, he'll love them!'

'I will!' Bea touched Gilly's arm before disappearing back into the kitchen.

'You look tired,' Gilly said, lowering her voice as she spoke to Nell.

'Honestly, I'm okay.'

'My guess is you barely slept,' she narrowed her eyes and gave Nell her 'she knows best' look.

Nell gave her a weak smile, 'A little bit of a restless night, that's all, Mum.'

'Understandable. Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries are always the hardest,' Gilly raised her eyebrows knowingly.

Ollie's first birthday without him flashed through Nell's mind. She'd spent the day a blubbering wreck up at Bluebell Cottage, with only her mum for company. They'd been on a long walk, visited the lake and after dinner they'd curled up on the settee with a bottle of wine, a box of chocolates and watched a marathon of rom-com films. That day had felt hollow, but despite all the heartbreak, Nell knew she'd come a long way in the last two years; those feelings weren't as painfully raw as they had once been and that was all down to the love and support of her mum and Bea.

Nell slid the bag over the counter towards her mum.

'I'll see you later,' Gilly said warmly, before grabbing her

bread and walking out of the deli.

Nell took a breather for the first time today as the deli began to quieten down. She wandered into the kitchen and quickly loaded up the dishwasher before washing her hands and hanging the tea towel over the rail of the stainless-steel oven. Bea was glazing a tray of sausage rolls.

‘I could murder a cuppa,’ said Nell, ‘Shall I put the kettle on?’

‘No need, I’ve read your mind. I was just about to bring you through a skinny cappuccino,’ she nodded towards the two steaming mugs.

‘Skinny, are you trying to tell me something?’ Nell brought her hand up to her chest in mock outrage, pretending to look hurt. ‘Do I need to go on a diet?’ she joked.

‘Ha no! It was my new year’s resolution to try and cut down, but you know what, sod that,’ she said taking hold of the mugs, ‘Wait there! Two luxury hot chocolates with the works coming right up!’

‘Now you’re talking!’

Five minutes later Bea and Nell were leaning against the counter, holding the most scrumptious-looking drinks, laced with marshmallows, cream and chocolate flakes.

‘Wow, I’m going to need an afternoon kip after this!’

Bea chuckled, ‘It’s calorific but, my gosh, it tastes good,’ she said, scooping up the cream with a spoon.

‘Look at this place,’ Bea flicked her eyes around the small café. ‘It looks like a bomb’s hit it after that mad rush.’

There were half a dozen empty tables that were littered with crumbs. 'I'll brush up after this and wipe the tables down,' offered Nell.

'You are a superstar. What would I do without you?'

The pair of them both cupped their mugs and sipped their hot chocolates while staring out over the marina through the window of the deli.

Suddenly, Bea placed her mug down on the counter with a clatter and hit Nell's arm. She nodded towards the window.

'Who's that? I've not seen him around these parts before.'

Nell's eyes darted over to where Bea was looking and smiled at her friend's sudden enthusiasm. The man standing in front of the deli window was the same man whose dog had knocked her clean off her feet this morning.

'Put your tongue back in, Bea, you're physically panting,' she ordered, but not admitting to her that her own stomach had done a slight flip at the sight of him again.

'The hot chocolate's too hot. Well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it,' Bea giggled.

'You're married,' grinned Nell.

For a second they both watched the handsome stranger, taking in his navy-blue jumper that clung to his toned abs, his overalls tied around his waist and wild, dark hair, which he constantly raked away from his eyes.

He flicked his head up and down the jetty and seemed quite anxious before spinning round and locking eyes with Nell for a

split second.

Damn, he'd caught her staring.

'It doesn't stop me from looking, though. He's ...' Bea grabbed Nell's arm and gave it a squeeze.

'Coming in,' she smiled.

All eyes were on the man as they watched him push open the deli door, letting in a blast of cool air. 'Hello again, I thought it was you,' he said, in his soft Irish accent.

'Hello again?' Instantly Bea swung towards Nell, raising her eyebrows. She was itching to know who the stranger was.

'This is ...'

The man smiled and acknowledged Nell's hesitation, 'Guy,' he said, thrusting his hand towards her. 'Guy Cornish. I don't think we introduced ourselves properly this morning.'

'This morning?' Bea queried.

'Nell, Nell Andrews. Pleased to meet you,' she beamed, shaking his proffered hand 'And this is ...'

'Bea,' Bea chirped, with a wicked glint in her eye, 'So come on, what am I am missing? How do you two know each other?'

'This morning Guy swept me off my feet.'

'He did, did he? And how come I know nothing about this?' Bea enquired playfully.

'Well not Guy, technically, but his dog.'

'And he's the very reason I'm pacing up and down the marina like a mad man. The lolloping hound has run off. We've only been here a couple of days and I've no clue where to start looking

for him.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘About five minutes,’ he glanced at his watch anxiously.

‘Don’t worry. He can’t have gone far. I bet he’s headed up the path near the woodlands. He’ll have sniffed out a rabbit or something.’

‘I don’t think he’s that intelligent,’ he joked, but there was no mistaking the worried expression firmly planted on his face.

Nell stood motionless for a moment wondering what to do, then taking a deep, calming breath she said, ‘I’ll help you look. That’s okay isn’t it, Bea? We’re over the dinner-time rush now.’

‘Yes, of course. You go. This time of day it’s always quiet.’

He gave Nell a grateful smile, ‘You will?’

Nell nodded, ‘I know the back paths,’ she answered, thrusting her arms into the sleeves of her coat and quickly zipping it up. ‘Come on, I’m sure it won’t take long to find him.’

Once outside the deli they headed towards the far end of the marina and strolled past all the shops, before hitting the trail that led to the woodlands.

‘What’s his name?’

‘Sam,’ Guy replied, and began to shout the dog’s name and rattle his lead.

Speedily, they carried on walking along the path, ‘So I take it you aren’t from around these parts, then?’

‘With an accent like this?’ he laughed. ‘No, it’s my brother who owns the boatyard here. I’m helping him out for a while.’

‘Ed’s your brother?’ Nell said astounded.

‘He is indeed.’

‘Ahh, you’re helping him out because of his operation?’

‘Yes, he’s laid up for six weeks after a hernia operation, so I offered to come and give him a hand at the boatyard he’s always raving on about.’

Ed had owned the boatyard at the marina for as long as Ollie and Nell had moored the ‘Nollie’ there. He seemed a little older than Guy and, as far as Nell was aware he had no wife or children. He was always a happy-go-lucky fellow, nothing was ever too much trouble. During the past year, Nell had often noticed his light on in the boat shed until the early hours of the morning when she couldn’t sleep. He was always beavering away, restoring and painting boats and was well thought of at the marina.

‘What do you think about the place so far?’ Nell asked, while Guy carried on beckoning for Sam in between chatting to her.

‘I can see the attraction,’ he snagged her eye and she didn’t know why but she felt herself instantly blush. He paused for a second, ‘Ed was always what my mum would call a tinkerer. Always up to his armpits in grease and oil.’

‘Just like my Ollie.’

‘Ollie?’

‘My husband,’ she answered, traipsing alongside Guy. ‘Was my husband,’ she exhaled.

‘Was?’ Guy commented, not making eye contact but looking up ahead for Sam. ‘Divorced?’

‘Widowed. He passed away. In fact it’s his birthday today.’

Immediately Guy stopped in his tracks and swung towards her.

‘I don’t know what to say. Are you okay?’ he asked kindly.

Nell offered him a warm smile, ‘What can you say? Life was difficult for a while but it’s becoming more bearable. I’m getting there, as they say.’

‘What happened? Do you mind me asking?’

Nell shook her head, ‘Ollie was involved in a motorbike accident, and eventually his life-support machine was switched off and you know what?’ she touched his elbow, ‘This is the first time I’ve spoken about it without bursting into tears.’

‘It sounds like it’s been a very difficult time for you.’

They carried on walking in silence before stopping a little further up and leaning against an old rickety fence. The pair of them stared at the stunning scenery. The fields stretched for miles and miles.

In the last twenty minutes or so the temperature had dropped dramatically and Nell shivered.

‘It looks like it’s threatening snow,’ said Nell, ‘Let’s hope we find Sam soon.’

Guy nodded, ‘You’re cold,’ he said, ruffling a hand through his hair before slipping off his scarf and handing it to her.

‘Thanks,’ she replied, wrapping it tightly around her neck. ‘It doesn’t look like he’s come this way. Let’s head back towards the marina.’

They both turned around and began to quickly walk back up

the path, 'I can't help but ask,' she said, curiosity getting the better of her, 'about your accent.'

'Irish.'

She nodded, 'Ed doesn't have an Irish accent.'

'That's very true. We have different fathers. He's ten years older than me. My mum and his dad split up years ago and then she met my father, Niall.'

'Whose name sounds very Irish!'

'Yep, hence the accent. Ed moved across here some time ago after meeting a girl at work. She was on a short-term contract at a firm he used to be employed at over in Ireland, but she was from around these parts and when her contract was up, she moved back home and he followed her.'

'I didn't even know Ed had a girlfriend.'

'He doesn't now. They split up a couple of months later, but he liked the place that much he never came home and has been here ever since.'

'What about you?'

'Me?'

'Yes, have you got any family of your own?'

His eyes seemed to harden for a moment, 'Only my dog, who seems to have done a complete runner on me.'

'Don't worry, he can't have gone far, we'll find him.'

They hurried back towards the marina and the whole place looked deserted on this cold grey day except for a van parked up at the far end of the towpath. Then, out of the blue, all they could

hear was a sudden continuous banging that seemed to echo all around them.

‘What’s that noise?’ Nell asked, glancing up the wharf.

‘That man over there. He’s hammering a sign on to the front of that building.’

She squinted ahead to see the man throw his tools into the back of the van, start the engine and drive off.

‘What’s that place?’ Guy asked as they carried on walking towards it.

Nell paused outside the building and a small wave of sadness washed over her. She was rooted to the spot and stared up at the sign. ‘For Sale,’ she murmured despondently.

‘It looks like it’s been empty for a while. Shame, it looks like it was a beautiful building.’

Nell had forgotten how much she adored this place. Some of her favourite memories were made right there, inside that building.

‘It was. It’s the Old Picture House.’

‘Picture house?’

She nodded, ‘A cinema with a difference. In it’s heyday, on a Friday night, it used to be packed to the rafters. It really was the place to go. Ollie and me had our very first date there, must be over twelve years ago now, and when I was a kid I’d spend my Sunday mornings here with my dad watching films. This place was the heart of the community for years.’

‘I bet you were a cute kid,’ he smiled at her.

Nell laughed, his words taking her a little by surprise. ‘Adorable my dad said, but he was biased.’

They both stared up at the building. The roof looked worn and the grimy bricks were streaked by the rainwater that had dripped from the broken gutters. Half of the windows had panes of glass missing and the other half were boarded up. Worn heavy velvet curtains still hung in the upstairs windows, but they looked as if they were clinging on for dear life. What was once a magical building was now badly in need of some tender loving care.

Out of every inch of Nell’s body poured the memories of her early dates with Ollie. They were good memories and magical moments she’d never forget. She could still remember the thousands of anxious fireflies dancing around in her stomach on their very first date, the smell of his aftershave and the feeling that surged through her body when he had held her hand for the very first time. That night he’d offered to pick her up from Bluebell Cottage and just before seven o’clock there’d been a rap on the door. Nell had waited a moment at the top of the stairs, not wanting to appear too keen, until her dad shouted ‘I’ll get the door.’

How embarrassing.

She’d sprinted down the stairs quicker than an Olympian and threw open the door to find Ollie standing on the doorstep, timidly smiling back at her. It was early autumn and the sun was still shining in the early evening sky. He’d stood shyly, with his hands in the back pocket of his jeans, and she couldn’t help but

notice his tanned muscly arms on show.

‘Hi,’ he’d said, then nervously raked a hand through his unruly hair. They’d walked to the marina, and she could remember looking back over her shoulder as they wandered up the garden path, only to notice her mum and dad peeping from behind the curtain. At that time of year the walk to the marina was a pleasant one, along the towpath. Honeysuckle still festooned the hedgerows and the narrowboats slowly glided past them up the canal. They’d ambled side by side, their elbows banging against each other’s. Her heart was thumping and she forced herself to breathe calmly. Feeling his presence so close to her had made every ounce of her body tingle. His eyes sparkled and met hers, then, finally, he’d stretched out his hand and their fingers had entwined. They’d strolled hand in hand for the rest of the way.

At the end of the evening he’d walked her home. They’d lingered on the doorstep for what seemed like hours before he’d taken her hands in his. She’d shivered in anticipation as he tilted her chin up and lowered his head towards her and kissed her gently. Her heart had been beating so fast that she honestly thought it was going to explode and that was the moment she knew, she wanted to be Ollie Andrews’ girlfriend.

A sigh escaped her and she met Guy’s eyes.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘Sometimes I wish I could turn back time and have my life again,’ but Nell knew standing there looking up at the building she couldn’t turn back the clock. She’d lovely memories of the

Old Picture House and ones she would cherish forever.

‘What happened to this place? Why did it close down?’

‘I’m assuming financial difficulty. I suppose these days people watch films online and less and less people began to use the place. It never really moved into the digital age, it continued to run exactly how it had done since the day it opened, with its projectors and ice-cream sellers in the foyer.’

‘There was a little place like that in Ireland. It kept going and going and soon it was all the rage again. The Vintage Cinema, you even had waitress service to your seat.’

‘That sounds just like this place. When you walked inside the foyer it felt like you were a Hollywood film actor. There was a beautiful chandelier and floor-to-ceiling posters of the latest films as well as the old classics. You should have seen it. Then there was ... Gladys, I think that was her name. She was the woman who sat behind the wooden box taking your money. Oh and I can’t forget the plush velvet red bucket seats, once you sank into them there was no getting out, well not with much dignity, anyway. It was a very sad day when the doors closed for the final time.’

‘Such a shame the magic can’t live on.’ Guy added, ‘And now it’s up for sale.’

Nell felt saddened by the ‘for sale’ sign, but it was only a matter of time before the property was sold on. ‘I’m surprised it’s not been sold sooner.’

‘It’ll be more than likely snapped up by a builder, then

flattened for houses.’

She felt a sudden pang in her heart at the mere mention of Guy’s words.

They stared for a moment longer until they were interrupted by a distant yelp, then a bark.

‘Sam,’ Guy shouted, ‘Sam, where are you, boy?’

They both stood rooted to the spot, waiting for him to bark again.

‘Sam,’ he boomed again.

The next bark came from somewhere behind them. They both spun round. ‘Over there, I think,’ said Nell, hurrying towards the water’s edge.

She strained to look between the moored canal boats. ‘There, over there,’ she pointed.

In the distance, standing to attention on the bow of a boat, was Sam. As soon as he spotted them, his tail swished madly and he began to woof excitedly.

‘How the hell has he managed to get himself all the way out there? I didn’t even know he could swim.’

‘It’s instinct. All dogs can usually swim.’

‘Come on and mind your head,’ Nell said, squeezing between the rails at the end of the jetty, then jumping down on to a small rowing boat that was tied up.

‘Grab an oar.’

Guy dithered, ‘Who does this boat belong to?’

‘Fred Bramley. He’s my neighbour, lived on the marina for

years. That's his boat there. The one next to mine, 'The Old Geezer.'

'Will he mind us pinching his boat?'

'Needs must! We're only borrowing it. I'm sure it'll be fine.'

Rubbing her hands vigorously in an attempt to warm them up Nell untied the rope and grabbed an oar.

'Jump in, what are you waiting for?'

Guy hesitated for a second, 'I have to admit, I'm not too keen on water.'

She glanced back up in his direction and tried to read his expression. With the anxious look on his face she realised that he wasn't joking and looked absolutely terrified.

Nell wondered how to put it tactfully. 'Guy, you need to get in. I can't rescue your dog by myself, I need help lowering him into the boat.'

'Is the only way to get there by boat?'

'There's the long walk round to the far jetty but it'll take about ten minutes.'

'I'm being silly, aren't I?' he said, but still didn't move.

'See that box on the bow of the 'Nollie', she nodded towards her narrowboat, 'There's a life jacket in there. Go and grab it quickly.'

There was a look of slight relief on Guy's face as he turned and hurried towards the box. Watching Guy slide the life jacket over his head, her heart hammered against her chest. She felt a little saddened. That was Ollie's life jacket and she hadn't set eyes on

it for a while, but it was the perfect fit for Guy.

He made his way back to the boat. The colour actually drained from his face as he grabbed the sides of the rickety old thing and began to lower himself in.

‘Whoa,’ he exclaimed as the boat began to rock.

‘Try and steady yourself and sit still, it can be a little daunting when you first climb in.’

Once Guy was safely perched on the edge of the seat she noticed his knuckles turning white as he clung on for dear life.

‘You really don’t like water, do you?’

He shook his head and stared out towards Sam.

Nell immersed the spoon of the blades into the water and began to row gently.

‘No holidaying on a cruise ship for you, then,’ she joked, trying to lighten the mood and put Guy at ease.

He shuddered, ‘I can’t think of anything worse. I think it’s safe to say I’m petrified of water.’

‘I hadn’t noticed,’ she said, cocking an eyebrow and offering him a warm smile.

‘I know it’s pathetic, a man of my age ...’

‘About thirty?’

‘Twenty-nine actually.’

‘Good guess.’

‘But ...’

He squeezed his eyes shut as they glided smoothly towards the barge.

‘But?’

‘It happened a long time ago, I was only seven years old.’

‘A very long time ago then,’ she said, playfully.

He peered through one eye, ‘Cheeky. Near to where I live in Ireland there was a lake. Every school holiday, I used to hang out there with my mate Dan and build dens in the forest near by, but this one day we came across a small rowing boat that had been abandoned near the water’s edge. It was Dan’s idea to see if we could row it to the other side of the lake. Unfortunately, halfway across, the boat began to leak and it capsized and I couldn’t swim. In no time at all we were both clinging to a sinking boat and the water was getting higher and higher around us. I clamped my mouth shut while Dan screamed for dear life. Dan could swim but didn’t want to leave me. Luckily for us, a dog-walker heard him, jumped into the water and rescued us both. That was the last time I ever went near open water, until now.’

‘Sounds very traumatic,’ exclaimed Nell.

‘If I close my eyes I can still remember the stench of the water,’

Guy shuddered.

She manoeuvred the rowing boat as calmly as possible through the icy cold water. As they approached Sam, he rocked excitedly from one paw to another. His tail was wagging and he began to woof.

‘Look at him, he’s soaking wet,’ Guy exclaimed. ‘Without a doubt he’s been in the water.’

‘Okay, here’s what I’m going to do. I need to steer closer to

the boat and tie it onto that wrought-iron ring over there. I need to make sure you don't float away when I climb out.'

Guy looked awful, his face was ghastly white, he clenched his cheeks and the fear in his eyes said it all.

'Don't worry, I'm not going to let anything happen to you.'

He nodded, soothed by Nell's words, then looked wistfully towards Sam and gave an exasperated sigh.

'Don't move!' Nell joked, smiling.

'I've no intention of going anywhere,' Guy said, folding his arms.

Nell took the oars out of the rowlocks, dug the blades in the water and stopped the boat. She reached and grabbed the rope then slowly tilted herself towards the wrought-iron ring and tied the little rowing boat securely to the side of the canal boat.

'It doesn't look like anyone's home,' she murmured, hurling herself on to the deck.

'Who owns this boat?' Guy questioned.

'Much Ado About Nothing,' she read the bright lettering on the side of the boat, 'I've no idea. It's only been moored here a couple of days, it's probably someone just passing through.'

As soon as Nell was standing on the boat, Sam sprang at her, leaving her covered in wet, stinky paw prints. She grabbed his collar and patted the top of his head. 'Good boy.'

'He's definitely been in the water,' she claimed, wrinkling her nose at the stench. 'Throw me his lead.'

Guy reached inside his coat pocket then gently threw the lead

towards Nell, who caught it and clipped it on to Sam's collar. Nell peered through the glass window, 'No sign of anyone,' she said, carefully lowering herself back into the boat, then encouraging Sam to jump, however he was sitting firmly on the deck of the canal boat and refusing to move. Nell glanced earnestly at Guy.

'Any ideas how I can get him to move?'

Once more Guy rummaged inside his pocket and produced a treat and passed it to Nell. 'Try this.'

She swallowed hard then exhaled, 'Okay boy, come on, let's get you on board so we can all get home.' She held the treat towards Sam, who immediately leapt into action and propelled himself on to the boat, Nell's smile drooped slightly as the boat began to rock.

Guy squirmed, closed his eyes and clasped tightly onto the wooden slacks he was sitting on.

Nell coaxed Sam to lie between her legs and patted Guy's knee, 'Here take this.' He opened his eyes and she passed him the lead. 'Keep him still. We will be back on dry land in no time at all.'

Nell placed the oars back into the rowlocks, grasped one in each hand then placed the blades in the water and began to row gently back towards the quayside. They both sat in silence until finally the little rowing boat bumped lightly against the jetty.

'We are here, safe and sound.'

Guy's eyes met with Nell's.

'Phew,' he said as she tied up the boat, then held out her hand

towards Guy.

‘Let’s get you off this boat and on to dry land.’

‘Yes captain,’ he answered, relieved.

As he placed his hand in hers, Nell felt him tense up, then he slid one foot in front of the other and slowly manoeuvred his way off the boat. Once his feet were firmly on the ground he heaved a huge sigh of relief. Sam trotted happily off the boat behind him.

‘Are you okay?’ asked Nell gently.

‘I feel an idiot, but I am now I’m back on dry land,’ he laughed nervously, ‘Even though I still feel like I’m swaying!’ He gripped on to the railings, steadied himself and began to take deep breaths before exhaling sharply.

‘You’re not going to have a panic attack on me, are you?’

He shook his head warily. ‘I think I’m ready to move.’

‘Good,’ Nell answered, seeing a slight smile spread across Guy’s face. She couldn’t help but beam at Sam, who sat patiently at the side of Guy, his tail thumping on the ground.

‘You go first.’

Guy bent down and began to squeeze back through the railings, pulling Sam behind him.

‘Do you fancy a ...?’

Before Nell could finish her sentence, Guy gave her a mischievous grin over his shoulder then cocked an eyebrow.

‘I was going to say coffee,’ she declared, feeling her face turn a dark shade of crimson.

‘Of course you were,’ he beamed, standing up and poking his

hand back over the top of the railings.

'I was!' protested Nell, knowing a huge smile had crept across her face.

'You protest too much,' he teased.

'I see you're already on top form,' Nell joked, placing her hand on top of the railing and deciding to hurl herself over the top. As she swung her leg over, Guy firmly gripped her arm to help steady her.

'Thank you,' she said, flashing a grateful smile. Her heart swelled at how gorgeous he was.

'I was only teasing you, you know.' He nudged her jokingly in the ribs.

'I know! Anyway, how are you feeling now?'

'A little light-headed and a right wimp, if I'm honest,' he muttered embarrassedly.

'Don't be daft. For the first time in years you've been back on the water, you're bound to feel panicky. How about that coffee to steady your nerves?'

Guy flicked his eyes between Sam and the 'Nollie'. His smile faded slightly and Nell sensed his hesitation.

'I know it's another boat, but it's a different type of boat, very steady. You won't even feel like you're on water. You can sit in your life jacket if that helps.'

'Oh very funny!' he cocked his head with the most gorgeous smile.

Nell had instantly warmed towards Guy; he put her at ease

and was easy to talk to. It was nice to have a little male company once more.

‘Do you need to be somewhere else?’ He glanced towards the deli.

‘Wait there a second.’

She quickly strolled towards the deli and spotted Bea cleaning the empty bread shelves behind the counter. She spun round when she heard the bell above the shop door tinkle.

‘Hello, you. Have you found him?’ she asked, with a worried look on her face.

Nell smiled and nodded. ‘All safe and sound. Somehow he’d managed to get himself stuck on a barge at the back of the marina. We borrowed Fred’s boat to rescue him.’

‘Thank God, even though it sounds like you’ve both been on quite an adventure.’

‘Do you need me? I was going to grab a quick coffee with Guy?’

Bea stole a look at the clock, ‘Let’s call it a day. You get off. It’s quiet now and if you need me later, just text.’

Nell smiled a grateful smile at her friend, ‘Will do, but I’m absolutely fine. See you in the morning.’

‘Here, take these,’ Bea scooped up a couple of cream doughnuts into a box, then slid them over the counter.

‘Me working here is no good for my diet, you know!’ she laughed, knowing full well that in the last six months the weight had begun to pile on.

‘You working here is no good for my profits either,’ she giggled, shooing Nell out of the shop, ‘Now go and enjoy your coffee.’

Nell closed the door behind her to find Guy waiting patiently outside and Sam lying at his feet.

‘I have to say, he does stink a little.’ Nell looked towards Sam, ‘Why don’t you hose him down while I nip on board and find some towels? He can dry off in front of the fire.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Guy said, sounding more cheerful than he did ten minutes ago.

‘The hose is just over there outside the shower block.’

‘Great, see you in five,’ he added cheerily, holding her gaze.

‘See you in five,’ Nell bit down on her lip to suppress her smile as she jumped on to the ‘Nollie’. What was it about that handsome Irish charmer that made her stomach flip so easily?

Chapter 3

Once inside the cabin Nell placed some old towels on the rug in front of the fire. For a second, she watched Guy through the small porthole before placing the kettle on the gas and the cakes on the table.

A few minutes later, the latch lifted and his bright smile beamed around the door.

‘Is it okay to bring Sam inside?’

‘It is, come on in, he can sit by the fire.’

Guy stooped down and walked on to the boat with Sam following behind. He swung his head round and took in his surroundings. ‘Wow! Look at this place. It’s like a proper house inside,’ he said in amazement.

‘It is a proper house, just on the water!’ Nell exclaimed, laughing.

‘I have to admit, that’s the part I’m not keen on.’

‘Come on through, you’ll be surprised. There’s a kitchen and everything, all mod cons in here, you know.’

‘I’ve popped your life jacket back in the box.’

‘Great, thanks, and you know where it is if you ever need it again and thanks for the loan of your scarf,’ she said, handing it back to Guy.

‘I’ve no intention of ever needing a life jacket again in my lifetime, but thanks anyway,’ he grinned. ‘Do you know, this is

the first time I've ever been inside a barge?'

'I'm surprised you've taken over Ed's job if you're scared of water and never been inside a narrowboat,' Nell mused, passing him a towel to dry off Sam, who was standing at Guy's side and wafting his long snout in the air.

'I surprised myself by accepting his offer but he promised me faithfully that all the boats that needed restoring and painting would be firmly on dry land inside the yard, but I am beginning to doubt he's told me the whole truth.' He rolled his eyes in jest.

Suddenly, Sam began to shake violently, spraying water everywhere.

'Whoa! Sam stop,' Guy commanded in a stern tone, quickly throwing a towel over his back and rubbing him down frantically. 'I'm so sorry!'

Sam looked up with his dopey eyes, 'How could anyone resist those puppy-dog eyes,' Nell giggled, wiping away droplets from her face.

'He has his moments. There, that's better, he's all done.' Nell took the towel from Guy while they both watched Sam in amusement as he circled round and round, chasing his tail until he finally lay down in front of the burning embers of the fire.

'Make yourself at home, why don't you?' Guy laughed.

'He's a gorgeous looking dog.'

'But a bit scatty!'

Sam was now fully stretched out on the rug. 'And definitely has bagged the best place on the boat.'

‘There’s something quite enchanting about a real fire,’ Guy said watching the flames crackle and burn.

‘There is. I do love this time of year. Take a seat,’ Nell gestured towards the bench, ‘Oh and welcome to the Nollie!’ she flung her arms open wide.

‘Nollie?’ She met Guy’s gaze as he raised an eyebrow.

‘Nell and Ollie: Nollie.’

‘Aw I see!’ he exclaimed, loosening his coat and sliding between the table and the seat, he settled next to the window.

‘It was Ollie’s idea,’ said Nell proudly of their little floating home.

‘And a very good one.’

‘Coffee?’ she asked, reaching for the mugs just as the kettle began to whistle.

‘Perfect,’ he answered rubbing his fingers together, ‘I think I’m finally beginning to thaw out. It’s bitter out there today.’

A flutter of white caught Nell’s eye and she peered towards the tiny porthole, ‘Look, it’s beginning to snow. I could watch the flakes fall for hours.’

Guy turned towards the window and Nell slid into the space next to him. They both watched the tiny snowflakes flurrying to the ground from the grey sky.

For a moment there was comfortable silence until Nell jumped, ‘I’ve forgotten your drink, what a rubbish host I am,’ she said, standing up, ‘and these are courtesy of Bea,’ she slid the cream cakes towards him.’

‘They look divine.’

‘I’m lucky to have first dibs on all the leftovers each day but it’s no good for the figure.’ She patted her tummy in jest.

‘You look fine to me.’

Nell quickly turned away to make the coffee, a perfect excuse to hide the corners of her mouth that had lifted. She could feel his solid warm gaze watching her before she settled back down next to him.

‘This is the first time it’s snowed in over a year,’ Guy said, his gaze turned back to the window.

‘It is,’ Nell answered softly, with a sudden memory of Ollie flooding her mind. It was their first Christmas on the ‘Nollie’ and they had spent Christmas Eve entwined in each other’s arms in front of the fire sipping mulled wine while watching *Scrooge* when Nell had uttered the words: ‘I wish it would snow, that would complete Christmas.’ She remembered Ollie’s mischievous wink, ‘You never know,’ he replied. The next morning, Ollie had woken her up from her slumber by kissing her tenderly on the lips, ‘Merry Christmas, Nell,’ he’d whispered, as he took her by her hand. A trail of paper snowflakes led her to the door of the ‘Nollie’. ‘Go on, open the door,’ he pressed, kissing the tip of her nose.

‘What are you up to, Ollie Andrews?’ His eyes twinkled, ‘Close your eyes, Nell.’ Ollie flicked the latch, grasped her hand, then led her carefully up the steps on to the deck of the boat. ‘You can open your eyes now.’

The second Nell had opened her eyes she gasped: the whole ‘Nollie’ had been covered in pretend snow, just like a magical winter wonderland. Their first Christmas had been perfect: dinner at the ‘Nollie’ and the evening spent at Bluebell Cottage with her parents.

Nell turned towards Guy and smiled. There was something about Guy she was easily drawn to and she felt at ease talking to him. ‘There’s something hypnotic about watching the snow fall.’

‘I agree,’ he said, ‘Even better when you’re with beautiful company.’ His eyes sparkled and Nell’s pulse began to race.

‘I’ll take that compliment,’ she smiled shyly at him, knowing it had been a long while since anyone had paid her a compliment and she liked it.

‘Thanks for rescuing Sam today,’ he flashed Nell a grateful smile before cupping his hands around the mug of steaming coffee and taking a sip.

‘It was my pleasure.’

Guy and Nell turned towards Sam, who was whimpering in his sleep while his front paw twitched.

‘He’s exhausted and dreaming. I think his little adventure has tired him out.’

‘And me!’ Nell laughed, stretching her arms, ‘Rowing that boat has certainly given my arm muscles a workout.’

‘I was useless, pathetic in fact. I’m sorry.’

‘You were! You can make it up to me, but no apology needed,’ she teased.

Guy laughed. 'We will never know how he got out there, but everything happens for a reason.'

'A reason?'

'Yes, a reason.' Guy stretched out his legs under the table and Nell felt them brushing against hers.

'I wouldn't be sat here now with you if it wasn't for Sam. I'm a strong believer in fate.'

Nell smiled up at him.

'How are you bearing up?' He asked cautiously.

'My arms are fine.'

'I didn't mean your arms,' he laughed, bumping his shoulder playfully against hers, 'I meant with your husband's birthday.'

She swallowed hard and held his gaze, 'I've learnt to take one day at a time but those days are certainly getting easier.'

'There's a brightness in your eyes, time to start living again,' he observed.

She nodded, 'Time to start living again.'

Guy leant across the table and covered Nell's hand; he squeezed it tight, she felt her body tremble a little.

'That fire is making me feel sleepy,' she murmured, 'and the snow is coming down thick and fast.'

'Have you any plans for tonight?' he asked.

'Mum's expecting me for tea, but with the weather like this she'd understand if I didn't venture out.'

'Do you fancy some company?'

Nell's face flushed as she glanced upwards at him and all of a

sudden felt a little shy, ‘Are you sure?’

‘There’s nowhere else I’d rather be’ and he was surprised just how much he meant it after everything he’d been through recently.

‘Well, in that case. That’ll be lovely.’

‘Have you ever lost anyone close?’ Nell asked, suddenly curious about the man sitting next to her.

‘Not in the sense you have but ...’ he paused.

Nell could tell by the sudden glistening of his eyes that he’d lost someone who had meant the world to him.

‘My granddad, Hector.’ His mood dipped a little, swallowing down a lump in his throat. ‘Look at me getting all emotional, it always happens when I speak about him.’

‘He must have been very special,’ said Nell softly.

He gathered himself together and lifted his eyes towards her. A smile spread across Guy’s face as he remembered his granddad. ‘Without a doubt, he was my rock and taught me everything I know.’

‘Sounds ominous,’ Nell said lightening the mood a little.

‘Ha, not at all, great memories. He bought me the best present ever when I was a kid.’

‘Which was?’

‘A box of Lego.’

‘I think Bea would disagree with you there – if she stands on one more bit of Lego,’ Nell chuckled while picturing Bea hobbling across the floor holding her foot and swearing

profusely, 'She's threatened to throw Jacob's in the bin.'

Guy laughed, 'My mum used to moan when it jammed the Hoover.'

'So why was a box of Lego the best present in the world?'

'Because Granddad showed me how to build everything from a bog-standard house to the Empire State Building and when I was older he let me go onto the site with him and taught me how to lay bricks, plaster and get my hands really dirty.'

'So he was a builder?'

'Yes, even though Granny wasn't impressed when he came home covered head to toe in dust every night. She used to shoo him straight upstairs into the shower. He died a while ago now but he and Granny clocked up over fifty years of marriage.'

'That's fantastic!'

Guy shook his head, 'She's no longer with us, sadly passed away six months after him. I know it sounds daft, but I honestly believe she died of a broken heart. She couldn't bear to be apart from him.' He closed his eyes for a brief moment and Nell noticed the sadness in his voice.

'It's not daft at all.' Her own eyes brimmed with tears at the thought of his grandma too sad to carry on.

Guy leant forward and wiped a tear from her cheek that had escaped.

'I didn't mean to make you cry,' his voice faltered and he gave Nell a weak smile. 'Here,' he said, taking a tissue from his pocket.

'Sorry I was lost in the moment there. That's so sad and

romantic.’

‘I was sure he was going to live forever and now they are no doubt rocking the heavens together. I miss them both dearly. Even though I knew Granddad had been ill for a while, his death was still like a kick in the stomach. It felt like my whole world had collapsed.’

This was a situation Nell could wholeheartedly relate to; first her dad and then Ollie.

‘Were your family supportive?’ Tears threatened again as Nell thought of her mum and Bea, her heart swelled with love for them both, she could never have got through the tough times without them.

Guy turned towards her, ‘Hey, I’m meant to be cheering you up and look at us getting all maudlin.’

For a split second his fingers entwined around hers, Nell squeezed them, then smiled up at him.

‘I know,’ she said, throwing caution to the wind while glancing down at her now-empty coffee mug, ‘I think we are both in need of something a little stronger, even if it’s a school night.’

‘Oh why not. You’ve talked me into it.’

‘It didn’t need much persuasion,’ she laughed, standing up and grasping a bottle of wine from the rack at the side of the fridge before pouring two large glasses.

The pair of them sipped at their wine thoughtfully, both tinged with sadness over the loss of their loved ones.

‘Hug?’ Guy asked softly, reaching towards her and taking her

hand. The feel of his touch sent shivers down Nell's spine and her skin prickled with goose bumps. A feeling she had missed for such a long time.

'That would be nice.'

'How's that? Comfy?' He rested his arm around her shoulder. It had been a while since she'd felt the comforting weight of an arm draped around her and she nestled into him as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Hearing the thump of his heart, 'Perfect,' she murmured, startled by her own feelings. The feeling of being close to someone again made her tingle all over as she wrapped her arm across his stomach and inhaled the gorgeous aroma of his aftershave. She could feel the intense heat radiating from his touch and wondered if he could feel it too as her heart skipped a beat.

'So tell me about Guy Cornish,' she asked. 'Who is this Irish man who's turned up at Little Rock?'

'There's not a lot to tell. I'm twenty-nine and owner of a scatty dog ...' he paused.

'Job?'

Guy exhaled, 'A suit, work in the city, dealing with financial stuff.'

'You don't sound too chuffed about that?' Nell said, detecting the change in the tone of his voice.

'It pays the bills.'

Nell lifted her head and gazed towards him, 'Single?' she asked calmly, even though her heart was hammering in anticipation of

the answer.

For a brief second the question hung in the air and he rested his chin on the top of Nell's head while she reminded herself to breathe normally.

'I'm single,' he replied.

Goose bumps prickled over every inch of her body, 'That's good, then,' the words left her mouth before she could stop herself.

Looking Nell in the eyes, he smiled. She noticed the gentle lift of his mouth and for a brief moment she thought he was going to kiss her. She'd no idea what had come over her – she'd only just met the man. Her heart was beating wildly and it was then Nell had felt it: raw chemistry, an attraction, a feeling she'd not felt for a long time.

'It's the wine, makes me brave,' she giggled, tearing her gaze away.

'You've only had one sip,' he laughed. He nudged her playfully with his elbow.

Nell felt the corners of her mouth lift, 'When are you due back in Ireland?'

'In a few weeks' time when Ed is back up on his feet.'

Suddenly, Nell felt a tiny pang. It was daft really, she barely knew the man but there was something inside her that didn't like the thought of him returning to Ireland anytime soon.

They sat in a peaceful silence, watching the snowflakes settling on the roofs of the pretty barges through the porthole of

the 'Nollie'. Smoke from neighbouring boats spiralled into the grey sky.

Guy turned towards Nell, there was a sudden brightness in his eyes, 'Let's raise a toast,'

'What are we toasting?'

'Ollie's birthday, my grandparents and to life.'

'That sounds like a great toast.'

They both clinked their glasses against each other's. 'Cheers, life.'

'Life,' Nell smiled, taking a sip of her wine.

Nell felt content and happy and even though Guy had only just come into her life, she didn't like the thought of him disappearing out of it anytime soon.

Chapter 4

‘Aunty Nellie, Aunty Nellie, you are living in a floating igloo.’

Nell looked up to see Nathan pulling an excited Jacob along on a bright-red sledge towards her.

‘Daddy stop!’ Jacob shouted as he hurled himself out of the sledge and crunched through the snow towards Nell.

‘Those wellies came in handy.’

Jacob’s face beamed.

‘Does Aunty Nellie get a huge hug?’

‘Absolutely,’ Jacob flung his arms wide open.

Nell stooped to wrap her arms around him and planted a kiss on the tip of his cold nose. She smiled at Nathan, ‘Morning. Did you have a successful day yesterday and find the part for the motorbike you needed?’

He shook his head regretfully, ‘No, but I managed to purchase a whole lot of other junk that I’m not entirely sure I needed. Well, according to Bea anyway. The second she heard the key in the door she shooed me to the back of the house and demanded I deposit my scrap in the shed because she wasn’t having any more half-built motorbikes in her kitchen.’

‘And rightly so – boys and their toys,’ Nell grinned, turning back towards Jacob, who currently had a mischievous smile on his face while scooping up the snow and patting it into a ball.

‘I hope you aren’t ...’ Too late! Jacob launched the snowball

straight at Nell, who promptly chased him, squealing, towards the deli. As Jacob pushed open the door Nell bundled him into her arms and blew a raspberry on his neck as he tried to wriggle free.

‘What’s all this noise?’ Bea appeared from behind the counter, smiling at her son.

‘Aunty Nellie is chasing me,’ Jacob giggled as Nell lowered him to the ground.

Bea pecked Nathan on his cheek then touched Nell’s arm. Nell met her gaze. ‘You didn’t text me last night, everything okay? I was worried about you.’

Nell nodded. Last night she’d spoken to her mum soon after Guy had left. Her mum had understood with the heavy snowfall that she hadn’t wanted to walk out in the bitter chill of the February air.

‘Yes, I’m all good.’ Bea pressed a swift kiss to her cheek and gave her a quick hug.

‘So, young man.’ Bea crouched down in front of him. ‘You’ve had a quick play on your sledge before school.’

Jacob grinned.

‘Just remember to wrap up well at school today if you go outside to play,’ she pulled up the lapels of his coat and his bobble hat down over his eyes.

‘Mummy!’ he giggled, pushing his hat back up on his head.

Bea grasped his scarf and pulled Jacob towards her, then kissed his forehead.

‘Some of the supplies haven’t been delivered yet; they must

be having some difficulties getting through the lanes with the weather. We're low on milk so I've rung ahead to The Waterfront who are going to lend us a few pints. I'll nip over and grab them now you're here,' she said, standing up and turning towards Nell.

'No need, I'll collect them. I've still got my coat on and it gives me a chance to pull my favourite godson on his sledge through the snow for five minutes.'

'Aunty Nellie, I'm your only godson! You're silly.'

'But it doesn't stop you from being my favourite, though, does it?'

'When I pick Jacob up from school I'll start the tea,' Nathan smiled at Bea then gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

'And that's why I love you so much.'

The door to the deli swung open and a blast of cold air hit them, 'Good morning,' the postman chirped, handing Bea a handful of letters from his sack before disappearing as quickly as he appeared.

'I won't be long,' Nell said, following the postman outside.

Nell and Nathan crunched through the snow in their boots, pulling a giggling Jacob behind them on his sledge. The Waterfront pub was situated at the far end of the marina and was a place Ollie and Nell would often frequent on a Friday night.

Nathan abruptly stopped outside the Old Picture House. He mustered a smile, 'Well, that's that, then. The place has finally gone up for sale.' They both stared up at the for sale sign.

'It's so sad,' Nell's voice suddenly wobbled. 'Guy mentioned

it would probably be knocked down and no doubt houses built in its place.’

‘Guy?’

‘Ed’s brother, he’s come over from Ireland to help out at the Boathouse while Ed recovers from his operation.’

‘Ah, Bea did mention something about him yesterday, and you know what, unfortunately he’s probably right.’

Nell’s heart plummeted; she could still visualise herself as a child sat next to her dad in the bucket seats with her legs dangling towards the floor, then years later cuddled up with Ollie waiting for the lights to dim so she could pinch a fizzy cola bottle from his pick ‘n mix.

Nell drew in a deep breath and her heart twisted. ‘Ollie would be devastated to see this place demolished, especially for houses.’

Nathan draped his arm around her shoulders and gave her a quick squeeze before they carried on walking towards the pub, ‘I miss him too you know.’

Nell nodded, ‘I know.’

‘Especially yesterday. I knew what day it was and that’s why I took myself off to the motorbike convention. I wanted to do something that we enjoyed doing together. It made me feel a little bit closer to him. Does that sound daft?’

‘Not at all.’

‘How did you cope with yesterday?’

‘Actually, quite well. Time does make things a little easier. It’s nice to actually talk about him without bursting into tears. I’ve

come a long way.'

'I'm glad,' Nathan smiled at her.

'Right, here's my stop.'

Nell swung around towards Jacob, 'You have a good day at school, young man, and tell Mrs Smith I think it's time I had a new painting for my fridge,' she gave him the thumbs-up.

'I'm on it, Aunty Nellie. I'll draw you a picture of Oreo.'

Nell raised her eyebrow, then glanced towards Nathan, 'Who's Oreo?'

'I've no idea ... Jacob?'

'One of Gilly's kittens, but Mummy said I've got to keep it a secret from ...' Jacob cupped his hand to his mouth and gasped.

'Daddy,' Nathan interrupted.

'Mummy said if we convinced you it was your idea, it was a no-brainer,' he scratched his head, not quite understanding what the word meant, 'We could have one of the kittens.'

'Did she now?'

'Am I in trouble?'

Nathan grinned, 'No, not at all, but hopefully the name is negotiable.'

'Good call,' Nell whispered to Nathan before waving her hand in the air and disappearing up the steps of the pub to collect the milk.

Chapter 5

When Nell returned to The Melting Pot, Bea was huddled over the computer in the corner of the office, shuffling various bits of paper and staring at the screen.

‘Just checking the emails before we open up, and shifting through this post.’

‘Anything interesting?’

‘No, just the usual new suppliers offering deals of various produce, but I’d rather stick with the devils we know.’

‘Absolutely, Mark from The Waterfront said not to worry about the milk, no doubt one day you will return the favour.’

‘That’s lovely of him and, yes, of course I will.’

Nell shivered, ‘At least it’s warmer in here than out there today. She shrugged off her coat and hung it over the chair. ‘I’ve got a feeling we may be a little busy today. There won’t be many boats moving in that icy water.’

‘I think you may be right,’ Bea answered, flicking the cursor up and down the screen.

‘Erm, is that a bacon bap you’re secretly scoffing in the corner? What happened to let’s eat sensibly after Christmas?’ Nell mused, putting the milk in the fridge.

Bea grinned before taking another generous mouthful, the brown sauce oozing all over her plate.

‘Busted! But, my God, I needed that! I feel hungry all the time.

I'm blaming the weather. How can anyone think about eating lettuce leaves and dieting at this time of year? I need comfort food, good old stodge.'

'Summer bodies are made in winter you know,' Nell laughed, 'And where's mine?'

'Bottom oven and there's a mug of tea for you over there.'

'Superstar,' Nell plonked herself in the chair opposite Bea and glanced up at the clock, 'Another fifteen minutes until we open.'

'Listen out for the oven timer, there's sausage rolls in the bottom oven and scones in the top.'

Nell nodded and began to devour her sandwich. 'You didn't fill me in on yesterday, what happened to the dog?' Bea said looking up from the computer and meeting Nell's gaze.

'Somehow, Sam managed to get himself all the way over to the boat moored right at the back of the marina.'

'I noticed that boat the other day. It's not a regular, is it? What's its name?'

'If I remember rightly, 'Much Ado About Nothing,' I've not seen it before and, come to think of it, haven't seen any movement on it either. I'd say it's been here a few days max.'

'And it won't be going anywhere soon in this weather. Did you manage to coax Sam back on to the rowing boat okay?'

'After a little persuasion. It didn't help with Guy, who happens to be scared stiff of water, being rooted to the spot.'

'What's the story there, then?'

'A near-death experience with water when he was a kid. God

knows how's he's going to manage the boatyard!' Nell chuckled.

Hearing the tinkle of the bell above the shop door they both quickly glanced at the clock.

'It's not time yet, we've another five minutes.' Nell said, taking another swift bite of her sandwich before standing up.

'Shop.' They heard a voice shout. 'Anyone there?'

'I recognise that voice,' Nell whispered, 'It's Guy.'

'Gorgeous Guy?' Bea said, while Nell rolled her eyes at her.

'I don't mind dragging my weary body off the chair to serve him,' Bea grinned, scraping her seat back.

'You stay there, I'll go!'

'Not a chance!'

Bea noticed Nell taking a tentative look in the mirror before smoothing down her hair and following her on to the shop floor.

'Good morning,' Bea sang with Nell looking over her shoulder.

Guy's face beamed back at them both. There was no denying he was looking very handsome standing on the other side of the counter with his tousled hair, slight stubble and dressed in a pair of olive-green overalls.

'Tom Cruise eat your heart out – all that's missing is the shades,' Bea muttered under her breath.

'Good morning to the pair of you.'

Guy's eyes twinkled towards Nell. He gestured to his mouth then raised an eyebrow at her.

Nell smiled, 'What?' she asked, amused.

'You've got brown ...' he pointed towards her mouth.

Nell couldn't help but feel a teeny bit embarrassed as she quickly wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

'Brown sauce,' she rolled her eyes, 'As you can see the diet didn't start today!'

'Wrong time of year for that dieting malarkey. I need something warm and stodgy before I take on the mammoth task of stripping out the inside of a boat.'

'Bacon, sausage and egg barm?' Nell suggested.

'Sounds perfect and a coffee to take out.'

'Give me two minutes,' she said, disappearing into the kitchen, leaving Bea chatting to Guy.

'How's Ed?' Bea asked, pressing the button on the coffee machine, which immediately began to whirl, quickly followed by a blast of steam, then complete silence. Bea looked at it, mystified, before wiping her flushed cheeks on her pinny.

'I think it's being a little temperamental this morning.'

'Best have a cup of tea, I think,' he grinned, leaning on the counter and staring at the array of cakes. 'The operation went well and he's recovering nicely.'

Nell could hear their conversation while she bustled about in the kitchen preparing his sandwich.

'That's good to hear. Are you staying with him up at Little End Cottage?'

'Sort of, I'm in the annexe attached to the cottage, which gives me and Sam our own space, but I can keep a close eye on Ed too when he arrives back from hospital. The nurse said he shouldn't

be in too much pain, but it's the usual no stretching and lots of rest and I'm not sure Ed is one for sitting still. I'll be on hand to make his meals and generally be at his beck and call.'

'He'll love being waited on hand and foot,' Bea said, 'Pass on our best wishes and I'll take him up his favourite steak and ale pie when he's home.'

Guy smiled, 'I hope there'll be enough for two!'

'Of course.'

Nell walked back into the shop and placed the sandwich down on the counter. 'How's Sam today?'

'He slept like a baby last night after his little adventure but so did I after that bottle of wine.'

Nell could feel Bea's stare burning into the side of her face.

'Wine?'

'Yes, you know the drink that comes in a bottle, usually with a cork.' Nell replied with a sarcastic grin.

'Mmm,' Bea eyed Nell doubtfully as she turned back towards Guy, 'I'm glad you both slept well. Here, have the sandwich on the house. I'm sure Bea won't mind.'

'Not at all,' Bea answered with a look that said to Nell that this conversation was far from over.

Guy's face lit up, 'Thank you, that's very generous of you both. I'll see you every morning with this kind of service. Nell, you are the best and now I know why Ed raves about this place so much.'

Bea coughed and folded her arms.

'And you too, dear Bea, you both are simply the best.' Guy

grinned cheekily before disappearing through the deli door.

As soon as the door was shut, Nell turned to Bea, 'I can't believe you let me come out here with brown sauce dripping from the corner of my mouth!'

Bea leaned in closer towards Nell, 'Hmm, and I can't believe you missed out the part about drinking wine with a handsome stranger,' she teased.

'Don't be daft, I rescued his dog and he was very grateful,' she answered, chewing her lip while watching Guy stroll towards the boat yard with Sam trotting at his side. He looked back over his shoulder and snagged Nell's eye.

'He likes you, mark my words.' Bea pulled her I-know-best look while Nell kept her poker face.

'You heard it here first, Nell Andrews, you just remember that.'

Nell flapped her hand at Bea, 'Get back to work, Bea, you are driving me insane!'

As soon as Bea's back was turned, Nell felt the corners of her mouth lift and her face blush. There was something about that Irish charmer that made her stomach instantly flutter.

Chapter 6

By mid-morning Nell and Bea had been run off their feet. The beef and horseradish rolls were a hit and had sold out in no time at all. There were a couple of loaves of bread left and Nell was already baking her third batch of scones.

‘I’d a feeling today was going to be busy,’ Nell said, wiping her hands on her pinny and exhaling sharply.

‘Where did all those people come from? You’d think there was going to be a food shortage with the amount everyone has bought,’ Bea exclaimed, leaning against the counter and taking a breather. ‘We’ve not even had a tea break yet.’

‘It’s the weather. It’s difficult for the boats to move so I think everyone is panic-buying, just in case the snow fall gets heavier.’

‘Let’s just hope our supplies get through okay, but I think we have enough ingredients in the pantry to keep us going for a few days at least.’

‘According to the weather,’ Nell flicked on to her phone, ‘It’s forecast rain from this afternoon, so hopefully the panic buying will settle down.’

‘Here’s hoping. Did you remember to take the last batch of scones out of the oven? I’m not sure I heard the timer buzz in the mad rush?’

‘Oh shoot,’ Nell replied, quickly grabbing the oven gloves before hurrying to the back of the kitchen and flinging open the

oven door.

‘Double shoot,’ she pulled out the baking tray and stared. ‘Well and truly cremated,’ she looked aghast, ‘That’s my fault. I forgot to set the timer with it being so busy.’

‘Not to worry, it’s just one of those things,’ Bea answered, leaning against the door frame, ‘Pop them on the side and once they’ve cooled down I’ll throw them out to the birds. They are probably in need of a good feed in this weather.’

They both whipped their heads round as they heard the shop bell tinkle, ‘No rest for the wicked,’ Bea rolled her eyes.

They hurried back behind the counter to find the postman standing there for the second time today.

‘Sorry Nell, I missed this one before,’ he smiled, handing over an envelope to her. As soon as the postman left the shop Nell put the envelope down on the counter.

‘Anything important?’

‘Bank savings, annual statement. Ollie’s life insurance.’

Nell had had no idea that Ollie even had any life insurance until she’d had to sell the yard.

‘I’ll put the kettle on, come on. Oh and I’m putting the closed sign up for ten minutes, we deserve a break.’ Bea announced, walking towards the door and pulling the latch down.

‘Here comes the rain now too.’ Both of them looked up to see to see the sleety rain drumming against the glass and boat owners quickly pulling their windows shut.

Nell moved into the kitchen and clutched the bank statement

while Bea switched on the kettle and ferreted around in the cupboard for a couple of mugs.

‘I never knew what to do with this money, it was just never important in the grand scheme of things.’

‘You did the right thing bunging it into a savings account, it’ll have gained a little interest,’ Bea said, perching on the table waiting for the kettle to boil. ‘Any ideas what to do with it now?’

‘Not got a clue,’ answered Nell, watching Bea make the drinks and settling in the chair opposite her. Nell hadn’t really given the money a second thought up until now. ‘I don’t particularly need anything, maybe in time I could invest it in property or a business.’

‘Are you going to open it?’

Nell nodded, then carefully opened the envelope. Her eyes flitted over the numbers on the page and exhaled, ‘Sixty-five thousand pounds.’

Bea gave a low whistle.

‘Why did I ever ask him to go out that night, Bea? If only ...’

‘Oh Nell, I don’t know what to say, we all miss him and I know it’s not the same but we are always here for you.’

‘I know.’ Nell flashed Bea a grateful smile. ‘No amount of money will ever replace him.’

‘It won’t and look ...’ Bea paused, ‘you don’t have to do anything with the money, leave it where it is for now.’

Both of them sipped on their tea before Nell pushed the letter to one side, then skimmed over the pages of the local newspaper.

‘What you need is a little company,’ Bea suggested, thinking that one of Gilly’s kittens might just be the thing for Nell.

‘Mmm, I believe you are going to have a new addition to the family very soon,’ Nell lifted an eyebrow and gave Bea a knowing look.

Bea sat up straight in her chair, ‘Wait, how do you know about that?’

‘Call it my psychic powers.’ Nell grinned, remembering Jacob’s little face when this morning he literally let the cat out of the bag.

‘You saw it, didn’t you?’

‘Saw what?’ Nell eyed Bea suspiciously.

They held each other’s gaze and no one spoke for a second.

‘Saw what?’ Nell repeated with a confused look on her face. She leaned forward and folded her arms on the newspaper and stared straight at Bea, who promptly blushed.

Bea opened her mouth and closed it again.

‘Spill Bea Green,’ Nell insisted, nodding encouragingly. ‘All eyes are on you!’

Bea looked suitably composed, ‘I think we may be talking about two different things.’

Nell lifted an eyebrow, ‘What are you talking about, then? Come on.’ Nell drummed her fingers on the desk in jest.

Bea swallowed and managed a nod, ‘At this moment in time I’m trying to ignore the queasiness in the pit of my stomach.’

It took a second for the penny to drop, ‘Sweet Jesus, you’re

pregnant! You are, aren't you?"

A huge beam spread across Bea's face, 'I am.'

Nell squealed, 'Come here, let me give you a hug,' she said as she squeezed her friend tight.

'I thought you'd spotted the test I left in the toilet the other day.'

'Ha no, but congratulations!'

'Thank you, we are both delighted, but we've not told Jacob yet as it's still early days.'

'Mum's the word!' exclaimed Nell.

'For the time being anyway,' Bea grinned, 'Now what was it you were on about?' She sat back down on the chair.

'Oreo!'

Bea gasped, 'Has Gilly spilt the beans? I've not run it past Nathan yet.' A worried look flashed over Bea's face.

'Don't panic, Nathan took it all in his stride.'

'Nathan? Oh God, how does he know?'

'Well he's about this big,' Nell gestured with her hands, cute chubby cheeks, clomps around in the brightest pair of wellies and is not very good at keeping secrets!'

'Jacob, the little monkey.' Bea rolled her eyes and shook her head laughing.

'Anyway, back to Baby Green, how far gone are you?'

'Early days, only eight weeks or so. I'm feeling so-so, a little queasy at times, but I seem to be eating my body weight in anything and everything.'

‘Well don’t overdo it, you know I can help with the early morning baking if you don’t feel up to it.’

‘I promise I will ask if I need any help.’

‘Good,’ Nell replied, skimming the newspaper once more and turning the page.

‘Anything interesting?’

Nell sighed, twisting the paper towards Bea. ‘Now this is what makes me sad.’

‘Nathan and I were only talking about this last night.’ Bea glanced at the paper.

There on the property page of the local newspaper were the details of the old derelict picture house.

‘Such a shame,’ Nell said sadly, a wave of nostalgia washing over her.

‘They could easily throw up a few houses on that plot. How much is it up for?’

Nell stared at the page and then Bea.

‘It’s up for auction. Ollie and I always talked about doing something together, a project that would benefit the community and bring the kids and the older generation back together. Everyone these days spends their life tapping not speaking.’

Nell’s mind began to whirl and she wriggled in her chair excitedly as she read aloud the reserve figure. Nell had a sudden sparkle in her eyes. Bea knew that look on Nell’s face – she was mulling something over.

‘What if? ...’ Nell hesitated for a second.

‘Go on, what are you thinking?’

‘No, I can’t, I’m just being daft.’

‘Come on, say what you’re thinking,’ urged Bea.

Nell swallowed and took a deep breath, ‘What if I bought the place?’ Once the words left her mouth her thoughts became reality.

‘What would you do with it?’

Nell bit down on her lip, gazed out of the window then turned back towards Bea, ‘Use Ollie’s money to restore it, turn it back into a picture house in his memory.’

It took Bea a second for Nell’s words to sink in.

‘Are you serious?’ Bea shot her a sideways glance.

‘How much do you think a project like this would cost?’

‘You are serious!’

Nell nodded, ‘I think I am.’

The excitement rose inside Nell. She’d often talked with Ollie about undertaking a project that would bring the community back together and this could be it. Not only would it benefit the whole marina, but it would stop new houses being built.

‘You’ll need to ask someone in the know. Shall I ask Nathan? He might know someone.’

Nell’s eyes grew wide then her face broke into a smile. ‘Would you?’

‘Of course.’

‘I just need to know how much a project like this would cost. I could co-ordinate it myself.’ Nell’s routine had been the same

day in, and day out in the last couple of years, this project would be the perfect opportunity to get her teeth into something new which would benefit the whole community.

‘That’ll keep you busy,’ Bea mused, finishing her drink.

‘It would, wouldn’t it. There’s no harm in looking into it.’

‘No harm at all.’

Chapter 7

It was Friday evening and Nell stood nervously on the steps of the annexe to Little End Cottage. She rapped on the door then dug her hands into her pockets to shield them from the frosty temperature of the night air. As she waited she shuffled her feet from side to side and snuggled deep inside her coat to keep warm.

She knocked again and still nothing.

‘Damn,’ she muttered to herself. She’d ventured out into the cold night on a whim. She’d never even considered there wouldn’t be any answer. She’d lain awake last night and had barely slept a wink, thoughts of restoring the Old Picture House had her pacing the length of the ‘Nollie’ in the early hours of the morning.

She’d had many honest conversations with herself, was she just running away with some romantic notion or could this be a possibility, was she even capable of renovating the Old Picture House back to its original state and make it into a viable business?

The previous evening, after seeing the property in the newspaper Nell had visited her mum at Bluebell Cottage. She’d sat in the kitchen tucking into homemade cottage pie and shared her aspirations for the abandoned building. While Nell enthused about the plans that were whizzing around in her head, she noticed a shift in mood in her mum.

‘The thing is, Nell, that place closed down for a reason. If a proper business person can’t keep it afloat, what chance do you

have? Projects like that can be draining mentally and run way over budget. Who's going to manage the place?"

'Well, me of course.'

'Abandon Bea after she gave you a job, a lifeline after everything that happened?' Gilly tutted.

Feeling deflated, Nell had sunk back in her chair with three gorgeous kittens on her lap. She'd never considered Bea in any of this. Once the picture house was up and running would she need to leave her job? It was something she hadn't even considered and now here was her mum putting a kibosh on the whole thing with zilch enthusiasm before it had even begun.

'Ollie and I had always talked about a project, something that would benefit the community and bring a new zest for life into the area.'

'And Ollie wouldn't want you to run yourself into the ground. How will this project be funded?'

Nell hesitated, 'With his life insurance and our savings.'

Gilly had dismissed the subject almost immediately, leaving Nell feeling confused and squashed. It wasn't quite the reaction she'd expected or wanted.

That was the reason she was here now, knocking on Guy's cottage door. She couldn't get the notion of the renovation out of her head, despite her mum's opinion. She wanted an outsider's opinion, someone who didn't have any emotional attachment to the situation.

Nell stared up at Little End Cottage, the place was still

picturesque even in the midst of February with the ivy entwined around it's oak-beam porch and the smoke swirling out of the chimney pot above the thatched roof. There was still no answer; she hesitated then followed the pebble path around the side of the property.

She stood on her tiptoes and peered through the window and caught sight of Guy walking into the living room, then she spotted Sam curled up on the chair by the side of the log burner.

Guy looked as if he'd just come out of the shower, wearing just a pair of grey lounge pants as he stood in front of the TV towel-drying his hair.

Nell found herself gazing at him, rooted to the spot, and couldn't help but admire his toned, tanned torso. And there it was again, that tingle, goose bumps and flutters in her stomach that had been missing for so long.

Suddenly, Guy jumped up in the air, flung the towel and began to play an imaginary guitar. As Nell watched his exaggerated strumming and lip-synching she couldn't help but giggle. Just as he was about to jump off the settee she lifted her hand to knock on the window, catching Sam's eye, who promptly leapt out of the chair and launched himself barking straight at the window.

Startled, Guy stopped in his tracks, whipped his head round and locked eyes with Nell. He casually stepped down from the settee as if it was the most normal thing in the world and his face broke into a smile. Two seconds later, he opened the door to the annexe. Leaning against the doorframe he folded his arms and

beamed, ‘Sorry, I didn’t hear you knock, I was just ...’ His eyes twinkled. ‘I was just ...’

‘You were just what?’ Nell cocked her head to one side and grinned.

‘You can’t beat a bit of Jimi Hendrix. That’s all I’m saying!’

‘If you say so,’ Nell bit down on her lip to quash her smile and secretly wishing Sam hadn’t spotted her at that precise moment. They stared at each other for a brief second before Guy remembered his manners and stepped to one side.

‘Forgive me, come on in. It’s freezing out there.’

‘Thank you,’ Nell brushed past Guy and stepped into the hallway while taking in his divine spicy masculine fragrance, which sent a tingle down her spine.

She heard Sam sniffing at the bottom of the door, which he soon managed to nudge open before he excitedly came bounding towards her.

‘Hello boy,’ Nell said, crouching down and ruffling his ears. He thumped his tail and scampered down the hallway, then promptly returned with a ball that he dropped at Nell’s feet.

‘You have a friend there.’

She smiled cheerfully, ‘That’s good to hear.’

A wooden staircase adorned the hallway, ‘Here, let me take your coat,’ Guy said, hanging it over the banister.

The hallway was lit by a lamp. Stripped wooden beams ran the length of the ceiling and it was extremely quaint and cosy.

‘Make yourself comfy in the living room. It’s probably best if

I go and pop some clothes on.’ Guy gestured towards the solid oak door.

Nell blushed slightly but couldn’t stop her eyes flitting over his body one more time before he disappeared into the bedroom.

Sam followed Nell into the living room. It was just how she imagined it, the furniture was sparse and simple, a chesterfield, an antique dresser and a roaring log fire. She settled on the chair next to the wood burner and Sam lay on the rug at her feet, wagging his tail, his tongue hanging out whilst staring at his ball. She could hear Guy humming to himself, then he popped his head around the doorway.

‘Cup of tea before I sit down?’

‘Only if you have time?’

‘I’m sure Jimi Hendrix won’t mind, I can jump off the sofa anytime,’ he winked before disappearing into the kitchen.

Nell gazed around the room. She noticed numerous photographs on the dresser and wandered over to them. She instantly recognised Guy as a young boy, sitting on a man’s lap in the front seat of a digger. ‘My granddad,’ Guy appeared, placing a tray of tea and biscuits down on the coffee table.

Nell swung round startled, ‘Sorry, I wasn’t being nosey.’

‘Don’t worry, that’s one of my favourite photographs. Sugar?’ asked Guy.

Nell nodded, ‘Just the one, please.’

He passed her a mug of tea and she sank back into the chair by the fire. ‘So what can I do for you?’

She looked up and met his gaze, 'I've got a mad idea spinning round in my head and I've no idea what to do about it or whether it's even doable. I've tried to talk it over with Mum but she seemed ...' Nell paused, 'I think reluctant is the word I'm looking for.'

Guy leaned forward and cupped his hands around his drink, 'Sounds very intriguing.' He joked, and stared at her with a curious expression.

'So, I wanted to run it past someone ...'

'Independent,' he finished off her sentence.

'Exactly,' Nell took a deep breath, 'Okay, here goes,' she exhaled, placing her mug on the coffee table, sitting up straight and tucking her hands between her thighs.

'You know the old building on the wharf, the one we stood outside.'

'The picture house?'

She nodded, 'That's the one. If I said to you I was thinking of buying it and renovating it back to its original state, how bonkers would you think I was?'

'On a scale of one to ten?' he grinned.

'I'm being serious.'

Guy's eyes widened, 'Well, I wasn't expecting that, but if I'm truly honest I'd no idea what I was expecting you to say.'

'You think it's a daft idea, don't you?' Nell sighed, picking up her mug of tea.

He popped a biscuit into his mouth, then slid the plate over

towards her. She eyed him nervously, waiting for him to answer.

‘I never said that! With what intention?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’

‘With the intention of selling it on to make a profit, or with the intention of trying to make a living out of it? What is your reasoning behind it?’

‘A romantic notion,’ she answered, as thoughts of Ollie flooded her mind.

‘I’m not sure a romantic notion is going to pay the bills.’ Guy’s eyebrows lifted a notch and he jolted Nell back to the here and now.

‘Ollie and I always talked about putting something back into the community, working on a project together and I think this it is. He wouldn’t want to see the place bulldozed for houses. That old place has history. I loved spending quality family time there, happy memories. Do you think it would be flattened for houses?’

‘That’s where the money is.’ Guy admitted reluctantly thinking about all the times his granddad had scanned the paper looking for opportunities, to renovate spare land to build new properties.

‘I can imagine,’ she took a breath, ‘but I want to turn back time, I want everyone flocking back to the Old Picture House for their first dates and creating memories like I have.’

‘I think I said my granddad was in the building trade and in my experience a plot like that has loads of potential but there will already be numerous interested parties. Someone may have already put in an offer.’

‘According to the paper, it’s up for auction.’

‘Okay, so that’s a little different.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Auctions are all about ready cash. Once the auction is won you usually have about fourteen days to complete the transaction, and you’ll have to take the property in whatever state it’s in. The local builders will have the means to snap up projects like this quite easily and the workforce to carry out any work.’

‘What if I had the ready cash?’

He held her gaze and from the look in her eyes knew she meant business.

‘Then I would say if you held your nerve at auction you would be in with a good chance of winning, depending on the reserve, your budget and the money needed to actually furnish it too.’

‘So, you’re saying I need the money to win the auction and then a little bit more.’

‘A hell of a lot more. Okay, if your bid was successful and you renovate the Old Picture House, what are you going to do with it then? Are you going to run it as a business, film museum? What’s the plan? Are you in it to make a profit? A project like this could cost you even more in the long run. The place closed down for a reason.’

So many questions. Guy sounded just like her mum now and Nell had to admit she hadn’t really thought that far in advance, but one thing she did know, she had fire in her belly and something was telling her to do this. Nell sucked in a breath, ‘It sounds all

very expensive now you are throwing these types of scenarios at me,' she said.

Guy placed his cup down on the table, 'Hey, I'm not trying to put a dampener on it all.'

'Like my mother,' she interrupted and couldn't get her head round why her mum was so dismissive of the idea.

'All I'm saying is don't go into this with your eyes shut. It will be a hell of a lot of money to lose if it doesn't go to plan and I've spent a lot of time with my granddad and have seen many a project unfinished due to lack of funds.'

Nell's eyes began to prick with tears and she came over all emotional, 'I think I was dreaming there for a minute,' a tear rolled down her cheek.

'Hey, don't knock dreams. Anyone's dreams can come true; you have to believe in yourself.' Guy caught Nell's eye. 'You have to budget for costs that you may never have even thought of. Here,' he fished inside his pocket and handed her a tissue.

'Thank you,' she said dabbing her eyes. 'I just feel I have to do this. Something in Ollie's memory.'

Nell hadn't really thought about the whole project in that much depth. She'd on many occasions watched re-runs of *Homes Under the Hammer* on a Saturday afternoon and admired anyone who took on a mammoth task of knocking down and building houses. She cast her mind back to her childhood and remembered the stress of her parents replacing their kitchen. But surely this project would be different: she wouldn't be living in it, she could

manage everything from the safe haven of the 'Nollie'.

Guy smiled then nodded encouragingly, 'It's definitely achievable, but do your homework first.'

Nell knew Guy was right. When Bea had taken over the deli everything had gone wrong initially. The boiler had packed in, the ovens were on their last legs, the roof had leaked and the whole place had needed bringing into this century. But she had done it, and she had an amazing business now.

'So ...' she smiled over at Guy, 'Your granddad, did he have his own construction business?'

Guy nodded, 'He was a very successful, very reputable man over in Ireland. He never had to advertise, all his work came about by word of mouth. Back in the day, he gave me a Saturday job: I was his lackey, at his beck and call,' he smiled, 'the tea boy.'

'You have to start at the bottom,' Nell chipped in.

'That's exactly what he said! But I loved working alongside him and had visions of Cornish and Sons becoming a building phenomenon. I loved the dirt on my hands, the muck in my hair, working outside in the fresh air.'

'But you became a suit? Stiff collars and ties.'

'I did,' he rolled his eyes, 'but that's a story for another day.'

Nell didn't press him any further, but peered up at Guy through her fringe and grinned, 'So you like getting your hands dirty?'

'I do,' his eyes danced playfully. 'What is going on in that little mind of yours, Nell Andrews?' he gave her a lopsided grin that

sent her heart into a spin.

‘Maybe you could help me, guide me and point me in the right direction. If I decided to go ahead with the picture house?’

‘I suppose I could be your right-hand man.’

‘Would you? Are you absolutely sure?’ she spluttered happily.

‘One hundred per cent. I’m already quite excited about the project, but that auction needs to be won first. And you need to think seriously about your plans for the place.’

Nell didn’t know exactly what that entailed but she like the thought of Guy being her right- hand man, guiding her through the project. She liked the thought of spending more time with him, full stop.

‘The more I think about it the more excited I am about the whole thing.’

‘Have you any other plans for tonight? We could talk figures, come up with some ideas.’ He gave her a cheeky smile.

Nell felt her cheeks flush a little as she held his gaze.

‘My only plans tonight involved a bottle of wine and then I’d probably curl up with a book. I know ... I sound so old!’

‘I can open a bottle. I owe you one of those,’ he stood up waiting for Nell to answer, ‘and maybe a take-away. I’ve not eaten yet.’

Nell nodded, ‘That sounds perfect and an offer I can’t refuse, but as long as you don’t mind me gate-crashing your Friday night.’

They both stared at Sam, who was lying flat out on the

sheepskin rug.

‘Look at him, he’s not going to be much company, you win hands down,’ Guy softened his words, ‘Even if you are bending my ear about properties.’

Nell felt her whole body prickle with goose bumps. She’d begun to feel alive again, something she hadn’t felt for a long time. And thanks to Guy Cornish she couldn’t think of a better place she’d rather be at this moment in time.

Chapter 8

Nell watched Guy disappear into the kitchen and glanced at her mobile phone screen, which lit up with Bea's name.

She swiped the screen to read a text, 'Fancy a girls' night at mine tomorrow. You know you want to!'

Nell smiled at Bea's playful goading. 'Absolutely! See you tomorrow,' she replied.

Nell heard two glasses clonk on the kitchen table and the fridge door open, then a couple of seconds later Guy appeared in the doorway holding the wine, 'Pinot?'

'My favourite, thank you.'

Guy gave Nell a soft smile as he poured them both a glass.

'I hope you don't mind but I've made myself comfortable near the fire.' Nell was sitting on the rug next to the wood-burner with her legs stretched out before her.

'I don't mind at all, curry or Chinese?' He asked handing the menus to Nell before poking the embers and adding more logs to the fire. He settled on the floor opposite Nell.

'Chinese – this is a lovely one and it delivers,' she thumbed the menu.

Guy phoned the order through and they chatted about anything and everything while waiting for the food to arrive. It didn't take long to be delivered and Guy scooted to the door and returned clutching a bulging white carrier bag that smelt

delicious.

‘Well, this is the moment of truth,’ Guy grinned, plating up the food.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Let’s see if this is as good as the Chinese back home.’

He gave a low whistle, ‘Actually, not bad,’ he nodded with approval while taking another mouthful.

‘I told you it was good!’

Just at that moment, a buzzing noise forced them both to glance towards the sideboard, where Guy’s phone was vibrating. He placed his knife and fork on the plate and wandered across to answer it.

For a brief moment, he stared at the screen. Nell wasn’t actually sure if he was going to answer the call, but after a couple more rings he cleared his throat and swiped the screen.

‘Yes,’ he said rather abruptly, which took Nell a little by surprise. She noticed he shifted uneasily from one foot to another before snorting quietly under his breath listening to the caller and looking agitated. Nell studied his profile. She couldn’t deny, with his dark hair and hazel eyes he was looking very handsome standing there in his grey lounge pants and tight-fitting white t-shirt.

He caught Nell’s eye, then looked away.

‘I’m not getting into a conversation about this now, I have company.’

Nell had no idea who the other person was on the other end

of the line but Guy couldn't seem to get rid of them fast enough.

'Enjoy your trip.' His voice was flat and he ended the call sharply, then crouched back down opposite Nell to finish his food.

'You okay? That sounded a little fraught.'

For the first time this evening Guy was silent. Nell continued to eat her food and waited for him to speak.

'Just work issues,' he mumbled.

Nell shot him a quizzical look. 'Any work issues in particular?'

'Nothing I want to worry you about.'

'Do you need to go back home?'

'Maybe,' he said.

Nell pressed her lips together and felt her insides suddenly tremble. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't like the thought of Guy returning to Ireland any time soon. She was already used to him hanging around Little Rock Marina; it felt as if he'd always been here, part of the furniture.

They both sat silently for a moment while they finished their food. Sam was still stretched out fast asleep.

'Do you like living in Ireland. It's a place I've never visited,' asked Nell bracingly. A surge of emotion ran through her body.

'That's where my home and job is.'

'You never answered the question,' she said tentatively, 'You seem to lose that spark in your eyes when you talk about work. Are you happy in your job?'

His shoulders slumped and he shrugged, 'It pays the bills.'

‘If you’re not enjoying something, just change it.’

‘Ever thought of becoming a counsellor, an agony aunt?’ he said, laughing. ‘If you’re not enjoying something, just change it.’ He mimicked Nell’s words.

Gazing up at him, he was grinning at her, ‘Are you making fun of me?’ She swiped his leg playfully, ‘I was only saying!’

‘Sometimes you just get stuck in a rut.’

Nell scrunched her face up, ‘I know that feeling. For the last couple of years, I’ve felt like I’ve been stuck in the same routine and existed on a day-to-day basis but I’ve finally come out the other side. Only you can change it.’

‘I know, I know, maybe I’ve had no reason to change it before.’

Nell could feel his eyes clamped on her. She sipped her wine to hide her smile. Was he flirting with her? She was sure he was flirting with her. Nell was conscious of her heart pounding.

‘What’s stopping you from staying?’

‘A home, a job.’

Nell could see Guy’s point. ‘If you’re enjoying it here, surely Ed would have enough work for you at the boatyard and, look at this place, he’s not going to kick you out of here in a hurry.’

‘He’s already agreed to rent this place out, in principle, to a young couple who are moving into the area.’

‘Oh,’ Nell replied.

‘Anyway, let’s change the subject. The last thing I want to be doing is talking about my boring job.’

‘So what shall we talk about?’

‘You know that boat? There’s something strange about it,’ said Guy, standing up and piling the plates on top of each other.

‘Which boat?’ Nell quizzed.

‘The one that Sam was stuck on. What was it called again?’

Nell racked her brains for a second, ‘Much Ado About Nothing,’ she recalled.

‘When I took Sam for a walk after work he was standing on the edge of the jetty and barking towards it.’

‘He’d probably spotted a bird or something?’

‘Maybe, but I had to yank him away.’ Guy stood up, ‘I’ll clear these plates away.’ He gathered them up and then hovered in the doorway, ‘This is what I actually miss,’ he said locking eyes with Nell.

Nell tilted her head, ‘Miss?’

‘Proper adult conversation,’ he said, before turning around and disappearing towards the kitchen.

Nell acknowledged what he was saying. For the past couple of years, she’d missed her late-night chats with Ollie, grabbing a take-away whenever the mood suited and drinking a bottle of wine together.

‘Sat here with you, it just feels natural. I feel relaxed for the first time in a long time,’ Guy admitted, walking back into the room and settling back down. ‘More wine?’ he asked holding up the bottle.

‘That’ll be lovely.’

‘If you want, why don’t we book an appointment to view the

Old Picture House? At least then I can have a look around and give you some idea of how much you may need to spend? I used to quote for the majority of Granddad's jobs.'

'Would you do that for me?'

'Of course. Like I said, I'll be your right-hand man,' he smiled.

Nell felt a bubble of happiness rise inside.

'Let's book an appointment for next week.'

'Leave it with me,' Guy said, opening the door to the dresser and handing her a pile of DVDs. 'Fancy watching one of these?'

She glanced at the films, 'You like chic flicks?'

He laughed, 'I found them in here this morning but I'm prepared to give one a go if it means ...'

Nell met his gaze, 'If it means ...?'

'You'll stay a bit longer,' he said slowly.

Nell chewed on her lip for a second, '*Notting Hill* it is, then. Guy Cornish, prepare yourself. You're going to love this.'

'What have I let myself in for?' he grinned, inserting the DVD into the machine. When Guy turned round Nell had plumped up the cushions and made herself comfy on the rug. He settled next to her. Gently his fingers reached for hers. Her eyes sparkled as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she nestled into his chest.

'You okay?' he said softly.

'More than okay,' she replied contently, feeling happiness for the first time in a long time.

Chapter 9

Bea scraped her hair back into an untidy ponytail and bent her head over the toilet. She'd lost count of how many times she'd thrown up in the last couple of hours alone.

Last night she'd spent the evening curled up on the settee with a bowl balanced on her lap. She'd felt sorry for Nathan, who'd pulled out all the stops and taken care of dinner.

But as soon as Nathan had placed the food on the table her senses had gone into overdrive and her body had surged with instant nausea. She'd pushed her chair back and raced to the bathroom, leaving a bewildered Nathan sitting at the dinner table all by himself.

It was six o'clock in the morning when Nathan knocked on the bathroom door. 'Have you been in here all night? I've just woken up and you were gone,' he asked, poking his head around the bathroom door.

'I hope I didn't keep you awake last night.'

'Slept like a log, but I'm assuming that's not what you want to hear,' he smiled warmly towards his wife.

'Yes, I've been here all night.' She answered, barely able to keep her eyes open. Bea's face was ghastly white; she was on the verge of tears and already at her wits' end.

'I'm not sure how much more I can take of this. I think I'm here for the foreseeable,' she whimpered wearily. 'I'm already

fed up of this pregnancy lark.’ She wiped her mouth with a tissue then heaved a sigh.

‘Can I get you anything? A cup of tea, maybe?’

Bea shook her head. She’d gone right off tea and couldn’t stomach the thought of it.

‘Have we got any ginger biscuits? I need to try and nibble at something and maybe some iced water.’

‘I’ll have a look,’ he answered, disappearing on to the landing.

‘Nathan,’ she shouted, who promptly appeared again, ‘The deli ... I’m not sure I can manage it today, or maybe I could mid-afternoon if this sickness subsides a little. Could you possibly go and begin the baking?’

Nathan raised his eyes, ‘Me in a kitchen? I’m not really into baking, Bea.’

‘Time of need, Nathan. Nancy and Isabel work on a Saturday, they’ll cover the tables and take the orders. Don’t worry, it won’t be that hard. Text Nell. I bet she’s up. She’ll give you a hand or go and knock on the ‘Nollie’s’ door.’ His face look terrified, ‘I’m fed up of this pregnancy lark too.’

Of course, Nathan was only joking but as tiredness washed through Bea’s body she’d lost her sense of humour.

‘You try sitting here.’

‘I was joking,’ he hurried over and kissed the top of her head. ‘Will you be alright if I leave Jacob here or shall I get him up and take him with me?’

‘He’s sleeping, leave him here. I’ll try and get a little sleep too.’

If things get too much I can always give Gilly a call,' she said, vomiting once more as Nathen screwed up his face 'Eww, I'm out of here.'

Thirty minutes later, Nathan had left for the deli with a whole bunch of keys, instructions and a promise from Nell that she would be there the minute she spotted him walking up the towpath. Bea was grateful to them both. This morning she didn't even feel as if she could manage to get changed or even brush her hair. It had crossed Bea's mind that she might need to lean on Nell more and more if the nausea didn't settle down soon, but with Nell's new project on the horizon she didn't want to become a burden.

She peered around Jacob's door and smiled. He was tucked up and still sound asleep. He looked so peaceful lying there. She couldn't believe she would soon be going through all those sleepless nights again and then there was the dreaded potty-training – that was something she didn't relish, but looking at Jacob she knew it was worth it.

Bea walked downstairs and shivered. Usually first thing in the morning Nathan would light the log burner but with a change to his routine it was stone cold in the living room. She grabbed a throw from the settee and clutched it tightly around her shoulders. She stood and stared around the living room. They'd bought Driftwood Cottage before Bea had fallen pregnant with Jacob and she was excited to bring another little person into it very soon. She wandered into the kitchen, being careful not to

step on the numerous trucks and fire engines that Jacob had been playing with yesterday. After kicking a piece of Lego to the side of the room she tossed a teddy bear on to the settee and opened the kitchen door.

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