

'I love all of Sue Moorcroft's books!' Katie Fforde

The Little Village Christmas



Sue Moorcroft

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**The Little Village Christmas: The #1
Christmas bestseller returns with the
most heartwarming romance of 2018**

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The Little Village Christmas: The #1 Christmas bestseller returns with the most heartwarming romance of 2018 / S. Moorcroft — «HarperCollins»,

‘I love all of Sue Moorcroft’s books!’Katie FfordeThe #1 bestseller returns with an irresistibly festive tale that you won’t be able to put down!Alexia Kennedy – interior decorator extraordinaire – has been tasked with giving the little village of Middledip the community café it’s always dreamed of.After months of fundraising, the villagers can’t wait to see work get started – but disaster strikes when every last penny is stolen. With Middledip up in arms at how this could have happened, Alexia feels ready to admit defeat.But help comes in an unlikely form when woodsman, Ben Hardaker and his rescue owl Barney, arrive on the scene. Another lost soul who’s hit rock bottom, Ben and Alexia make an unlikely partnership.However, they soon realise that a little sprinkling of Christmas magic might just help to bring this village – and their lives – together again...Settle down with a mince pie and a glass of mulled wine as you devour this irresistibly festive Christmas tale. The perfect read for fans of Carole Matthews and Trisha Ashley.

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*The
Little Village
Christmas*

Sue Moorcroft

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Dedication

To Mark West and Dominic White.

Thank you.

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Prologue

‘Are you *serious*?’ Ben stared at his mother.

Penny twisted a tissue in her hands. ‘I’m only telling you that Dad said if you hadn’t taken up with that girl then none of this would have happened. Lloyd wouldn’t be ... where he is.’

Ben sank onto his parents’ floral sofa, the cotton cold beneath his sweating palms. ‘*That girl’s* name is Imogen.’

‘In a way, I can see Dad’s point. Everybody in Didbury knows her family. The Goodbodys breed like rabbits, live off benefits and their garden looks like a scrap yard. They’re like something from a reality TV show.’

‘Imogen’s never claimed a benefit in her life. She’s put in long hours in a demanding sales environment, in spite of her background and in spite of people badmouthing her.’ Ben wasn’t sure whether he was more outraged by his parents’ prejudice or by being put in the position of defending Imogen.

His mother didn’t let his dig deter her. ‘The Goodbody men are chancers and the women are slu —’ She flicked Ben a glance and chose a primmer adjective. ‘The women are man-eaters. If she was supposed to be on a spa weekend with an old uni friend, why was she in a car with Lloyd in the middle of the night? Dad warned you you’d never have a quiet mind if you married her, so why did you insist on working away so much? You’re such a decent, straightforward man, but didn’t you see that it was like throwing petrol and a match together? At least Lloyd’s single. Imogen was married to you—’

Ben leapt to his feet. ‘Lloyd’s my *brother*!’ He ought to have been used to being the second child in all senses, but no way could he get his head around his mother holding him in any way responsible for this mess.

Penny buried her face in her hands. ‘And those aunties of Imogen are going round painting her as an innocent victim and you as a callous husband!’

‘Do you think I don’t know? The Auntie Mafia never pass me in the supermarket without asking what happened to “For better, for worse”.’

And his petition for divorce had goaded them to literally hiss at him in the street. He hadn’t wasted his breath defending himself because he understood Imogen’s family’s loyalty lay with their own. They’d never heard Imogen’s words: *I don’t think we’re going to get past this, Ben. If you can’t forgive me then divorce me.* Her pain when he’d demanded to know how he could forgive her when she refused to tell him what had really happened that night had been too deeply personal and painful a moment to share with anyone but her.

Penny gulped. ‘And now the Goodbodys are giving you a hard time and you’re selling up and leaving Didbury.’

Her words reminded Ben of the depressing task that had been interrupted by this conversation: dismantling their home. Stilted phone calls to Imogen about what she wanted packing into her brothers’ vans, his heart convulsing as he imagined her, white-faced, trying to be brave.

The very same heart that couldn’t forgive her.

He turned wearily for the door. ‘I’m not leaving because of Imogen’s family, Mum. I’m leaving because of mine.’

Chapter One

THE MIDDLEDIP COMMUNITY WRECKING PARTY

Help us strip out The Angel pub

ready for its transformation into

THE ANGEL COMMUNITY CAFÉ

and we'll give you ...

BEER AND BBQ

Saturday 9th September

TONIGHT!

Over the course of the wrecking party, enthusiastic villagers had shifted the rubbish of decades from the once-splendid Angel public house to the skips outside. Most of the Victorian building's fabulous period features had been dismantled.

Alexia clambered up on a stepladder in what used to be the 'Bar Parlour' of The Angel to make an announcement above the hubbub. 'I declare the "wrecking" over! Now let's party!' Jumping down amidst cheers and calls of, 'Thanks, Alexia!' she ignored the surge of people towards the cool boxes of beer and instead she gazed around the long-neglected room. The lovely old door with its etched glass had been moved to storage along with the once-polished Victorian bar. Dozens of flickering tea lights had been lit in place of the industrial lights rigged for the stripping-out.

Someone had brought a docking station for their iPod and music began to echo off walls freshly stripped of red flock wallpaper and nicotine stains. Dusty people chattered around the mood boards that depicted Alexia's vision of the pub's transformation to The Angel Community Café.

Alexia's best friend, Jodie, appeared at her side, her long dark hair overlaid with a cobweb, and pushed a cold can into Alexia's hand. 'Here. You deserve a drink.'

Alexia pulled the ring tab with satisfaction. 'We all do. I love this village. Forty people have given up their Saturday to help us.'

'They want a community café and they like free beer!' Jodie raised her voice to match the increasing noise. 'Shane says he's stowed the mirrors, tiles and etched glass screens upstairs so there's nothing to damage if folk let off steam. He's gone to fetch the burgers and sausages from your fridge. Shall we find someone to help us set the barbecues up? Seb's around somewhere.'

'Not Seb,' Alexia protested. 'I don't need my ex breathing down my neck. There must be someone else mug enough to sacrifice drinking time in favour of carting more heavy stuff.' Alexia's gaze shifted to the only person in the room she didn't know, a man with tousled corn-coloured hair. She'd watched him help take up the black and white tiles to be stacked in the back of Shane's truck and moved off-site to be cleaned. Most people had joked and chatted as they worked but the fair man had offered only the occasional reply if a remark was tossed in his direction. Now, T-shirt and jeans dusty, he was alone, leaning on a wall. 'Him,' she suggested.

Jodie followed her gaze. 'Two minutes single and you've got your eye on the brooding stranger?'

Alexia grinned. 'It's four weeks. And what's the point of being single if you can't show interest? Come on.' She cleared the dust from her throat with a swig of beer before threading her way towards the man who was idly watching a group of four laughing women trying to dance on the mortar where the floor tiles had been. His gaze focused in on Alexia only once she was standing in front of him.

She introduced herself and gave him the benefit of her best smile. 'I'm project-managing the refurbishment of The Angel. And this is Jodie, who'll run The Angel Community Café when it opens.'

'I'm Ben.'

Alexia disregarded the economy of his reply. It was probably overwhelming to be the only person here who didn't know every other person here. 'Thanks for helping. Aren't you Gabe Piercy's

nephew?’ Gabe had been uncharacteristically reticent about why his nephew had turned up on the edges of Middledip village and then kept almost entirely to himself.

‘That’s me.’ His hair slid over one eye as he nodded.

‘Gabe’s probably told you that he’s bought The Angel because the village can’t sustain a coffee shop unless it has some community value—’

Ben finished for her. ‘So he’s set the rent low to make the café viable and the book club and all the other local groups are going to bring business in.’

Alexia took a step back. There was ‘brooding’ and there was ‘abrupt’ and in her eyes Ben had just crossed from one to the other. ‘Sorry if I’m being boring, but this is such an amazing building, I’m excited to see it brought back to life. And,’ she added tartly, ‘in case you’re worried that your uncle’s being ripped off, the village has raised money towards the refurb. Gabe will end up with a sympathetic restoration, and a share of the profits from the café that’s far in excess of what he’d earn if he kept his money safe in the bank.’

She prepared to turn on her heel and find someone friendlier to haul barbecues around for her but Ben put out a hand, looking rueful. ‘No, I’m sorry. Like Gabe, I’m a bit of an oddball and, worse, I’m an oddball having a bad day. My mind was on something else when you came up.’ He managed a faint smile. ‘Let’s begin again. It’s a great community effort and Gabe tells me you’re not charging for managing the project.’

Before Alexia could protest about Gabe being termed an oddball or explain why she was working *gratis*, Jodie jumped in to claim a vicarious share of the accolades. ‘And my boyfriend Shane’s doing the building work for “mates’ rates” because I’m in partnership with Gabe for the business side of the café. By the way, thanks for taming the jungle at the front so we can actually see The Angel from the road for the first time in decades.’

At this reminder, Alexia forgave Ben his earlier instance of gracelessness. Twice on site visits she’d enjoyed watching him dangling from a harness, not above wondering what his face was like without his hardhat and visor. ‘In that case you’re practically one of us boring community volunteers so I don’t feel so bad about hitting on you to help drag barbecues about.’

A brief pause as he stared at her. Then, ‘Hit on me? Lead the way.’

‘Great.’ Blushing, sure he knew it had been accidentally-on-purpose that she’d said ‘hit on you’ rather than ‘hit you up’, Alexia led him through groups of chatting villagers to one of the doors to what had once been the kitchen, evidenced by a pair of white pot sinks, both cracked. The borrowed barbecues were lined up in the middle of the floor as if waiting to be invited to the party. ‘That big green one’s on wheels. The other two have to be carried.’

‘You wheel, I’ll carry.’ Ben wrapped his arms around the sphere of a battered steel kettle barbecue and heaved it from the floor while Alexia and Jodie began dragging the green barbecue into the hall and over the steps of the side door. Ben had fetched the second barbecue in the time it took for them to manhandle it across the weeds that heaved up the aged tarmac.

They were selecting the most even ground when Shane drew up with the food Alexia and Jodie had shopped for yesterday.

‘Shane!’ cooed Jodie, throwing open her arms to take up what was these days a familiar position – wound around her boyfriend.

Shane was good-looking, Alexia acknowledged. His short hair and square jaw went with the kind of body that reflected his physical job. He wasn’t the stable influence Alexia would have chosen for her lifelong friend, though.

‘No Tim?’ Alexia enquired.

‘Nah, he’s gone off somewhere. C’m’ere, gorgeous.’ Shane swung Jodie, lifting her off her feet, making her squeal.

Alexia could imagine stolid Tim preferring to go home than come to a party. Shane chattered enough for both of them, anyway.

‘Right. This is Gabe’s nephew, Ben, who—’

Shane pumped Ben’s hand without waiting for the rest of Alexia’s introduction. ‘All right, mate?’ Brimming with bonhomie, he joined Ben in hooking up the gas bottles that fired the barbecues and dragging a battered table out of a skip to bear the food.

Seeing Shane opening another beer for Jodie, though she was protesting and giggling that one was enough, Alexia glanced from the packs of food to Ben, who hadn’t vanished at the first opportunity as she’d thought he might. ‘Fancy manning a grill?’

He shrugged. ‘OK.’

It took twenty minutes for the grills to become hot enough and they could take up their stations flipping burgers. Ben looked after the grill to Alexia’s left while Jodie cooked to her other side, when she wasn’t giggling with Shane. She seemed tipsy already so she probably hadn’t stuck to her intention to only have one drink.

Alexia frowned. ‘You should take more water with it, Jodie.’ She tried to sound jokey rather than judgy, but Jodie was already trying to play Jenga with the sausages.

Shane used his beer can to wave Alexia’s concern away. ‘She’s fine, aren’t you, darlin’? She’s grand. She’s lovely.’ He nibbled Jodie’s neck, prompting an explosion of giggles.

Jodie allowed herself to be smooched off into the shadows and Alexia rearranged the Jenga sausages so they could actually cook. She sighed. ‘Jodie’s going to have a sore head tomorrow if she keeps this up.’

Ben’s eyes remained on his grill. ‘It’s her head. People make their choices about drinking and have to put up with the consequences.’

Alexia wasn’t sure if the slight edge to his voice was disapproval of Jodie’s tipsiness or of Alexia’s grumble. But as she was in danger of being landed with Jodie’s grill as well as her own, she felt justified in lifting her voice in mild protest. ‘Hey, Jodes, I thought you were the cook around here? Shane, any chance you could start slicing bread rolls? This food’s going to be ready soon.’

Reluctantly, Jodie swayed back to her post. Shane sent Alexia a dark look, but reached for the bread.

Gabe stepped out of the porch. Behind him, the once impressive front door, currently beribboned with peeling varnish, squeaked on its hinges. Gabe sniffed the air. ‘I smell sausages and my belly’s rumbling.’ Known for his silver ponytail and mismatching sartorial choices, today, along with his hungry expression, he wore a button-down shirt tucked into jogging bottoms.

Alexia grinned. ‘We’re just about ready with the first lot of food.’

Gabe turned with alacrity. ‘I’ll call everyone out.’

In seconds, hungry villagers were pouring out to grab paper plates to heap with carbohydrates and cholesterol. Fat sizzled and Alexia’s eyes began to sting as the press of bodies left the smoke nowhere to go. ‘Ouch.’ She tried to wipe her face on her sleeve.

‘Here.’ Ben passed her a sheet of kitchen roll with a smile that flashed so briefly she almost missed it.

It chased away his frown lines and almost made her forget the waiting queue. ‘Thanks.’ She smiled back. Maybe Ben simply took a while to relax around people and warm to them. Maybe—

But then a familiar voice claimed her attention. ‘Alexia, you’re looking good.’

Alexia jumped. She hadn’t noticed the tall man who now hovered in front of her barbecue. ‘Seb! But I look as if I’ve been living in one of the skips.’ She tried not to feel guilty at laughing her ex’s compliment off. ‘Burger?’

‘Yes, please.’ Sebastian held out his plate. ‘Shall I walk you home later?’

Alexia’s heart sank. Seb always reminded her of a genial bear with his brown hair and burly shoulders, but he acted more like a sheepdog. ‘No need.’

‘So you’re going on somewhere?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I’ll check back with you.’

Alexia fought down the urge to snap, ‘You can’t act like an over-protective boyfriend now you’re not my boyfriend!’ Instead she tried to let him down lightly. ‘Thanks, but you know nobody needs walking home in the village.’ She smiled past him at the next person in the queue. With an air of reluctance, Sebastian moved on.

Ben clicked his tongs and popped sausages onto plates passing on their human conveyor belt. ‘Plaintive expression from him; guilty tension from you. Ex-boyfriend carrying a torch?’

Alexia checked Sebastian had moved out of earshot. ‘Good guess. He’s a lovely guy and I’ve known him forever but ...’ She shrugged, not sure how to say, ‘Too nice, too smothering, too settled, too *unexciting*’ in a way that didn’t make her sound like Ms Heartless. ‘I’m in a wing-spreading phase and hope to be leaving the village to work on new projects in London. Whereas Sebastian ...’

He shrugged. ‘If you don’t want to be with someone, you don’t. No justification necessary.’

Alexia paused in opening a new pack of burgers, trying to read his suddenly shuttered expression. ‘True,’ she replied carefully. ‘But also not true. At least not to this particular “someone”, because he apparently needs to be freshly convinced each time we meet.’

‘It’ll be easier when you leave.’ Ben returned to doling out sausages.

The villagers Alexia had grown up with filed by, offering snippets of gossip or teasing remarks. Meeting both with good humour, Alexia kept them moving. Until a small woman planted herself squarely before the grill, regarding Alexia balefully from beneath a blonde geometric bob. ‘No fish?’

Alexia smiled, hoping this wasn’t going to turn into another awkward encounter. ‘Hello, Carola. No, sorry. Nice of you to come and help.’ In fact, Alexia hadn’t seen any assistance from Carola, who’d been a thorn in their sides during the fundraising, and was pretty sure she was only here to turn her nose up.

‘I don’t eat much meat.’

‘Veggie burger?’

‘No. I’ll have two sausages – if you’ve got any that aren’t overcooked.’

Deciding not to point out that the sausages weren’t veggie, Alexia simply slapped two on Carola’s plate and the line moved on. And on.

‘Well now, Alexia!’ said a jovial man with a long and lugubrious face.

‘Mr Carlysle. Sausages?’ Not many people in the village called the owner of the local Carlysle estate by his first name. It was always ‘Mr’ or the whole mouthful of ‘Christopher Carlysle’. He was another who’d come to the party for reasons other than to work. In his case it was to ‘show his face’ at an event to which he had vague connections.

‘Lovely, lovely. And one for Mrs Carlysle, as well, please. She’s around here somewhere.’ He held out his plate before having a few words with Ben and then moving on.

Some people came back for the second or third time. Alexia became used to Ben’s presence alongside her. Villagers tried to get him talking but, although he was affable enough, he somehow kept the conversation superficial.

Alexia tended her own grill and Jodie’s, as Jodie seemed more into exchanging tongues than wielding tongs. All three grills had emptied again before the line of hungry people abated.

Shane and Jodie, arms clamped around each other as if they were running a three-legged race, staggered back, Shane beaming. ‘I’m taking this beautiful woman to her bed,’ Lexia. Apologies in advance. Know what I mean?’ He gave an exaggeratedly lewd wink as he began to steer Jodie down the drive.

‘All too well, unfortunately,’ Alexia muttered, watching them weave off towards Cross Street. She transferred her attention to her grill, dropping the last few burgers and sausages onto its glowing rack. ‘Just enough left for us.’

Ben turned off the other two grills and stuck his hands in his pockets as she arranged the sausages like sunrays around the burgers. ‘You didn’t look too thrilled at Shane’s remark.’

She flicked him a glance. 'Jodie lives at my house at the moment.'

'Ah.' Laughter lurked in his eyes.

Her cheeks heated up. 'But at least it means they've left Shane's truck here rather than trying to drive to his place.'

Any trace of amusement faded from Ben's face. 'Driving and alcohol is a bad combination. So you and Jodie house share?' He seemed prepared to chat now there were fewer people about.

'For the last few months, since Jodie's marriage ended. We've been friends most of our lives.' Under the guise of tearing off a fresh sheet of kitchen roll, Alexia glanced around to check Sebastian wasn't one of the shadowy figures finishing up a burger in a corner before adding, 'Seb was making moving-in-together noises so inviting her to live with me worked for us both. I hadn't bargained for Shane, but Jodie says their hot and heavy "thing" is a good way of getting over her husband.'

Ben's eyes narrowed thoughtfully beneath his unruly hair. 'Does that work?'

Shrugging, Alexia patted a burger with the flat of her spatula. 'She took it hard when Russ left, and Shane does seem to have cheered her up. I just wish he wouldn't encourage her to drink so much. He must've stashed beer out here, I think, because I didn't see either of them going in and out for cans.'

She didn't add that Jodie was subject to mood swings and when Alexia had explained to Shane that alcohol made the tendency stronger he'd snapped at her not to be a worry-arse.

Ben began slicing rolls to place on the plates. 'That food looks good. I'm starving.' He pulled two chairs, minus their backs, from the skip, dusting them with a flourish of an imaginary handkerchief before disappearing indoors and returning with two cans of beer.

Alexia sank onto the chair, realising how much her feet were aching. Although almost everyone else had gone indoors to escape the evening chill the residual warmth from the barbecue made it pleasant to dine al fresco. She sipped the fresh beer. 'This must be my last.'

Ben paused, a hot dog halfway to his mouth. 'Don't think I'm trying to get you drunk. There's lemonade indoors if you want it. Your ex glared at me when he saw me taking two cans.'

She laughed and then groaned. 'I hope he doesn't come out to check up on us! Every time I see him I realise how much I prefer being single.'

Ben gazed at her for several unsmiling seconds. 'You're giving me lots to think about tonight: rebound relationships as a good thing and the joys of being footloose and fancy-free.'

There was such a strange expression on his face that Alexia just gazed at him, not knowing how to answer.

Obviously divining her confusion, he smiled faintly. 'My wife and I split up a while ago. Learning to like being single could make things easier.'

Chapter Two

Alexia put down her burger. 'I'm sorry if anything I said was smug or insensitive.'

He smiled, if a little painfully. 'It was refreshing. It's easy to keep viewing things from the same old perspective.'

'You've taken off your wedding ring.'

'Rarely wore it. Safety hazard when I'm up a tree with a chainsaw.'

They lapsed into silence, chewing smoky food and sipping beer. People began to emerge from The Angel to call their goodnights, the more thoughtful among them depositing their rubbish in a skip as they passed. Alexia returned the farewells, wiping up her ketchup and licking her fingers. Though surprised to realise it was past eleven, she felt no immediate need to move.

Sebastian emerged and hesitated.

'Night, Seb,' she said brightly, not wanting a repeat of the 'can I walk you home?' conversation.

With a brief 'Night' Sebastian melted away down the darkened drive. Alexia felt a pang at the despondent set of his rounded shoulders. Ben was probably right that things would be easier when she could carry through on her plan to leave the village.

Gabe appeared, carrying a box of empty cans. 'I'll take these to the recycling.' He glanced back in the direction of the building. 'It looks frighteningly bare in there. You are going to put my property back together again, aren't you?'

Alexia laughed. 'Just give me till Christmas. It's bare because Shane and Tim have been so conscientious about keeping period features safe.'

He beetled his brows at her in mock ferocity. 'The *Saturday before* Christmas. That's our grand opening.'

'The *Saturday before*,' she agreed with a grin. 'The tiles will have been relaid and the fireplaces restored. I'll make gorgeous Victoriana Christmas arrangements of holly and dried oranges to stand on the mantels. The Victorians loved Christmassy things made of lace and beads as well – it will look gorgeous!'

'I knew I could rely on you,' Gabe acknowledged, patting her shoulder. They said their goodnights and Gabe strode down the short drive.

Alexia glanced at Ben. His face, lit only by the lights of the kitchen windows, was shadowy. 'You can go with him. I'll finish up here.' To give Shane and Jodie time to fall asleep she'd gladly linger to explore the newly bared Angel, excited by the metamorphosis to come. Tomorrow she'd bring her camera and take work-in-progress pictures for her portfolio. It was an important project for her and it would be good to properly capture this swept-clean moment.

Ben wiped his hands. 'I don't live with Gabe. I'm staying in a cottage on the Carlysle estate.'

Alexia put on an interested expression, though she'd already known. Everyone in Middledip knew everything. 'A cottage on the home farm?' The Carlysle estate employed many of the villagers and a few of lived there.

'No, Woodward Cottage, near the lake. I was able to persuade Christopher Carlysle that it goes with my job. "The woodward" was the old name for someone who looked after woodlands.'

'I haven't been to Woodward Cottage since I was a teenager. It was so tumbledown it's hard to imagine it as habitable.'

'Apparently Mr Carlysle was able to get a grant to do it up. His idea was that the estate bailiff would move in but the bailiff decided to marry a woman with two teenaged kids and there's only one bedroom. I've been there about six months.'

'Six months? I'm amazed Gabe hasn't introduced us. I haven't even seen you around the village, except for dangling in the trees out front.'

He rubbed his nose. 'I've kind of kept to myself.'

Alexia could somehow imagine solitude suiting Ben. He had the air of someone who could take people or leave them. 'I think you were the subject of conversation at the pub the other day. Do you have a pet owl? The guys decided you're a wizard.'

He grinned faintly. 'Barney's a rescue owl. Owls aren't pets. Gabe found him on the edge of the wood. He'd fallen from the nest and damaged his wing. He'll never fly or hunt, so I've given him a home. When not looking after Barney I'm a tree surgeon. I used to have my own business but I sold up when I moved here. The woods haven't been managed as well as they could have been so Gabe put in a word for me with Christopher Carlisle and now I'm employed by the Carlisle estate. I was in the mood to be left alone to do my thing and that's the kind of employee Mr Carlisle likes.' Ben rose and returned his chair to the skip.

Reading this as a full stop to the subject, Alexia rose too, collecting paper plates while Ben disconnected the barbecues from their gas bottles.

They moved indoors to find that the last stragglers were ready to yawn off into the night. Alexia switched on the main lights and went round blowing out the guttering tea lights. 'I declare the Middledip Wrecking Party a success.'

He ran his finger down a gaping crack in the plaster. 'Does work start soon?'

'The electricians and plumbers arrive on Monday while Shane and Tim get on with cleaning up the tiles to be reused. Luckily the windows and doors are OK and most of the plaster mouldings, too.' She gazed around the Bar Parlour, its missing fireplace and bar making it look like a mouth with gaps in the teeth.

Ben drifted over to the mood boards still standing at the end of the bare room. 'And this is how the place will look?'

She joined him, casting him a quick glance to check he wasn't just being polite – not that he struck her as someone who'd bother. 'Yes, this is the storyboard for the project beginning with photos of the building as it was when Gabe bought it, to my vision of the finished article. My 3D drawings are called rendered models and the 2D are the floor plans. The colour swatches make it look pretty.' Her heart gave a tiny kick of excitement that the project was finally underway.

'It's a Victorian building and must have been quite grand for a village. When Middledip was bypassed by better roads in the eighties it couldn't support two pubs, and the more homely The Three Fishes was the one to survive. After The Angel closed, the landlord died and the landlady lived here alone for more than twenty years. She eventually died without a will and distant cousins had to be tracked down to inherit. It was a long time before it could be put on the market and then nobody seemed to see its potential.'

She lifted her gaze to the beautiful plaster ceiling roses where big glass lights had dangled until Shane took them down to protect them. 'I'm amazed nobody bought the place just to get the period features and sell them to a reclamation yard. The moulded brickwork on the front elevation alone must be worth a fortune. Maybe the grounds were so overgrown that everyone forgot The Angel was here.'

'Until Uncle Gabe decided his tree surgeon nephew would love to take out all the overgrowth.'

'It does seem as if you've been handy,' she agreed, glad to see the faint smile return. His default expression seemed so grim. 'Luckily, Gabe not only knew The Angel was here but was willing to invest in the building to give the village its coffee shop if additional funds could be raised to see it restored. Otherwise, The Angel would probably have fallen down from neglect.'

'Generous of the village to contribute.'

'What swung it was that the village hall had to close because the roof timbers are rotting. They'll cost a massive amount to replace, much more than to fix up The Angel. The village hall committee's obliged to slog through applying for grants and asking the county for money. We were able to just spring into action.'

He quirked a brow. 'Bad luck for the village hall.'

‘I do feel disloyal. I’ve been to the hall to so many parties and stuff. But accommodating all the groups that used to meet at the village hall meant Jodie and Gabe could call it a community café and start fundraising.’ Alexia led him through a doorway. ‘This was the poor-relation bar. It says “Public” in the glass in the door – when the door’s hanging where it’s meant to be.’ She flicked a switch as she stepped into the room and the strip light flickered into life. A couple of stray slivers of 1970’s woodchip wallpaper lingered up near the ceiling, suggesting the Public hadn’t been deemed worthy of the red flock of the Bar Parlour. ‘It’s where pub customers used to play skittles and darts. It’s not as grand as the Bar Parlour but will work brilliantly for groups.’

Ben gazed around the big empty room with its scarred floorboards. ‘I’m surprised that whoever orchestrates things at the village hall didn’t say the funds you raised ought to go to them.’

‘I’m afraid that’s exactly what’s happened,’ Alexia acknowledged ruefully. ‘The village hall committee’s headed up by the formidable Carola, the one who demanded fish at the barbecue. She’s vehemently opposed to the community café and says the villagers should never have been asked to raise money for a building and a business that belongs to an individual. But nobody had their arm twisted. The village hall and The Angel Café have no relationship to each other, and Gabe, Jodie, me and your boss, Christopher Carlyle, who accepted responsibility for The Community Café fund, aren’t about to hand over the dosh to Carola.’

A suspicion of a twinkle lit Ben’s eye. ‘If I hadn’t come from a small town myself I’d be astonished at the politics.’ Then his phone beeped and he pulled it out to silence it. ‘Interesting as this is, I’m going to have to get home. That’s the alert to remind me that Barney needs his dinner.’

‘You must feed him.’ Alexia felt a tiny prickle of disappointment at losing his company, not to mention an opportunity for her to spout about her pet project, but told herself not to be so idiotic. ‘I’ll hang on here for a bit longer before I lock up.’

He hesitated. ‘On your own?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Don’t you start! I could run around Middledip at night with my hands full of cash and nothing bad would happen. Honestly, I’ll wander home when I’m ready.’

‘Giving your friends time to quiet down?’ He half-smiled, his eyes bright in the overhead light.

She felt her cheeks heat up again. ‘That would be the plan.’

‘Can’t you just tell them to be more considerate? It’s your house.’

‘I could. But if I can move my career in the direction I want to then Jodie’s hoping Shane will move in when I move out. Two lots of rent will smooth my way considerably.’

Grey eyes thoughtful, he considered her. Almost offhandedly he said, ‘I can’t leave Barney hungry. He’s so young he needs feeding three times a day. You could come and meet him, if you want? It would fill an hour before you go home.’

Alexia debated quickly. It wasn’t that she couldn’t find something to keep her occupied for an hour or two at The Angel but, truthfully, she was intrigued by the idea of a late evening stroll through the woods with this man. He termed himself an oddball like his Uncle Gabe, but Gabe just happened to be one of the nicest men she’d ever known. Going over her plans for The Angel could wait. ‘I’d love to meet Barney and see how Woodward Cottage has turned out.’

They ferried the cooling grills into the kitchen in case of rain, then Ben waited as Alexia locked the big front door before they stepped together into the quiet night-time village.

Ben paused. ‘We could walk down Little Lane and hook back on ourselves up the track to the cottage, but it’s about three miles. It’s quicker to take the footpaths, if you’re not scared of the dark. I have a torch on my phone.’

Alexia laughed at the idea she might be scared. ‘I grew up here. I know my way around the bridleways and my phone has a torch, too.’ A feeling was fluttering about inside her. But it wasn’t fear.

Angling right and crossing Port Road, Ben lit up his phone ready to leave the pavement and take the bridleway. Beside him, Alexia followed suit. The bright white lights illuminated the path and

the vegetation that soon replaced the fences on either side. Insects flitted through the beams as if anxious about what the humans were up to.

What *was* he up to?

He glanced at Alexia. 'Certain you don't want to go around by the road?'

In the backwash of the light he saw her brows lift. 'What, walk three miles instead of one? The bridleways are safe.' She reminded him of the cartoon character Betty Boop with her dark curls and mischievous smile. And her curves.

She also possessed the easy confidence and self-sufficiency that made him see why, by trying to look after her, her old boyfriend had been doing exactly what was most likely to aggravate her.

'OK, if you're sure.' He set off again, deciding to accept it all as part of this strange ending to an odd day.

It had begun badly.

Opening his mail, he'd discovered he'd been granted his *decree nisi*.

Just plain white paper with typing on, he hadn't even realised what it was at first. He'd stood on the old flags of Woodward Cottage reading the words that symbolised his failure and loss. Grief had risen up and made him want to break things, which was the only reason he'd given in to Gabe's urging to attend the wrecking party.

He'd hurled stuff into the skips as if each bent curtain rod or cracked mirror had caused the end of his marriage. He'd only meant to hang about for one drink to wash the dust from his throat but then Alexia had arrived in front of him with big eyes and a wide smile and launched friendliness at him like a missile. When he'd tried discouraging her with boorishness he'd found himself apologising the instant hurt and dismay had filtered across her features.

When her infectious smile forgave him it had been as if she'd released one of his inner knots of tension.

Fun seemed to radiate from Alexia at a time when he'd all but forgotten what fun was. It had made him feel the first inclination to reclaim that distant, half-forgotten Ben, the one who'd liked a good time.

As the evening had progressed he'd found himself enjoying her company, wanting to know more about her, being interested in what she had to say.

Finally, she'd made him think about the *decree nisi* not as a symbol of failure but of liberty. A strange topsy-turvy instinct had seemed to pop the invitation to Woodward Cottage out of his mouth and he'd probably looked just as surprised as she had.

Maybe it was just basic need, but now a startling question was revolving in his mind. Could he still pull? It had been eight years since he'd made love to anyone but Imogen. Then for two years he'd gone without sex in a daze of pain and grief. Strange that the urge should flood back today but it was swamping him, compelling him to ease the need.

This woman beside him, with her smile and fitted T-shirt, was paying attention to him. It wasn't that she was the only woman who'd done that since Imogen and Lloyd had ripped his guts out ... just the only one he'd responded to.

He was man enough to admit to himself that her being commitment-averse and aiming to get out of the village at no distant date was attractive, too.

He cleared his throat. 'So tell me more about your career plans.' He might be rusty but he was pretty sure asking a girl about herself was a safe conversational gambit.

Alexia gave a little skip as if the subject put springs in her heels. 'I'm an interior decorator.'

'Painting and wallpapering?' He could envisage her up a ladder wielding a paint roller. She'd seemed completely at home getting her hands dirty at the wrecking party.

'No, that's a painter and decorator. I do some of the same hands-on things but also project manage, come up with ideas and overviews, and produce some one-off and bespoke decorative items. In DIY, a householder decides on the look they want, sources the materials and carries out the

decorating. I'm kind of the alternative option, working with clients to give them ideas and help them decide what they want. Then I create it, either via sub-contractors or by doing the work myself. Sometimes it's a redecoration of a single room; sometimes it's a much bigger project, particularly refurbishments. I've made it my business to build up a fantastic network of tradesmen who like working with me because I listen to them and properly utilise their skills. Do you know how vastly tradesmen are underrated? Especially by certain architects and designers.'

Taking the right-hand fork in the path, she climbed the stile that marked the beginning of Carlysle land, dropping down lightly on the other side. 'My friend, Elton, started training at the same time I did. He stayed the course and became an interior designer, making him vastly superior to me – *he* thinks.'

He swung himself over the stile in her wake. 'But didn't you just say you *are* an interior designer?'

'No.' She came to a halt as if she couldn't make him understand while she was in motion. 'I'm an interior *decorator*. An interior designer has a professional qualification, a degree. As Elton never ceases to remind me, I dropped out of uni.' She sent Ben a conspiratorial grin. 'But I put up with his superiority because he's working for an investment property developer. He wants to concentrate on acquiring the properties and he's looking for someone else to oversee projects – which could be me! So I'm working hard on getting my portfolio and website "looking great and up-to-date". Elton won't present me to the investor until he's completely happy.'

They started off again, Ben following Alexia along the narrow path, and soon approached the point where the path curved round the small lake. Ben realised he was training the beam from his phone onto Alexia's behind, and angled it down to her feet. 'But it's all dependent on one money man?'

Glancing over her shoulder, she sent him a look of slight reproof. 'Money *woman*. She's made a lot in industry, apparently, and now she's making more by investing her money via Elton and telling him to spin it into gold.'

'I can see why you'd want to be part of that. Will your parents mind you leaving the village?'

'Mum lives in Bettsbrough and Dad moved to Bolton with his new wife.' She stopped short as the path swerved to the left. 'Wow!'

They stepped further into the clearing where the silent cottage waited in the moonlight. Ben had permission to make a garden in the clearing if he wanted but he liked the woodland floor as it was, the great horse chestnut trees rising up from a leaf-mould carpet.

Alexia gazed at the tiny building. 'I can't believe this is Woodward Cottage! When I used to come here you could see more ivy than walls. There were no windows or doors, the stone was crumbling and in the end the roof fell in. What a great renovation! It looks as if it came from a fairy tale.' She took her time, studying the stonework, admiring the dormers in the roof. Then, wandering on past the log store, she paused where a framework leant against the back of the cottage, a roll of netting on the ground alongside. 'What are you building?'

'Barney's aviary. He'll be ready to move in to it in a few weeks.'

'But it's enormous.'

'Not compared to the entire wood, which is what he should have been flying around.'

'True. Loss of mobility means loss of freedom.'

His throat was suddenly dry. 'That's right.'

She turned to give him a smile. 'Gabe must think a lot of you to trust you with one of his animals.'

He nodded. 'My uncle can usually find room for a creature in need.' When Ben had been unable to stay on in Didbury, where everything he'd thought was his was no longer, Gabe had provided a refuge. When Ben had been a kid in the shadow of his golden big brother, Gabe had given him time. If anyone had stopped Ben turning his second-child grievances into teenage troublemaking, it had been Gabe.

‘Come and meet Barney,’ he suggested, turning on his heel and almost mowing Alexia down in his haste to get away from his personal darkness and into the light.

Alexia had to hurry to keep up with Ben as he led her to his front door and directly into a sitting room.

She blinked as he hit the light switch. Revolving in the middle of the room, she admired the beams, the staircase rising up from one corner, the black woodstove on the hearth. Two chairs that didn’t match stood either side of the fire on a rug of silver grey and willow green. ‘The inside doesn’t disappoint.’

‘Make yourself at home. Coffee?’ Ben went on into the next room.

‘Tea, please.’ Alexia heard a tap run then the unmistakeable sound of a kettle beginning to heat up.

‘Can we light the stove in here?’ she called. ‘I know September’s a bit early but I love firelight.’

‘Go for it. Matches on the mantel. One thing I’m not short of is firewood.’

The stove door screeched when Alexia opened it. Crouching, she swiftly made a bed of screwed-up newspaper to criss-cross with kindling from the basket in the hearth. There was something satisfying about striking a match and watching the blackening newspaper shrink as the flames grew brighter and bigger.

Ben arrived with two mugs, a whisky bottle and two glasses. ‘Nightcap?’

‘Definitely.’ Alexia settled on the rug with her back against an armchair so she could feed the dancing fire as Ben poured the whisky.

He settled himself against the opposite chair. ‘So you’re completely done, you and Sebastian?’

She was suddenly conscious that his legs had come to rest close to hers. She took a sip of the neat whisky, feeling its fiery kiss in her throat. ‘Completely. Jodie always said I’d settled for him because he was nice and kind. Maybe she was right.’

Ben snorted. ‘I’m pretty sure most men would hate that description. Might as well say “dull and boring”.’ His eyes glittered at her over the rim of his glass, the reflection of the fire flickering like flames in the whisky.

She took another sip, feeling lassitude weigh her limbs as it combined its effects with the beer she’d drunk earlier. ‘Aren’t you “nice and kind”?’

‘Not so you’d notice. Why did you “settle” for Sebastian?’ He shifted slightly and their legs brushed.

Alexia felt a tightness in her belly. Was he doing it on purpose? ‘The boyfriend before him was “high maintenance and awkward”. It was exhausting.’ She circled back to the question he’d side stepped. ‘I’d describe myself as “bright and bubbly”. Your turn.’

He screwed up his face in a mock-ferocious frown. ‘I’m “prickly and disorientated”.’ The frown faded. After several moments he added, thoughtfully, ‘And horny.’

Alexia, taking a sip of whisky, choked.

Ben flushed fierily, giving a laugh that ended on a groan. ‘And cringingly out of practice! Sorry, that was dire. Wipe it from your memory. I’ve obviously forgotten how to do this.’

Alexia giggled. Despite his show of embarrassment, she noted that his gaze didn’t drop entirely, hinting that he was interested in her reaction.

His legs still grazed hers. Heat reached her through the fabric of their jeans, a heat Alexia doubted came from either stove or alcohol – though the latter probably encouraged her to be more airily direct than she would usually have been. ‘You haven’t, erm, put in any “practice” since your marriage ended?’

He sobered. ‘I needed recovery time. And now I’m floundering.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘Hints and clues gratefully received.’

Alexia was entertained by his frank request. ‘Well,’ she mused, lounging a little more deeply against the armchair. ‘Bringing the tea and whisky on one tray was smooth but not pushy, allowing

me the opportunity to choose whether to drink more alcohol. And mirroring the way I'm sitting is supposed to be the right thing to do to make me trust you, isn't it? So you've got that right as well.'

'Ticks in two boxes.' His eyes smiled.

Alexia turned her expression reproving. 'But, seriously, if you invite a girl home to see your barn owl, you really ought to have one.'

He jerked upright. 'Barney! He's in his box. I haven't fed him yet.'

He dumped his glass on the tray, scrambled up and shot into the next room.

Rolling to her feet more slowly, possibly because the room was getting a little fuzzy, Alexia followed him into his kitchen in time to see him ease an open box of translucent white plastic out from under the counter. An indignant rustling came from within. Carefully, Ben positioned the box on the red quarry tiles. 'Alexia, meet Barney. Barney, you just wait in your tub for a minute while I get your supper. Alexia's going to keep you company.'

Ben busied himself elsewhere in the kitchen while Alexia sank down beside the tub and peeped inside. 'Ohhhhhh ...' she breathed. Peeping back was a pair of round black button eyes topping a hooked beak that looked way too big for the little plate-flat face and ball-of-fluff body. One wing hung badly, like an empty sleeve.

The beak opened and emitted a surprisingly loud *HEHHHHH*, like gas leaking under pressure.

Delighted, she laughed. 'You are so *gorgeous*.' Extending a cautious finger, she touched the off-white fluff of Barney's chest. 'As soft as down.'

'I suppose it is down. He's a bit young for feathers.' Ben was still occupied with whatever he'd taken from the tall white fridge. 'Look away if raw stuff upsets you. He eats mice and chicks. I buy them frozen from a pet food supplier.'

'I'm a country girl. I know animals have to eat and that they eat each other.'

Ben returned to kneel beside her, in his hand the red lid of a sandwich box covered in chopped meat. Delicately manipulating a pair of tweezers he lifted Barney out, and touched a tiny piece to Barney's beak. Barney, with a bob of his head, grabbed it quick and scooped it down with much chomping of his beak.

'Cute!' The slightly acrid smell of Barney warred in Alexia's nostrils with the much nicer man-and-whisky smell of Ben as he patiently fed the youngster. Barney bobbed energetically and made little breathy noises that sounded to Alexia as if he were trying to squawk with a sore throat.

Ben murmured soothingly as Barney's supper vanished, addressing him solemnly as 'little guy'. Alexia watched, fascinated by the contrast of Ben's strong tanned hands and the tiny ball of fuzz snatching at every morsel of food that came his way.

Finally, Ben put down the now-empty lid and pulled a towel from a drawer. He spread it over Alexia's lap where she sat cross-legged on the floor. 'Now, little guy, you look after our guest for a few minutes while I do your housework.' Gently, he scooped up the baby bird and transferred him to the hands Alexia instinctively cupped to receive him. 'Put your hands low on the towel. Relax your fingers and let him putter about.'

Alexia marvelled at the almost weightless warmth in her hands. 'Barney Owl, you're so soft and cuddly.'

Barney breathed *hehhh* companionably and peeped all about the kitchen, head twitching this way and that as his gaze fixed on each new thing, one stumpy wing waving. Alexia breathed a sad sigh over the other, broken, wing, but then if Barney hadn't been injured she would never have known him, never felt his tiny talons scraping across her skin under his dandelion-clock fuzz.

Filling a bucket with water, Ben removed a soiled towel from Barney's tub to drop in it then retired to the sink to scrub his hands. He returned to carefully relieve Alexia of the near nothingness of the young owl's weight, their fingers touching as Barney made it from one to another. Then Ben sat beside her on the floor and set Barney on the flagstones to stretch his legs and explore. Alexia giggled

as Barney pecked at drawer handles or paddled his feet on the floor as if finding it odd beneath his feet. 'He's so cute!'

At length, Ben took the towel that had been draped over Alexia's knees to line the tub before collecting Barney up. 'Bedtime, Barney. Maybe Alexia will come back and see you another day.'

'I'd love to.' Alexia rose reluctantly. While Ben slid the tub back in place with Barney in it she glanced around the kitchen, noting the natural oak cupboards and drawers, the plain worktops. 'Did you really fit this kitchen? It has a charming lack of artifice.'

He shrugged. 'I'm not the kind for fads or frills.'

'So I see.' Everywhere were unfussy lines, no pictures and no ornaments. She wandered back into the equally sparse sitting room. All the shape and movement in the room came from the minimal furnishings and the unevenness of the walls – warm but making 'plain' an art form.

Following her in, Ben stopped in front of the stove and fed another log into the flames, though the room felt warm compared to Alexia's recent perch on the kitchen floor. 'Do you want to see the upstairs?' His back remained to her but his voice held an undercurrent that made Alexia's heart trip on its next beat.

Did 'seeing the upstairs' mean simply viewing what he'd done with the upper storey? Or something more to do with his hesitant move on her, the interest in his eyes whenever he looked her way?

She was quite confident that if she responded, 'I think I'd better go home,' he'd just nod and walk her back to the village.

But being with him was like being in the thrall of an absorbing film: not knowing what would happen next and gripped by the urge to find out. She decided on a neutral reply. 'That would be interesting.'

Ben turned away from the fire with a smile of what might have been relief. Flipping the light switch at the foot of the stairs, he stood back to allow her ahead of him. The practical, mushroom-coloured stair carpet looked new and, remembering that she'd spent the evening disturbing dust and spiders, Alexia kicked off her trainers before treading up the stairs.

At the top, she halted as she found herself on a postage stamp of a landing under a slanting ceiling. The uncurtained window framed a rectangle of black night. 'Bijou,' she observed. A door to her left was closed, then the landing simply opened out into a bedroom. Much of that bedroom was taken up by a double bed. Two small windows in the wall beyond it rose either side of a stone fireplace laid with newspaper and kindling.

As Ben reached the landing too she could feel his warmth crossing the few inches of air between them. He cleared his throat. 'At least the bed's made. Kind of.'

Alexia glanced at the forest green quilt dragged untidily up to a heap of pillows and had no idea what to do next. It felt equally wrong to barge through the closed door or lead the way into Ben's bedroom. There was no room to stand back and let him go first yet if she suggested they go straight back downstairs he'd probably think she was feeling worried or threatened.

She wasn't ... she was feeling warm and swimmy. And it was more to do with his presence behind her than whisky or beer.

From his stillness she suspected he was processing similar 'what now?' thoughts. The silence grew until Ben broke it with a sigh. 'I think in the old days I used to plan some kind of lead-in. That saying about buying dinner first can't have come from nowhere.'

Though reassured to realise that he seemed to be feeling all the uncertainty she was, he sounded so disgusted with himself that Alexia felt laughter brewing. She turned, meaning to make a joking remark, but he seemed to move at the same time and her forehead clonked his chin, making his teeth click audibly together. 'Ouch, sorry!' She clutched her forehead, which felt as if it bore the imprint of his jaw. His look of ludicrous dismay released her laughter into the air. 'I'm no more prepared than you. I'm so dirty.'

Laughter sprang into his eyes and she began a mortified backtracking. 'I meant dusty, *dusty* from the wrecking party and I must smell of sausages and—' She clutched her forehead harder than ever. 'And I can't believe how much I just over-shared.'

Slowly, he reached out and opened the door that had been closed. He pulled a cord and light sprang out to greet them. 'Help yourself.'

Alexia gazed into the room in wonder. It was as if Ben had made up for the unfussiness of the rest of the house with a bathroom of floor-to-ceiling opulence. A blindingly white corner spa bath and one of those shower cubicles with jets from all angles gleamed invitingly between walls and floors of polished tiles.

'Ooh.' She stepped into the room, forgetting their mutual embarrassment. A small sigh of longing escaped her. 'How *gorgeous*. It makes me want to wallow in the bath.'

His expression focused now, rather than mortified, he stooped to push down the plug and pull up the lever on the shiny chrome tap. The room began to echo with the thunder of water. A dollop of bath foam from a tall green bottle soon added a froth of luxurious light-reflecting bubbles.

Alexia gazed at the steaming water then back at Ben. 'Are you sure? It looks blissful.'

His hands were looped loosely into his pockets, his gaze steady. 'Absolutely sure.' His smile was pensive. 'What I'm uncertain about is whether I'm staying. It's been so long that you're going to have to give me a sign. One that's not too subtle.'

She breathed in the sharp smell of the lime bath foam in the steam that was rising to prickle her skin. Or perhaps the tingling was actually the excitement of being wanted, of being fixed in the tractor beam of his gaze. She had to lick her lips before she could speak. 'Your bath's big enough for two. Is that clear enough?'

His smile flashed. 'Even for me.' He hesitated no more, lifting his hands to rest lightly on her shoulders before dipping his head to kiss her, letting the kiss deepen as they learned the taste of each other. Then he touched her body slowly, as if exploring a new land.

Heart pounding with every new caress, she let him undress her before she reached for him, unfastening the dusty denim of his jeans, releasing him. Enjoying his shudder as she caught him in her hand, savouring the brush of his body hair, the heat of his skin.

Somewhere along the line he'd paused to turn off the tap. Now he tested the water then lifted her, stepping over the bath side, sinking down into the delicious bubbly warmth until the foam threatened to overflow.

Their bodies slipped and slid familiarly, as if they'd known each other for years. He cupped his hands and rinsed the dust and cobwebs from her hair, sending it streaming back from her forehead. Then he turned his attention to her body and soaped her from top to toe, stoking her desires until it was all she could do to concentrate on soaping him in return, learning the shape of him and what made him close his eyes and groan.

Finally, she straddled his body.

His eyes flipped open as if in sudden pain. 'I have no condoms.'

She halted with a groan. 'Neither do I.'

Then he surged to his feet, taking her with him, reaching for the towels. 'Let's take this into the bedroom. A little imagination ... a lot of possibilities.'

Wrapped in towels and sketchily dried, they padded into the bedroom and he paused to put a match to the fire, crouching on the dusky red rug to feed the flames until they danced high, bathing him in flickering golden light. Alexia sank down beside him. 'I've never seen an open fire in a bedroom. Are you a caveman?'

He turned his head, reaching out to flick her towel open. 'Sounds impressive but actually I get free firewood.'

Then he secured the guard around the fire and reached for her again.

Alexia didn't know whether it was the heat from the flames or his hands and tongue that scorched her skin. Every touch just made her hotter, want harder, a wanting he took as his mission to fulfil until, finally, they made it onto his bed to sleep.

In the darkness, Ben ricocheted out of his dreams, heart bouncing against the walls of his chest.

He blinked, trying to force open his burning eyes. Nightmares. Again. Sucking in a breath he tried to remember what he'd been dreaming about. It had involved fear and pain. Imogen. Again. Panic. Again.

His clock's illuminated figures told him it was 04.13. Night after night it was as if his body awarded him a single cycle of sleep and then slapped him mercilessly awake.

With a shock of desire, he became conscious of the naked woman curled up against him. Still half-trapped in the web of sleep, he traced the curve of her hip, the dip of her waist until his hand found her arms nestled between their bodies. He snatched his hand away.

Not Imogen.

Reality crashed back.

Alexia. Bright, vivacious Alexia with her rounded body and naughty smile.

Right on cue, the insidious voice of negativity slunk into his mind. *So your head was turned by a mischievous smile. You think this is OK?*

Sweat broke like a stripe of shame down his back and he eased his flesh from hers, heart still thumping. He tried to remind himself that it was just another middle-of-the-night anxiety attack; the bombardment of worry, guilt, regret and pain would ease.

But the voice wouldn't leave him alone.

You've got it easy compared to Imogen and Lloyd. And now you're in bed with a naked stranger. Can you imagine Imogen's pain if she saw you now?

We're getting a divorce.

So you pick up a local girl for a one-night stand?

Alexia's leaving the village soon—

But not right away. She's going to expect things from you. Calls, texts, dates. You seriously think you can do that? YOU? The fuck-up who lives like a hermit?

The choking fingers of panic closed around his throat. The slaking of his desire had transported him briefly out of the bleak place he'd inhabited. Maybe he wouldn't feel so bad if he hadn't enjoyed it so much, but her smile had made him feel better, more worthwhile, and her enthusiasm had poured into the air like a rainbow on a grey day.

Desperate not to wake her and have to rationalise these warring emotions, he eased backwards until he could scoot out from under the covers.

Yes, go. That's how you cope, isn't it? By being alone.

Alexia stirred, muttering in her sleep. He groped his escape across the little landing and down the stairs.

In the kitchen, breathing came easier. He pulled clean clothes from the tumble dryer and fumbled into them, heart beating too loudly for him to hear whether Barney rustled in his tub. Grabbing the rechargeable torch from its holster on the kitchen wall he cast around for his boots.

Then he crept out of the front door, refusing to look at that sheet of paper headed *decree nisi* on the table by the door, lying as it had landed when he'd flung it from him this morning.

The period between nisi and absolute exists for a reason. It's for last efforts, second thoughts. For now, Imogen's still your wife.

He stumbled through the door and out of the clearing, the torchlight lighting the path unevenly, the same path he'd trodden along with Alexia a few hours ago; a woman he'd wanted. A woman who'd excited him.

For two years his libido had been sulking, but last night Alexia had unleashed it and it had flown out, fizzing and spinning.

Now, the memories of all the mornings he'd woken wrapped around Imogen's body swept in.
You've been unfaithful.

It can't count. We're nearly divorced and—

And your heart and your guts are telling you that you've been unfaithful.

Like one of the animals that wandered the night Ben trudged around the path edging the lake,
where the water lapped and the breeze stirred the leaves.

The negativity always won in the dark hours.

He should have remembered that before he invited Alexia to share his night.

Chapter Three

Alexia woke slowly, languorously stretching sleep-heavy limbs. Through the windows she could see patches of blue sky hung with hurrying clouds. But it wasn't her window.

The events of last night rushed back at her.

The Angel. Ben. Coming back to his enchanting little house in the woods.

The ashes in the grate were grey and cold now but last night the fire had roared up the chimney as she and Ben enjoyed each other's bodies, the shadows dancing across his skin as he rose above her.

It had been a damned shame that neither of them had had a condom to allow them the satisfaction of the final act. Still. Hands and mouth had provided a fine substitute.

She glanced at the other side of the bed, but already she knew it would be empty from the absence of warmth stealing towards her along the sheets. She yawned, then stopped and listened. The house was quiet.

'Ben?'

No answer. She felt a little as Goldilocks might have done if there had been no bears, waking alone in a strange bed in a cottage in the woods. She rolled out of bed and wandered to the head of the stairs. 'Ben?'

Silence. Shrugging, she entered the bathroom, glancing at herself in the mirror and laughing at the way her hair was sticking up. Last night's dusty clothes lay on the floor but she stepped over them to try Ben's upmarket shower, experimenting with the buttons that controlled the jets. Enjoying the hot water, she thought of Ben's hands on her last night. Maybe he *was* a wizard. He'd certainly worked a little magic on her body. Her limbs still felt heavy and relaxed. Sated. She smiled gently at the memories as she allowed the hot water to sluice the scent of Ben from her body. Then she borrowed his towel and had little choice but to climb into yesterday's clothes, combing her hair with her fingers.

'Ben?' she called again as she ran down the stairs. It didn't take long to check the ground floor. In the kitchen she pulled out Barney's tub and crouched to peep at him. 'Where's he gone, Barney? Did he have to work today? It's Sunday. I thought most of the estate workers had weekends off.'

Barney's beak flipped open. 'Hehhhhh.'

Rising, she gazed out of the window at the clearing and the tree trunks crowding beyond it. The silver truck she could see was presumably Ben's. Briefly, she debated hanging on to see if he returned but then decided he wouldn't be so rude as to leave her to wake up alone unless he'd gone out to work for the day. Maybe an elm had needed urgent surgery. She glanced at her phone to check for texts before remembering there had been no reason to give him her number.

'He could have left a note, eh, Barney Owl? But maybe he told me last night – parts of it are a little blurry. Never mind. He'll come back to feed you so tell him I said bye.'

'Hehhhhh,' remarked Barney, tilting his head.

Alexia let herself out into the brisk September morning and headed up the path to the village, hurrying to keep warm until she left the tree canopy and made it out into the sunshine.

In fifteen minutes she emerged from the bridleway and crossed Port Road, electing to traverse the playing fields to access Main Road rather than taking Cross Street, which would mean passing the village shop. 'News and Booze' for many years had been A & G Crowther but now Gwen Crowther's niece, Melanie, had taken it over and made it an off-licence. Melanie was even more beady-eyed than Gwen had been and Alexia could just imagine her throwing open the door and yelling, 'Where have you been to get your jeans dirty this early on a Sunday?' Her huge friendly smile wouldn't in the least prevent her from later sharing Alexia's reply with every customer to enter the shop.

So, crossing the village by way of the playing fields, Alexia waved at a couple of people she knew who were pushing their children on swings and spared a glance for the sad sight of the closed-down village hall.

Her trainers were damp from the grass by the time she got home. Like Ben's cottage, 44 Main Road was made of stone, but there the similarity ended. Long and low, its windows peered out from under its slated roof. Grandpop, Alexia's grandfather, had left the cottage to Alexia and her brother, Reuben – bypassing his son, Clifford, their dad, because he knew its proceeds would be swallowed by the insatiable maw that was Clifford's finances.

Alexia, who hadn't inherited the rubbish-with-money gene, had taken on a mortgage to buy Reuben out, who, living happily in Germany with his wife Hanna, had been delighted.

It was Alexia who'd been close to Grandpop anyway, spending hours with him in his workshop at the side of the house 'making sawdust' as he'd called it. Her workshop now, Grandpop's tools mingled happily with her sewing machine and paintbrushes, the perfect place for the projects that brought her touch to her clients' homes.

She let herself in, acknowledging wistfully that though she planned to take down all her lovely handmade Christmas ornaments early in the holiday this year, she'd be packing them along with everything else ready to move out in January. It would cause her a pang to leave number 44, even knowing Jodie and Shane would look after her little house and that Alexia could return. But Grandpop would have understood her leaving Middledip for a while to give working with Elton a try. 'Upwards and onwards,' he'd have said.

The house was silent, though it was past ten o'clock. Shane's truck wasn't outside so presumably it was still where he'd left it at The Angel last night and he and Jodie were still upstairs, oblivious.

Enjoying the peace, Alexia ran up to change her dusty clothes before embarking on weekend chores – doing laundry, humming gently to herself as she ironed, wondering, occasionally, whether Ben would get her number from Gabe.

As the hours went by with no sound from elsewhere in the house, she revised her opinion about Shane and Jodie. They must have got up and gone out before she came home, which was pretty hard-headed of them considering how drunk Jodie had looked the night before.

By the middle of the afternoon she was seated at her kitchen table, happily emailing Elton an update on The Angel.

I've allowed twelve weeks for the project from tomorrow, but there's a time contingency built into that. IF everyone turns up when they say they will AND we hit no snags I'd like to complete the refurb in ten. I'll keep you posted ...

A sudden noise caused her to cock an ear towards the kitchen ceiling as what sounded like Jodie's footsteps crossed between bedroom and bathroom. She must have been sleeping off her heavy night all along.

Alexia returned to her email.

... and also get my portfolio and website absolutely spot-on to include loads of pix of The Angel. Maybe that would be a good time to resume the conversation about involving me with your investor's portfolio of properties?

Evidently Elton was online too, because his answer pinged into her inbox in minutes.

You know I'm waiting for you with open arms, woman. Just get your crap together and give me something I can show my investor!

Alexia had typed back – *You'll have to give me till Christmas to get The Angel up and running, then, hopefully, in the New Year* – as Jodie trailed into the kitchen wrapped in a past-its-best blue-striped bathrobe. Flopping down at the table she propped her head in her hands. 'Bleurgh,' she groaned piteously. 'Have you seen Shane?'

Regarding her friend's waxy pallor with sympathy, Alexia shook her head. 'I assumed he'd be with you. He's not working at The Angel today, is he?'

Jodie gave a tiny shrug, palms dragging her cheeks down. 'Dunno. I'm dying, I feel horrible. Can you make me feel better?'

Sportingly, Alexia closed her laptop and picked up the kettle. 'I'm surprised to see you quite so hungover. I know you had several beers but—'

'I only had one beer!' Jodie protested. 'But it did go to my head. Shane had some lovely lemon stuff his auntie had brought him back from Sorrento and he said it would set me right. We took it up to bed.'

Alexia's hand tightened on the tap. '*Limoncello*?' Seriously? Shane had poured liqueur down Jodie when she was already drunk? His brain must have begun to rust from spending too much time outdoors.

'Yes, that was it. I loved the limoncello,' Jodie added, fairly. 'But it didn't make me better. I started to be sick so Shane got me a bucket.'

'And cleared off?' Alexia felt anger bubble up that Shane wasn't responsible enough to stay and ensure his girlfriend was OK when he'd quite obviously encouraged her to get drunk. What kind of shitty boyfriend did that? She set a mug of coffee before Jodie. 'Don't you mind that he didn't stick around?'

Groaning, Jodie slowly collapsed until her arms pillowed her head. 'He stayed till I went to sleep. Will you make me some toast?'

Deciding today wasn't the day to demand the magic word, Alexia did so, scraping only the thinnest coat of butter across the warm surface so as not to upset Jodie's stomach. She set the plate alongside the coffee beside Jodie's head and settled back down to her work.

She'd just reread Elton's email and decided she'd been right to step up her preparations for an exciting move down south when her phone began to burble.

'*Urrghhhh*,' groaned Jodie as if the noise had given her physical pain.

Alexia read the screen and answered, 'Hi Gabe,' scrolling to the foot of the email with the hand that wasn't holding the phone. She wondered suddenly whether Ben was with Gabe. He could easily have had plans with his uncle. The thought made her feel better about waking up alone this morning.

Gabe's precise voice came loud in her ear, sounding puzzled. 'I didn't think there was any work going on today.'

Alexia clicked 'reply' on the email ready for when the call was over. 'Is Shane at The Angel? Jodie was just wondering where he was.'

Jodie lifted her head from her arms, face already shaping itself into its 'Jodie loves Shane' expression.

'No, Shane's not here. But neither's the roof.'

Alexia laughed. 'Have you looked on top of the building?'

But humour was sadly lacking from Gabe's voice. 'The front of the building's perfectly normal. But at the back? Fresh air where there used to be slates. If Shane has stripped the roof then why hasn't he put a tarpaulin over the timbers? It's already spitting with rain. We'll have the damned place down around our ears with damp.'

Slowly, Alexia's hand fell away from her laptop. Unless Gabe had been eating strange mushrooms, there was something going on. 'There's no reason for the slates to be stripped. The roof's sound.'

'That's what I thought.'

Alexia's unease grew. 'I'd better come down to the site. Be there in five minutes.'

'What's up?' Jodie managed to prop her chin on her hands as Alexia ended the call.

'Gabe says the slates have gone off the rear aspect of the building.'

Jodie eased her head back down onto the table saying, 'Can't have,' before once again closing her eyes.

After dragging on a jacket, Alexia strode along the uneven pavement to The Angel, casting about for an explanation that would account for Gabe's astounding revelation. Leaving Main Road, she broke into a jog along Cross Street, passing the row of cottages known as Rotten Row before

turning in to Port Road where many of the village's redbrick Victorians were grouped together as if the rest of the village wasn't quite good enough for them.

Where Shane's truck had been outside The Angel last night was now an empty space. Gabe paced up and down the drive, silver ponytail flirting with the breeze. With his usual smile absent there was more resemblance between him and Ben than Alexia had hitherto noticed.

Wordlessly, Gabe led her to the back of the building.

She didn't have to go far down the overgrown garden to see the naked roof timbers and daylight where the slates should have butted up snugly to the bricks of the gable end. 'What the hell?'

She gazed around the jungle of the garden. No sign of stacked slates. Nor were they tucked between the skips in front of the property.

Fishing out her keys she hurried towards the building. And jerked to a stop when she rounded the porch.

Gabe did exactly the same. 'Where's the *door*?'

A long snake of fear began to uncoil itself in Alexia's tummy. She ran through the gap where the door ought to have been, into the Bar Parlour and then the Public. Having checked every room downstairs with a mounting feeling of doom, she raced across the foyer and through the doorway to the stairs.

It seemed more like a mountain than a staircase but she made it up to what had once been the living quarters of the pub, darting from bedrooms to bathroom to sitting room. When she could no longer dispute the evidence of her eyes she ground to a halt. Over the pounding of her heart she could hear the slates at the front of the building shifting uneasily as the wind prodded their unprotected undersides.

The noise receded and then flooded sharply back, mixing with the sound of men's voices floating up from downstairs. She held her breath, hoping to hear Shane explaining why he was busy with unplanned work.

She did recognise the voice. But it wasn't Shane's.

On jelly legs she trudged back downstairs to find Ben standing in the foyer beside Gabe.

Absently she noted that he didn't smile. He didn't step forward to greet her or express concern about what was going on. There was no air of awareness of last night or this morning.

In fact, it seemed to Alexia that his eyes were unfocused as if he weren't quite looking at her.

That was the least of her worries right now though. She turned to Gabe. 'Everything Shane stowed upstairs is missing.' She slumped down on the bottom step. 'And everything of any value. Every original feature – doors, radiators, even the cast iron toilet cisterns. Someone's stripped the place. I presume the only reason they left the roof slates on the front was to disguise what they'd done for as long as possible.'

'Someone?' asked Ben. 'Like who?'

Alexia shook her head. 'I'll try and ring Shane.' Her voice seemed to echo in her ears.

Gabe began to speak but was interrupted by the ringing of his phone, which he answered with a 'tsk' of irritation. With fumbling fingers Alexia pulled up Shane's name in her contacts list and pressed 'call'. It went straight to voicemail. Trembling, she tried his mate Tim's number too. Same result.

'But how the hell ...?' she heard Gabe demand of his caller.

She paused to raise her eyebrows hopefully and mouth 'Shane?' at him. Gabe gave an abrupt shake of his head and held up a hand to indicate he needed to listen to the person on the other end of his line.

Desperately, she tried Jodie who did, at least, answer.

Alexia took a steady breath. 'Has Shane turned up?'

'Not yet. I tried to ring him but—'

'You got his voicemail,' Alexia finished for her. 'Does he have a landline number because—'

Then she dropped her phone, ending the call hastily as Gabe made a strangled noise and reached out to steady himself against the wall. Ben got to his uncle before Alexia could even begin to move and in an instant he'd lowered Gabe down to sit on the steps beside her.

Gabe was grey, clutching his phone with a shaking hand. 'That was the bank. The money's gone.'

The room seemed to do a huge swoop around Alexia's head. She couldn't force words past the lump of fear that had jumped into her throat at Gabe's words.

'What money?' Ben crouched before his uncle, his expression granite-grim.

'The money in the community account and the business account. It's been moved out of the accounts in a series of transactions, raising a red flag with the bank.' Gabe passed a shaking hand over his face. 'It's the money the village raised and the start-up money Jodie and I put into the partnership.'

Ben swung a grey gaze on Alexia before returning his attention to his uncle, his voice hard and rapid. 'Who has access to the bank accounts?'

Gabe pressed his forehead as if forcing himself to think. 'For the community account Alexia, Jodie, and Christopher Carlisle and me. Jodie and I for the business account.'

'But it takes two of us to sign to get money out of the community account,' Alexia croaked.

'Not on Internet banking. We all signed that it was OK, if you remember.'

Ben's face was a mask as he studied the evidence on Gabe's phone. 'The accounts are showing nil balances. And my uncle's property has been stripped out and devalued with no means of refurbishing it.' Slowly, he raised his gaze. 'Can you shine any light on this?'

'Me?' Alexia's eyes felt ready to pop out on stalks as she gazed at Ben in fresh horror. 'Me?'

'Well ...' Ben hesitated at the shock in her dark eyes, conscious that his thoughts hadn't translated into quite the right words.

He'd been so angry at the grief and shock on Gabe's face, this good and genuine man who'd always been on Ben's side, that only half his thoughts had been on the current situation. The other half had been a shame-filled reflection on what Alexia must be thinking of him after his middle-of-the-night desertion. All day he'd been plagued with images of her in his arms. But they'd warred with images of Imogen until he wasn't certain where he should lay guilt and over whom he felt regret. He tried to explain. 'You have the knowledge of how much the original features are worth and where someone might sell them. You were telling me last night about your contacts.'

'Ben!' Gabe protested sharply. 'You sound as if you're accusing Alexia!'

Ben groped for better words. 'No, I was asking for insight—'

But Alexia was already climbing to her feet, turning on Ben a look of dazed repugnance, lifting a shaking hand as if to keep him at a distance. 'We'll have to come back to that discussion. I have to ring one of my *contacts* and get a tarpaulin on that roof.'

Gabe clambered to his feet too, pulling her into a comforting, avuncular hug. He looked to have aged ten years in ten minutes but at least the torpor of shock seemed to be fading. 'Are you OK to handle that? I've got to ring the police.'

Over Gabe's shoulder Ben watched Alexia close her eyes as if she couldn't bear to have to look in his direction. 'I can do it. You report what's happened.'

Then Ben ceased to exist – at least so far as Alexia was concerned, anyway. Her gaze didn't rest on him once. She moved into the Bar Parlour to make her call while Gabe remained in the foyer to make his.

Ben found himself hovering between the two, unable to contribute and with plenty of opportunity to wish his words to Alexia unsaid. He cringed at what she must think of him – the man who last night had savoured her body and today sounded as if he were accusing her of wrongdoing.

Through the doorway he watched Alexia slide down the wall as if her legs wouldn't hold her, pinching the bridge of her nose as she spoke into her phone. 'Dion, I know it's a huge favour –'

'I'm afraid I have to report some thefts –' Gabe said into his own phone from Ben's other side.

'– it's not my property but it's my project –'

‘– it seems like a finely calculated scam. Much of the property was removed last night under the guise of –’

‘– I’ll really owe you if you can get it tarped tonight. I hate to ask you on a Sunday evening but you can invoice me, obviously –’

‘– I know what was in the bank accounts but fixing a value on the rest at this moment is difficult –’

‘– and I need someone to put a temporary door on, too. Oh, would you? That would be fantastic.’

Gabe finished first. He came to stand silently with Ben while Alexia began another call.

‘Jake, a project I’m on has been done over.’ She hunched a shoulder as if feeling Ben’s gaze on her. ‘Can I list some of the stuff that’s been stripped out? Then if you could let me know if any of it’s offered to you ... It’s all mid-Victorian. A load of roof slates, mahogany doors and screens with etched glass, two mahogany pub bars – probably dismantled – Victorian mosaic floor tiles, black and white with a border tile ...’ She pushed herself up and began travelling from room to room, slowly listing what she could remember of what had been in them. She remembered a lot. Her voice went on and on, growing fainter as she progressed.

Gabe turned a steely gaze on Ben. ‘You must apologise to her.’

Ben felt slightly sick. ‘I will. I didn’t mean it the way it came out.’

‘Then you need to control the way things come out. She must think you’re a shit.’

Gabe almost never swore. In fact, Ben couldn’t remember seeing him angry before, but now his bushy brows were meeting over a sharp crease between his eyes. Like a naughty child, Ben squirmed through the only lecture, in fact the only criticism, he’d ever received from Gabe, who wound up with, ‘I know you’ve had a bad year, Benedict, but to say I’m mortified is understating the case. Alexia’s not only a dear friend, she’s donated all her work to this project.’

‘It honestly wasn’t meant to sound that way.’ Ben was unable to summon a better explanation or admit that he’d had only half a night’s sleep, again. ‘I’m not proud of myself,’ he muttered in the end, which had the virtue of being true.

Before Gabe could reply Alexia returned to the room, white and shocked but otherwise composed.

Ben lost no time in trying to put things right. ‘I’m sorry if I sounded as if I was accusing you, Alexia. I was angry on Gabe’s behalf and I was just trying to get information. I offer an unreserved apology.’

Alexia’s gaze remained on Gabe. ‘A roofer, Dion, is coming to tarp the roof and he says he’ll hang a temporary door while he’s here. What did the police say?’

Gabe glanced at his watch. ‘They’re sending someone.’

‘OK. I’ll stay and see them with you.’

‘Alexia,’ Ben tried again.

Alexia turned her back.

Ben spent the rest of the evening fermenting in a mix of shame and irritation as Alexia continued to elaborately ignore him but bestow fervent thanks on Dion when he turned up with rolls of blue plastic sheeting and the scaffold tower he needed to protect the roof from the worst of the weather.

When black-clad Police Constable Arron Harris arrived, Alexia gave a factual outline of her part in things and agreed to make a full statement at a later time, nodding along as Gabe and the police officer discussed how best to proceed with the bank. The same bank of which Gabe had once managed a branch.

‘So the contractors, Shane Edmunds and Tim O’Neill, you don’t think they could have simply put in extra hours?’ asked PC Harris, reviewing his notes.

Alexia shook her head. ‘Not to remove items we’d agreed to store, and there’s no valid reason I know of for them to strip the slate from the back of the building. Neither Shane nor Tim are answering their phones and Shane’s not with my housemate, though they’re in a relationship.’

PC Harris nodded, making new notes. 'Any other contact details? An address, maybe?'

Alexia felt sick. 'My friend should know. I'll ask her.'

'No rush for the moment. Let's deal with what we've got. You're clear that the money should be in the bank accounts?'

'Crystal clear.' Gabe began to detail the access arrangements on each account.

Finally, PC Harris arranged that a detective constable would ring Gabe on Monday then departed to knock on the doors of the neighbouring houses in case the occupants had seen anything useful.

'We mustn't jump to conclusions.' Gabe's face was furrowed with worry as he watched the police officer leave.

'No. But I'd feel a lot more comfortable if Shane hadn't disappeared.' Alexia paced nervously.

Gabe nodded. 'Especially as we have to accept that the money and the materials are likely to have been taken by the same person. It would take a massive coincidence for it to be otherwise. And experience in banking tells me that when money vanishes from accounts there's usually someone involved who's connected to the account holders.'

Alexia couldn't have looked much more miserable without bursting into tears. 'Do you mean you know how it happened?'

Gabe blew out his lips. 'I have a few ideas but fraudsters have a lot of weapons in their armoury. We'll have to see what the police turn up.'

Alexia passed a shaking hand over her eyes. 'Why didn't I just stick to one of my normal contractors?'

'It's not your fault.' Gabe's gaze flicked to Ben, though he continued to address Alexia. 'Shane was Jodie's boyfriend so we took her personal recommendation. I had no misgivings about it and she's a partner in the business side.'

Alexia hugged her arms around herself. 'When Dion's finished, I've got to go home and talk to Jodie.'

'I think we ought to go together. I'll ring Christopher and advise him of the situation while we're hanging about.'

As Gabe stepped away to make his call, Ben cleared his throat. 'Alexia, please let me apologise —'

Alexia didn't even look at him as she turned and strode into the Public. If her nose had tipped any further in the air she would have given herself a crick in her neck.

Then Gabe ended his call and returned. Ben turned to him. 'She won't let me apologise.'

The older man sighed. 'She probably isn't too bothered about your feelings right now because she's facing the prospect of confronting her best friend about the boyfriend going missing at the same time as money and valuables. And when bad things happen to Jodie she can find it hard to cope.' After a pause for this to be digested he added more gently, 'You get off home, Ben. Give her time to calm down.'

Dismissed, Ben had little choice but to trail off in the direction of Woodward Cottage, zipping up his hoodie against the evening wind that had an edge on it for September, crossing Port Road and entering the quietness of the bridleway under the familiar weight of negative emotions.

But this time he knew exactly where his guilt and regret lay.

Chapter Four

Alexia's feet felt like lead weights, heavier with every step she took towards home.

Gabe seemed in no more of a hurry, scuffing gloomily through drifts of golden leaves. Alexia tried to rehearse what to say to Jodie but her thoughts kept flying back to the rage on Ben's face as he'd questioned her. Though he'd tried to back up, her anger and disappointment had refused to let her listen.

When they reached the cottage she silently unlocked the glossy blue door, finding Jodie, still in her dressing gown but looking less hungover, lying on the sofa, tucking into what she always termed her 'poorly food' – salty crackers and Pepsi. She looked up from the TV as Alexia trailed into the room, Gabe on her heels. 'So what's going on with the roof?' She was grinning, obviously ready to be told some funny story about why Gabe had phoned Alexia with news of missing roof slates.

Falling into a chair, Alexia was no nearer knowing how best to approach Jodie than when she'd left The Angel.

Thankfully, Gabe took the lead. In his deep, precise tones he explained to Jodie what had happened at The Angel.

Slowly, Jodie sat up, belting her dressing gown more tightly, frowning. 'So someone's broken in and *stolen* the old radiators and tiles? They've taken the slates *off the roof*?'

'We can't tell if they broke in, or whether they had a key, as the door's gone.' Gabe's voice held the cautious note of someone pussyfooting about a subject.

Jodie's gaze flicked between Gabe and Alexia. 'What do Shane and Tim say? Have they seen anyone lurking around?'

Gabe fidgeted. 'We haven't been able to contact them. Have you heard from Shane?'

Jodie shook her head, but slowly, as if moving it too decisively might disturb something delicate.

Gabe glanced at Alexia but Alexia felt frozen, as if she were watching an oncoming car speeding towards them and was unable to suggest they jump out of the way.

Gabe turned back to Jodie. 'I'm afraid there's worse to come,' he said gently. And he told her about the missing money. 'I take it you have no knowledge of these transactions?'

Jodie gasped, clutching at the neck of her dressing gown as if holding herself together. 'I haven't had any reason to look at the accounts for days. How can the money have gone? Who's taken it? It's nearly £30,000 altogether. It can't be gone!' She scrabbled in her pocket for her phone and began to stab wildly at it.

Slumping more deeply in her chair, Alexia watched hopelessly, letting Jodie have her moment of denial but miserably aware that no amount of checking the bank balance was going to make the money miraculously reappear. She felt exhausted. It wasn't until Jodie lurched into a high, keening sobbing as she tried fruitlessly to ring Shane once more that Alexia dragged herself over to the sofa to slide her arm around Jodie's quaking shoulders.

'What are we going to do? How can it have happened?' Jodie wailed.

Alexia felt hot tears ooze from her own eyes. Whether they were for Jodie, Gabe or herself, she couldn't have said. But, used to Jodie's emotional reactions, Alexia patted her back while Gabe made hot drinks and fetched tissues. There was nothing to do when Jodie was locked in grief but to allow her to cry it out.

Eventually, when the storm had lessened, Gabe accessed the recent bank account transactions to show them that the money had disappeared in a series of withdrawals – cheques on Friday, when they'd all been preoccupied with preparing for the wrecking party, and the rest via Internet banking either side of midnight Saturday/Sunday.

'You can see the name of the payees!' crowed Jodie, hope dawning on her red and blotchy face. 'Look, this one's a company called Oatwood 2k Ltd. And this one's —'

But Gabe was already shaking his head. ‘Don’t get your hopes up. Whoever did this is clever. They’ll have hidden their tracks. It will lead to a dead end.’

‘But how can it?’ Jodie demanded, expression bewildered. ‘It’s *there*, the name of the company —’

Gabe’s lips thinned. ‘If my experience is anything to go by the money will have been transferred out already and will have disappeared into a network of companies and individuals. The addresses of some will be rental properties and the current tenants will never have heard of Oatwood 2k or any of the others. Some will be legitimate entities, often blissfully unaware that their identities have been stolen and used to open bank accounts. Somewhere along the line the money will be drawn out in cash.’ Jumping up, he started to pace around the room. ‘There’s a very practised hand on the tiller during this voyage of deception, let me tell you. They knew precisely which gambles were worth taking. I, for one, was kept very busy on Friday and Saturday and had no reason to check the accounts.’

‘Same,’ said Alexia, picturing Shane ‘marshalling the troops’ as he called it while they’d all helped to get ready for the wrecking party. She curled up on the sofa as Jodie tried over and again to ring Shane. Alexia might not have Gabe’s banking experience but she was shrewd enough to know that whoever took the money must have had an in. ‘Jodie,’ she began gently. ‘Do you have an address for Shane?’

Knuckles whitening around her phone, Jodie began to bluster, brown eyes furious. ‘Honestly, Alexia, I can’t imagine why you’d bring up such a random question now, when we’ve got this to worry about. He lives in Manor Road in Bettsbrough, but I’ve only been a couple of times and I didn’t exactly note down the door number.’

Alexia glanced at Gabe. He gazed gravely back, compassion in the depths of his eyes. She tried again. ‘The police want to know. Someone has taken this money. Shane isn’t answering his phone so they need to find him—’

‘*What?*’ Jodie physically jumped away from Alexia. ‘Are you accusing my boyfriend? The bank accounts have been hacked. Obviously! It happens all the time. It’s random! Don’t you dare—!’

Gabe interrupted, voice soft. ‘But slates and doors, fireplaces and tiles ... how could a hacker remove those?’

Jodie stared at him dumbly, horror written on her face.

Alexia swallowed painfully. ‘Has Shane had access to your Internet banking app, Jodes?’

With a wail, Jodie leapt up and fled from the room.

Alexia covered her eyes. Could this day get any worse?

That night, Alexia tossed and turned long after Jodie had shut herself in her room and Gabe had gone home. Though she was exhausted, her gritty eyes refused to stay closed and her brain wouldn’t sleep. It flipped from anxiety to disbelief to guilt. She was one of the people the village had trusted with the money they’d raised. And now the money was gone.

With a need to do something constructive, she sat up and switched on the light, then balanced her laptop on her legs to type an exhaustive list of what had been stripped out of The Angel. Together with the ‘before’ and ‘during’ photos she’d taken of the building, the list would go to the police, and to every reclamation yard she knew of in Cambridgeshire.

As she laboured on in the still hours, the phrase ‘*All the money’s gone*’ echoed through her mind, last heard fifteen years ago in her mother’s horrified whisper. They hadn’t needed the police on that occasion. The culprit had been well known to them. Alexia’s dad, Cliff, had run up debts faster than Heather, Alexia’s mum, could pay them off.

To prevent his credit card companies taking the family home Alexia had had to stop attending uni and let her mum use her student loan. A debt Alexia was still repaying as Heather wasn’t well-off and Clifford was on to a whole new lot of debts, probably. Unless his current wife had him well in hand.

Her parents' marriage hadn't made it past the crisis and Alexia and Reuben had been more relieved than distraught when Clifford had moved out. They'd all suffered by being hitched to the same financial wagon as him but at least he'd accepted Heather's rejection, just as he'd later accepted Grandpop leaving his cottage to Alexia and Reuben, philosophically acknowledging his total lack of money management. It was an endless mystification to his children that he could apparently see the truth yet never mend his ways.

Alexia and Reuben heard from him mainly on birthdays and at Christmas now.

Last night had felt like a return to the old financial nightmare and as Alexia grimly tapped at her keyboard she made a series of fruitless wishes.

That Jodie had never met Shane. Jodie might have been resolute in refusing to join the dots of the money and goods disappearing at the same time as Shane and Tim, but Alexia didn't believe in that kind of coincidence.

That Alexia had never agreed to Shane and Tim being the main contractors at The Angel. But once they'd shown her their work was good enough she'd decided to give them a chance. It hadn't occurred to her to ask for evidence of their honesty.

If she had access to unlimited wishing wells, fairy godmothers and wishbones, top of her wishiest wishlist would be the wish that she hadn't spent Saturday night in Ben's bed. On his rug. In his bath.

She *so* wished that.

But he'd seemed likeable in his offbeat way – what was it he'd called himself? An oddball? – and she'd been attracted to his dishevelled good looks and slightly brooding air. The tenderness he'd exhibited with Barney had made her feel all warm and fuzzy, as had his vulnerability over his divorce and bashful confession that he'd forgotten how the seduction game went – though he'd pretty quickly got the hang of it again.

Alexia had been a prize fool. Carefree with singledom, she'd seen no reason for caution. She'd never before indulged in a one-night stand but, hey, they were adults.

It had felt like a triumph every time she'd made him smile. He hadn't looked at her then as if he didn't know who she was. It had been a special connection! It had! Though new and exciting, they'd seemed to know each other in the private world they'd created in his cottage in the woods. It had even led her to assume there would prove to be a perfectly good reason for him leaving before she woke.

That should have been a clue to what kind of man he was, because who *did* that?

Benedict Hardaker. That was the name he'd provided to the police officer. His relationship to Gabe Piercy must be on his mother's side. Fancy him being related at all to lovely warm Gabe, familiar to everyone as he clippity-clopped through the village with his blue cart and little black pony, Snobby.

Benedict gitty shitty Hardaker, she typed into her list after *4 Victorian toilet cisterns, black*, thumping the keys so hard it made her fingertips burn. Then she went back and deleted the words with slow, deliberate taps. Gone. She wished he'd go as easily from Middledip, or at least crawl back into his lair in the woods so she never had to see him again.

It was light by the time she'd finished so she gave up on sleep, freshened up under the shower and trailed downstairs to make a huge mug of tea.

She tried to put some hours in on her real job, the interior decorating she actually charged for and which paid the bills, but couldn't concentrate. She should be putting the finishing touches to the scheme of works for a basement kitchen-diner conversion with utility room and shower room, the old ground-floor kitchen being knocked through to the sitting room to make 'a generous living space'. She'd thought it would be the last substantial job she'd schedule before leaving the village, but now she wondered if what had happened to The Angel would put her new role with Elton back a bit.

In any event, her heart wasn't in it today. She grabbed the key to The Angel's temporary front door, which Dion had dropped off, picked up her jacket and went out.

She found The Angel dreaming under a sun that glowed through the merest suggestion of September mist and paused outside. The front view was misleadingly intact. The thieves had been smart enough to resist even the beautiful moulded brickwork between the windows so their crime wouldn't be immediately obvious. She supposed she ought to be grateful for small mercies instead of standing in the road, her heart a tonne weight. Now she was here she found it hard to go inside and confront again the indignity the gracious old building had suffered.

She reversed her route and crossed back to Main Road, ignoring her own home and taking instead the track that led to Gabe's.

Gabe was feeding his chickens and collecting eggs, a waistcoat over a shirt that used to have a collar. He took one look at her and said, 'Want to take Snobby a couple of carrots for me? He's a good listener.'

Alexia laughed. 'Do I look woebegone enough to need Snobby's listening ear?' But she took three carrots from the feed store by the back door and set off for the paddock. Snobby, black all over, his long mane blowing in his eyes, looked like the pony equivalent of an emo. Planted in the middle of the field he regarded her unmovingly until she waved his snack and he knew it was worth the trip to the gate to meet her. He arrived with his neck extended and his mouth already open.

'Life sucks,' she told him, holding a piece of carrot in her palm and feeling his velvet muzzle shiver over her skin as he hoovered it up. 'And I think it's going to get a lot suckier.' Breaking the carrots into the smallest pieces she could, she fed the thick-coated pony slowly, running her free hand down his smooth neck, letting his coarse mane slither soothingly between her fingers as she told him her woes. Snobby's ears flicked back and forth as if paying close attention. Until the carrot supply dried up, then he tossed his head out of her reach and ambled back into the middle of the field to graze.

Alexia sniffed. 'So now you've had what you want, you don't want to know me? Reminds me of someone else I know.' She stayed for a while, deriving comfort in Snobby's serenity as he tipped up one hoof to rest his leg, tail streaming in the quickening breeze.

At length she headed back, finding Gabe still in the chicken run. He passed her a rake. 'And how's Snobby?'

She surveyed what had once been grass before the chickens got at it. 'Behaving like a man.'

Gabe grunted as he scraped the chicken litter from the hen house into a bucket while Alexia raked up chicken droppings, wishing she could rake up the poo in her life and discard it as easily. Then she took the bucket out to Gabe's compost heap while he dusted disinfectant powder around the hen house and added fresh bedding.

Accepting her help unquestioningly as he moved through his morning's chores, Gabe didn't ask Alexia why she was there. It wasn't because he didn't care, she knew. Gabe just had an uncanny knack for letting people be.

It wasn't until they stopped for elevenses of homemade mint tea with Eccles cakes, consumed leaning companionably on Snobby's gate, that he enquired whether Ben had spoken to her again. Snobby rested his head on Gabe's arm because Gabe was the one person he'd come to without a bribe.

'Nope.' She sipped her steaming drink and stroked Snobby. 'Looks like his coat's thickening for winter already.'

He nodded. 'Probably it will be a hard one.' He sighed, making Snobby sigh back. 'Alexia, I'm not excusing Ben's clumsiness but he has had a dreadfully shitty thing happen to him. He pretends he's coping but I can't tell you how unBen-like it is to isolate himself in the woods.' He gave Alexia a nudge to encourage her to look at him. To read the sincerity in his brown eyes. 'All the people he loved most let him down. He's full of anger and he doesn't know how to let it out. I think I understand why he was so maladroit yesterday and then didn't seem able to retrieve the situation. It was like he was a boiler with a tiny crack. The steam that escaped was under pressure.'

Alexia put down her Eccles cake as she relived the stomach-plummeting feeling of being made to feel like a criminal by the man whose body she'd caressed. 'Are you talking about his divorce?'

Gabe hesitated. 'It's a hard thing to face, not being able to keep your wife. But there's so much more to Ben's situation than that.' He finished the final bite of Eccles cake before continuing. 'I've always had a special relationship with Ben. I see him as a bit of a kindred spirit. For most of my life I tried to conform. I let my parents influence me into joining the bank, a very stuffy institution in those days, just because I was good at maths. I tried to give my wife the kind of marriage she wanted, with dinner parties and a modern box of a house. I was thrilled when the bank gave me the opportunity to retire early but she was horrified that I wanted to get an allotment and animals. I wasn't trying to winkle her out of her precious six-bed detached in Orton. I would have carried on with all that nonsense if she'd given me a bit of understanding, but she wanted me to fritter away my days on bridge parties and coop myself up on cruises. We had the most extravagant rows about it.'

His laugh held an echo of an old relief. 'When we finally gave up on the marriage, I came here to the simple outdoor life I'd always wanted and my wife was happy with that as long as she got the lion's share of the money in the divorce settlement. Ben was the only one of my family who seemed to understand, who glowed as he explored every inch of the place, asking question after question. The rest of our family looked down their noses and said they were wearing unsuitable shoes.'

'In time, it was me who supported Ben's wish to study arboriculture instead of whatever boring subject my sister Penny had earmarked for him. Because I recognised a square peg in a round hole when I saw one.'

Despite herself, Alexia was interested. She still tried not to show that her interest extended to Ben, though. 'Do you think of your wife much?'

He gave her a wink. 'I called my pony Snobby, didn't I?' With a last squeeze of her hand he rose. 'Shall we pick those beans?'

Before they could, his phone began to ring and he slid it from his pocket. As he listened, the laughter died from his face. Presently he said, 'Hold on a moment. Alexia Kennedy is with me. I'll ask her.' He took the phone from his ear. 'A detective constable from Bettsbrough Police. Would we like to go in and make our statements this afternoon?'

The sun went behind a cloud as reality made itself felt again. Alexia sighed. 'I suppose. Let's go together. Get a time and I'll pick you up, because I don't suppose the police station has a hitching rail for Snobby.'

Chapter Five

Ben remembered Alexia telling him she lived in Main Road, but not the number of the house. As he didn't particularly want to ask Gabe in case it provoked another lecture, he asked at the village shop.

'Number forty-four, blue door,' the well-upholstered lady behind the counter responded promptly. 'Caught your eye, has she?'

'Um, thanks.' Put off by such outright nosiness he hurried out before she could invade his privacy further.

When he located Number 44 he realised it stood quite close to the entrance to Gabe's track. He must have passed it dozens of times. Squaring his shoulders, he strode up the path and rapped with the black doorknocker.

The door was opened by Jodie, wearing a tatty cardigan and a half-hopeful expression. 'Oh. Hello,' they said in unison, each sounding disappointed to behold the other.

'Is Alexia here?' Ben felt on edge. Last he'd heard, Jodie's boyfriend had been proving difficult to contact just when a lot of people wanted to speak to him urgently.

Jodie shook her head.

'Right.' He tried to prompt her. 'Any idea when she might be home?'

Jodie just shook her head again.

Good manners made Ben thank her, though he wasn't sure what for. He turned and wandered up the track to Gabe's but found the house locked up.

While he decided on his next move he watched the chickens pecking peaceably, placing each clawed foot as if fussy what they trod in. Though the autumn sun fell on his shoulders there was no real warmth to it. It made him wish he'd spent some of the summer at Gabe's place instead of letting Gabe come to him while Ben did the hermit thing in the woods.

Shaking himself free of such pointless regrets he tried Gabe's phone. No answer. He strode back to the shop, where he'd left his pick-up, and drove around the corner to The Angel. He might as well do something useful.

He carried his kit around to the back of the property where the yellowing grass was up around his thighs and neglected shrubs had linked arms as if to keep humans out. His target was an old apple tree with a decided lean. The bare branches on one side and the shelf fungus on its trunk told Ben there wouldn't be a good end to its story so Gabe had agreed it had to go.

Hardhat, visor and ear defenders in place, he paced around, treading down the grass and deciding on the best place to drop the tree. Then he turned to the wall of shrubs, alternately using his saw and his hedge cutter until he'd cut a path through them. He dragged aside the resultant heap of brush to go through the chipper later.

He turned back to inspect the tree. It would be unsafe for him to get up into it to reduce the crown before felling, so, after a check of the blade and chain, he started up his chainsaw to lop what he could reach from the ground without it falling on him. Guided by his even strokes the glistening blade sliced through the wood in a fountain of chippings as the motor wailed yeeeeOOwwwwww. He cut up the branches as they fell, clearing the brush and stacking the timber.

Then he pulled back the grass and weeds to get a good look at the base of the trunk. He eyed the line on which he wanted the tree to fall then returned his chainsaw and ear defenders to the truck and picked up his axe.

Hefting it, he mentally marked out his target then began to chop, first a pilot cut on the side the tree would fall, then settling in to cut slightly higher on the opposite side, his swinging axe eating methodically through the trunk. Despite gloves, his palms stung and his shoulders ached, but somehow the regular blows gave him satisfaction.

He paused to shrug off his jacket and wipe the sweat from under his visor, checking that his line of fall was still good. That was when he realised he had an audience.

A woman who reminded him of Betty Boop was standing back, watching. He pulled off his hardhat and visor. 'Alexia!'

The deep blue jacket and skirt she wore with heeled shoes made her look more grown-up than the jeans and T-shirt he'd so far seen her in. And out of. She tilted her head. 'You're using an axe when you have a chainsaw in your truck because ...?'

He glanced back at the tree, only a few strokes away from succumbing, the cream and brown heartwood exposed. 'I wasn't prepared to wield the chainsaw on a trunk with no one around to get help if I got into trouble. Anyway, it seems fitting that such an old tree meets its end by hand.'

Her eyes narrowed. 'You looked like you were beating it to death.'

Face heating up, he felt as if she saw right through him. But he pushed the thought aside, wanting to make the most of their return to conversation rather than frozen silences. 'I really need you to let me properly apologise—'

'It's OK.' Her expression didn't change.

'It wasn't OK! I was incredibly crass, doing a vanishing act while you were asleep then sounding as if I was accusing you of having something to do with what's gone missing. I've hardly slept for wondering what you must have felt.' Hardly sleeping wasn't new, but he'd passed a bad night even by his standards. 'You must have *something* to say.'

She stared. Finally she nodded. 'I'm glad we didn't have condoms.' Then she turned and vanished around the corner of The Angel.

He stared after her, insulted, as he knew he was meant to be.

Turning back to the apple tree he pulled on his hardhat and visor and weighed the axe in his hands before swinging the glinting glade once more. Ten strokes and the tree creaked and whined. He stood back and watched as it seemed to fall in slow motion, landing with a thump that travelled up from the earth and into his legs.

It lay exactly where he'd planned. At least he was good at something.

Chapter Six

Alexia let herself into her house and found Jodie once again lying on the sofa, staring at the ceiling while *Family Guy* blared out from the TV.

Alexia hung her jacket on the doorknob and flopped into an armchair, scooping up the remote to switch off the TV, too heartsick and hollow to worry about niceties. 'We need to talk.'

Slowly, Jodie turned to look at her. 'I was watching that.'

Alexia declined to get involved in an argument about what constituted 'watching'. She suspected that even the most optimistic of girlfriends must by now be seeing the writing on the wall but was unsurprised Jodie was putting off reading it. She wasn't exactly one of life's copers. 'Gabe and I have been to give our statements to Detective Constable Fitzhugh at Bettsbrough police station.'

Jodie's eyes shimmered with sudden tears.

Compassion triumphing over her own grey mood, Alexia hauled herself up and went to kneel on the floor beside her friend. She softened her voice. 'Have you been able to reach Shane?'

Jodie shook her head and a tear skated from the corner of her eye.

'The police have confirmed they're looking for him, Jodes. I'm so sorry. According to a neighbour's CCTV his truck made several trips to and from The Angel between eight and ten on Sunday morning. It was fully loaded each time it left. Shane and Tim don't seem to exist, according to the police national computer, so DC Fitzhugh wants you to see him to provide what details you can. Give him pictures of Shane from your phone, and his truck's registration number.'

More tears followed the first, plunging down Jodie's cheeks. 'I don't remember his number plate.' Her mouth stretched around a sob. 'Shane's *my boyfriend*. I've been with him for months, he almost lived here—'

'About that.' Alexia clasped her aching forehead. 'You know some of the money in the community account was cleared by cheques paid into a few different accounts?'

Jodie gave the tiniest of nods.

Alexia stroked her friend's arm through her dressing gown. 'Gabe and I have an appointment with the bank tomorrow and we're hoping you'll come.' She cleared her throat miserably. 'The thing is ... the cheque numbers relate to the cheque book we keep here so a likely scenario is that ...' About to say *as he got so close to you* she looked at the misery and pain on her friend's face and changed it to, 'as we let him pretty much run tame here, he had access to it.'

Slowly Jodie's face crumpled. 'How *could* he?'

Although she knew Jodie was beseeching her to explain how Shane could treat Jodie that way, Alexia shied away from any discussion that might lead to the conclusion that Jodie had been a mug. 'The DC said it's possible Shane's a confidence trickster. Obviously time's been invested in pulling together his plan and it probably won't be the first time he's done it. By sharing space with you he got access to your laptop, your security gadget from the bank and the cheque book.'

With a howl, Jodie lost what was left of her composure. 'All the cheque books. My private bank accounts are empty too-oo-oo!'

Shock swept through Alexia. 'Oh, *no*! Oh, Jodes. For some reason that hadn't occurred to me. Have you called the police?'

'Noooo-oo-oo,' Jodie bawled, flinging her arms around Alexia and burying her head against her shoulder.

'Then tell DC Fitzhugh when you go and see him. And you'll have to notify the bank.' She slipped her arms around Jodie's quaking body. 'Do you want me to come with you?'

'Yes plea-ea-ease!'

It was some time before Jodie stopped howling. Alexia hugged and patted her and passed her tissues, stunned by the cruelty of her friend's humiliation. Ben's disappointing behaviour paled into insignificance when compared with the cynical way Shane had used Jodie.

'Th-thank you for not being cross,' Jodie hiccupped eventually.

'Of course I'm not cross. You're the sister I never had, remember?' Alexia referenced the phrase they'd used as teenagers. Jodie, older by two years, had always been ready with teenage wisdom at important moments, such as Alexia's 'first time'. *At the end the boy goes 'ruuuuhhhh' and falls on you but he'll be OK after a minute.*

In their twenties it had been Alexia who'd blossomed, following her star despite not being able to complete university, determined not to stagger from one financial crisis to another like her dad, nor to rely on a man, like her mum. Jodie, less driven, had been content with working in cosy coffee shops popular with customers who liked a chat as well as a well-risen scone.

Alexia had been surprised when Jodie agreed to join with Gabe to run The Angel Community Café. Responsibility didn't feature large in her comfort zone – in fact it was a prime cause of anxiety for her – but probably Gabe, with his innate good sense and decades of financial experience, had made it seem nice and safe.

Now everything had gone wrong. Alexia and Gabe were struggling for a grip on the nightmare of being the victims of crime. Jodie had gone to pieces. Christopher Carlysle, who'd only ever lent his good name to The Community Café fundraising account, was making it plain he had not expected to be dragged into the fallout from theft by deception.

And how the hell was this whole ugly mess to be explained to the villagers? So many had joined in the fundraising—

Jodie thumped the sofa cushion, jolting Alexia out of her unhappy reverie. 'You're supposed to be the businesswoman, Alexia!'

Alexia, her legs aching from crouching for so long, wobbled dangerously. She'd thought herself inured to Jodie's lightning changes of mood but this one caught her by surprise. 'What?'

Jodie's face was blotched red but her mouth was set in a stubborn line. 'You obviously didn't check Shane out, did you?'

Alexia hauled herself to her feet, rubbing her knees to bring the circulation back. 'One of the ways I check contractors out is to go on personal recommendation from someone I trust! In this case, the person I trust would be *you*. FYI, you're also the reason he's half-lived here, eating us out of house and home while, it turns out, he poked his nasty nose into our private things, stole anything he could get his shitty hands on including a lot of money we were responsible for, and left us to face the music.'

Though understanding it was fear that made Jodie snap and snarl like an injured animal, the attack left Alexia feeling sick and trembly. 'I'm going to have a few drinks at The Three Fishes. Coming?' The invitation was tacked-on with little enthusiasm.

'I just want to stay here.' Jodie turned her face into the cushions.

Alexia gazed at her, shoulders quivering under a mantle of unbrushed hair. 'Do you want to phone DC Fitzhugh before I go?'

Jodie's voice came out muffled. 'No.'

Trying to persuade Jodie in this mood was like trying to cajole a timid dog out from under a bed – it was best for everyone to wait until she felt safe. Alexia shrugged wearily back into her jacket and let herself out of the front door. Her days didn't usually involve being in the pub at six o'clock, but sod it. Her days didn't usually involve fraud, theft, betrayal and a horrible throb of panic beneath her breastbone, either.

It was only a five-minute walk to The Three Fishes but it was chilly enough that Alexia was glad to push open the door into the pub's bright warmth and make for a stool at the bar. Janice the barmaid appeared from the back regions as Alexia propped her elbows wearily on the polished wood. 'A very big glass of Sauvignon blanc, please.'

Janice reached for a glass. 'Your wrecking party took all our trade on Saturday night, by the way, so you're on Tubb's shit list.'

'Unfortunately, the landlord being cranky doesn't even make the top ten of "Alexia's things to worry about" right now.'

Janice laughed as she placed the frosty glass in front of Alexia along with a tumbler of ice, not needing to be reminded that Alexia liked to pop ice into her wine no matter how well chilled it was already.

Alexia took a big gulp of wine to fortify herself before reaching for her phone. She hadn't wanted to rub salt into wounds by checking her private accounts in front of Jodie but she was almost shaking with trepidation as she opened her banking app ...

Phew. She took another big gulp of wine in relief. Both personal and business accounts were intact. Though he might have been able to find her Internet banking security device in her drawer, Shitty Shane hadn't had the opportunity to look over her shoulder and catch her passwords as he probably had Jodie's.

Grateful for small mercies but feeling decidedly un-chatty, she kept her eyes trained on her phone screen as she worked her way steadily down both her wine glass and her email inbox.

An enquiry about a small decorating job: lounge with garden room opening out. Two newsletters, which she deleted unread. Offer of £5 off if she took a train to London before the end of October. And an enthusiastic email from Elton about a property they were completing on in Wimbledon, *The sort of thing you could so go to town on, rejigging the space for best effect and greatest profit.*

The thought that she'd yet to tell Elton how spectacularly pear-shaped her project had gone made her feel queasy. Unless, she thought, regarding her now empty glass, that was due to pouring one-third of a bottle of wine into a stomach that had scarcely seen food today. She caught Janice's eye and ordered cottage pie. And another glass of wine.

While she waited, she googled Shane Edmunds and Timothy O'Neill. If the police national computer hadn't thrown anything up then her Internet search wasn't likely to, but she had to try *something*. Predictably, all she dug up was their social media accounts, presumably as phoney as they were, and social media accounts of different Shane Edmundses and Timothy O'Neills.

Her dinner arrived and she felt better for eating it. She was just deliberating between another glass of wine or a more sensible cup of coffee when a man she didn't know strode into the pub and came to stand just around the corner of the bar. Tubb had replaced Janice as server and he ambled over to hover expectantly.

'I'm hoping you can help me,' the man began loudly. 'I'm looking for someone called Benedict Hardaker. Ben.'

Alexia gave him a second look. The man had thin sandy hair and a forehead that looked as if it saw a lot of frowns.

Tubb shrugged. 'Sorry, mate. Don't think I know him.'

The man's frown dug deeper furrows. 'He might be staying with his uncle. Gabe Piercy.'

Tubb gave his odd smile, the corners of his mouth turning down instead of up. 'I know Gabe. Not been in here tonight, though.'

'He's not at home either. Neither he nor Ben seem to have been answering their phones lately.'

Tubb looked sympathetic. 'Bad signal round here sometimes.'

'Right.' The man's cheeks were mottled red. 'Perhaps if you do see Gabe you could give him a message to pass on to Ben? It's very important that Ben sees his brother. Tell him Imogen really needs his help, too. Oh, and we'd actually appreciate knowing that Ben's OK.'

Tubb began to move off to serve a customer. 'If I see Gabe I'll try and remember the gist.' He didn't look as if he'd try very hard. Probably the man ought to have at least bought a drink before demanding favours.

Alexia pinned her gaze to her phone screen. Should she speak up and say that Ben was fine – if you didn't count being moody and changeable? But Ben might be hiding out in the woods for a reason. On the other hand ... the messages had sounded as if they could be important.

The 'buts' continued to circulate in her mind while the man drummed his fingers on the counter then turned and left.

Tubb paused in front of Alexia on his way to the till. 'Have you seen Gabe today?'

She nodded. 'Think he was going out this evening.' He'd been going to see Christopher – they'd taken one awkward interview each: him Christopher, her Jodie – so maybe he was still there.

'Gabe's nephew is the wizard in the woods, isn't he?'

Alexia nodded, unsurprised. Tubb knew a great deal about the village and everyone in it.

Tubb grunted and went to the till, frowning. Alexia had known Tubb since she was a child being brought into the beer garden for lemonade and crisps on a summer's afternoon. Despite his often dour façade he had a code so far as his pub was concerned. It was the village's oasis and people deserved to be able to relax there unhounded. Ben was a prospective customer by virtue of having chosen to live in Middledip, even if on its very edges, whereas the man asking after him was an outsider.

In following the possible workings of his mind, Alexia found herself making a decision. 'I'll make sure the nephew gets the message. I can ring Gabe.'

'Thanks.' Frown disappearing now that someone else was taking responsibility, Tubb moved on to another customer without even making the anticipated complaint about the Middledip Wrecking Party taking all his business last Saturday.

Alexia fished out her phone and dialled Gabe's number, but the call went straight to voicemail. She sighed.

What now? Nobody would blame her for filing this under 'not my business' and simply passing the messages to Gabe tomorrow, but something about that solution didn't sit well. She had a strong feeling Ben should be warned about the man looking for him. Maybe it was because the man had sounded closely connected with the family and Alexia remembered what Gabe had said about everyone who Ben loved letting him down.

Also ... her conscience kept nudging her that her remark about the condom had been malicious and, from Ben's expression, hurtful.

They were both aware that when she realised neither of them had a condom, she'd been so frustrated she could have screamed. Actually, she had screamed, just a tiny bit, and he'd laughed and applied himself to relieving her frustrations in ways for which no condom was required.

She glanced behind her to the window. Twilight. She sighed and gave up on the idea of coffee.

If Ben was surprised to hear a knock on his door in the middle of the evening he was downright astounded to open it and find his caller to be Alexia Kennedy.

'What an unexpected pleasure.' He was aware of sounding sarcastic but this afternoon's interchange had stung.

'I came to tell you something.'

He looked past her into the darkness. He hadn't heard the approach of a car. 'Don't tell me you've walked here.'

'OK. But I've had two large glasses of wine so I didn't drive.'

It was hard not to notice how she hugged her thin jacket around herself. He took a tentative step back. 'Do you want to come in to tell me?'

Equally as tentatively, she stepped inside.

As she seated herself in one of the armchairs he shook from his mind the image of the laughing, eyes-dancing Alexia lounging on the floor on Saturday evening, back propped against the same chair as she drank whisky. And, later, naked and glistening Alexia exploring his body with inquisitive hands.

Glad he'd already lit the fire in view of the way she extended her hands to it, he took the other chair. 'What's up?'

She wasted no time on small talk. ‘A man was looking for you at the pub. He said it’s important that your brother sees you, that Imogen needs your help, and that “we”, whoever that is, would like to know you’re all right. I decided that some of those messages might be important and as I don’t have your phone number I came over.’

‘Thank you for going to the trouble.’ Part of him wanted to consider why she had. Her collar, he noticed, bore small white polka dots, an unexpectedly frivolous detail of the same otherwise nonsense outfit he’d seen her in earlier.

She narrowed her eyes as if trying to measure his muted reaction. ‘The man was in his sixties with thin sandy hair—’

‘I know who he was.’ He rested his head on the chair back, knowing he had to prioritise. ‘It is possible that one of those messages might be important.’ Not the one about his brother, Lloyd – or, at least, he doubted it would prove to be anything new.

But Imogen ...

‘Would you mind hanging on while I make a quick call?’ Without waiting for an answer he jumped up and made for the kitchen. There, he opened his contacts list and tapped on *Imogen*.

She answered after two rings, voice breathy with surprise. ‘Ben?’ She sounded so familiar that for an instant he felt as if the past had slipped into the present, as if he might be calling to say he could get home on Friday so they could go out to dinner. He could almost hear the reply she would have made: *Or we could stay home, just the two of us ... and then you never know what you’ll get on the table*, her slight Berkshire burr caressing the words ‘could’ and ‘never’. He’d have laughed and lowered his voice to suggest ...

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