

The Flower Shop on Faxley St.



Can a new love bloom for Lily?

Rachel Dove

The Flower Shop on Foxley Street

«HarperCollins»

Dove R.

The Flower Shop on Foxley Street / R. Dove — «HarperCollins»,

A new love could be about to bloom for Lily in this bright, warm women's fiction title that fans of Holly Hepburn and Cathy Bramley will love. Lily Rose Baxter loves her little flower shop on Foxley Street and the freedom and independence from her family that it represents. Lily can't help but feel that something is missing from her life..., but when mysterious stranger Will Singer comes into her shop looking for the perfect bouquet of roses, all that could be about to change.

A new love could be about to bloom for Lily

Lily Rose Baxter loves her little flower shop on Foxley Street and the freedom and independence from her family that it represents.

Lily can't help but feel that something is missing from her life... , but when mysterious stranger Will Singer comes into her shop looking for the perfect bouquet of roses, all that could be about to change.

Fans of Holly Hepburn and Cathy Bramley will adore this bright, warm women's fiction read.

[Also from Rachel Dove](#)

The Chic Boutique on Baker Street

The Flower Shop on Foxley Street

Rachel Dove



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Book List](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Author Bio](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Endpages](#)

[Copyright](#)

RACHEL DOVE is a mum of two from Yorkshire. She has always loved writing, has had previous success as a self-published author, and is the author of *The Chic Boutique on Baker Street*. Rachel is the winner of the Mills & Boon Prima Flirty Fiction competition.

She is the winner of the 2016 Writers Bureau Writer of the Year Award and has had work published overseas. She is currently working on her 5th book, and can often be found glued to a keyboard.

She is a former post 16 teacher and is passionate about English, reading and special educational needs.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements to me are sometimes harder to write than an actual book, as I worry about leaving people out.

Lots of effort goes into making a book, from the first idea to seeing it out there in the world, and it's not just me sat behind a keyboard that makes it happen.

First of all, a big thanks to my editor Anna Baggaley, who is responsible for turning my ideas into the polished versions you amazing readers get to read, and the HQ Digital team for giving my characters a home.

As always, authors and bloggers are an important part, and I have to give a big shout out to my author family, who keep me sane, make me laugh and don't judge me for my Gerard Butler obsession. (Gerard, if you're reading this, call me.)

To name but a few: Lisa Hall, Holly Martin, Ann Troup, Portia MacIntosh, Darcie Boleyn, Ann Troup, Raven Allen, Lynda Stacey, Sarah Bennett, Kaisha Holloway, JB Johnston, Claire Allen and Roxie Cooper.

Also a shout out to Mills & Boon and Prima magazine, who helped me start this journey
Love you all

Dedication

In memory of the late great
Stuart Malcolm Cockell
Gone but never forgotten

CHAPTER ONE

Lily Rose Baxter pulled up to Foxley Street in her bright pink van and, after turning the engine off, closed her green eyes and finished off her conversation with Michael Bubl . Or rather, she rested her head on the worn headrest and let the rest of his song, playing from the radio, wash over her as she finished her imaginary conversation. It was the same as usual, Bubl  using his smooth silky tones to declare that he was leaving his life, and hopping on the nearest jet to Westfield to pick her up. She always played hard to get in her daydream, as any girl would, but today, if Mr Bean turned up in his mini with a bag of Haribo she would dive into his arms and chug off into the sunset.

Home was horrible. It was a minefield of awkward silences, pointed barbs and downright open hostility. Going down to breakfast this morning felt like it needed a two-drink minimum. Lily had finally called it a day after the fourth insult and got breakfast on the go instead. If a banana salvaged from the bowl on her way past counted as a morning meal. She knew Roger would have the coffee machine going, and the thought of that java warming her bones thrilled her.

Retailers as a rule hated the January slump, but Lily was optimistic. She knew January brought with it a new year of occasions, new loves, the promise that this year would be the one when her life changed. This year also heralded her thirtieth birthday, and she hoped that it would be an important year for other reasons too.

She zipped her body warmer up to the top and, flicking an errant leaf off her blue jeans, she got out of the van, locked up, and half jogged to her shopfront. It was still early, only just after eight, but she knew that the fresh delivery would be in, and Roger would be hard at work with today's orders.

Thank God for Roger. As she opened her front door, she heard the familiar tinkle of the bell and was hit with the welcome scent of flowers and foliage. The radio was playing in the back, and she could hear her assistant and friend humming along to 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. The weight in her shoulders lifted, and she worked her fingers on the knot at the base of her neck as she flicked the shop sign to open.

'Morning! Happy 3rd of January!' a happy voice trilled. Roger came around the corner, a large white lily in hand. 'Coffee?'

Lily beamed at him, nodding. 'That would be great, thanks. Is that the Carson order?'

Roger nodded at the flower sadly. 'Yes, poor Mrs Carson. These winters in the countryside, poor old dears drop like flies.'

Lily shook her head good-naturedly at his trademark bluntness. Roger didn't have a nasty bone in his body, but he spoke as he found, which was precisely why he survived here, and why they got on so well. It took a strong character to stomach her parents, and Roger seemed to survive each event unscathed.

Lily wished she could do the same. That morning had been terrible. Every morning, in fact, was pretty dire. It was like living in a battlefield. She fully expected to come down to breakfast one morning to find her parents in trenches at each side of the house.

Roger made her a drink and they gravitated to the large solid woodwork island in the back. They both took a seat on their stools, pausing to sip at the warm brew. Roger was eyeing her over the top of his mug, and she was intentionally pretending not to see him. The flower shop looked great, and Lily never tired of looking at it. Since her parents retired six months ago, allowing her to buy them out, she had really made it her own, renaming it from Foxley Flowers, in honour of the street in Westfield it was on, to Love Blooms.

She had overhauled the interior too, lightening the walls with lovely cream and eggshell blue colours, and buying a computer to take online orders. Not that many people in Westfield used the net to order, but orders from neighbouring towns and villages were increasing as word got around. Her parents were not thrilled with this modernization at first, but they pretty much left her alone now, realizing that they had sold the shop to her to do as she wished, and so they could enjoy their retirement. They were still guarantors for her huge loan, but she knew that one day it would be hers on paper as well as in her heart.

Lily realized that Roger was still staring at her over his Kenco. She raised a brow at him.

'What?' she drawled.

Roger pursed his lips and smiled slyly. For a man who constantly wore cardigans, he could pull some comical faces.

'You know what, dear. I keep telling you, clean the flat out upstairs and move there! It's yours – there is only crap up there. A bit of furniture from A New Lease of Life, a few cushions et cetera. A trip to IKEA, and you are sorted. Your own pad, close to work – and NO parents!'

Lily nodded along, having heard this speech many times. 'I know, I know, and I have thought about it, don't get me wrong, but ...'

'But,' Roger retorted, swilling his cup out in the sink and getting to work on the wreath again, 'you are waiting for Mr Tiny Balls to man up and plan the wedding, and for your parents to be happy again.'

Lily laughed. 'Don't call him that! He doesn't have tiny balls!'

Roger shrugged. 'Does he not?'

Lily shook her head in exasperation, draining her coffee and heading over to the order book.

'No, he works with them, obviously, but the way you say it – and anyway, my parents need me at the moment. It's a very delicate time in their lives –'

'Delicate!' Roger snorted. 'Forgive me, dear, but they have retired, their amazingly talented and green-fingered only child has taken on their legacy, their house is paid for, and they have money in

the bank. The world is their oyster! They have their health, time. People work to be in their positions all their lives! Excuse me if I don't break out the violins.'

Lily leant over the counter, resting her head on the order book's white pages.

'I know, I ... I just can't go yet; they are not seeing eye to eye at the minute, and it's pretty bad.'

Roger snipped a stem, thrusting it into the green oasis mount.

'Honey,' he said, flicking out a hip, 'you are thirty this year. You have your own business, and you have talents. Stop waiting for other people to get a grip on their lives; take charge of your own. Trust me. I waited years to come out to my family, lived a lonely life of lies, and when I came out, my mother laughed as though I was telling her the sky was blue!'

Lily looked across at her friend, who was arranging flowers while wearing a clothing combo of floral shirt, cardigan, fitted skinny jeans and blue glittery brogues. He lived in the village with his husband, James, who was a businessman and property developer, and their dog, a huge sloppy Great Dane called Bruno. She couldn't imagine him dulling his light to make others feel comfortable.

'It's a bit different, Roger. I don't have some big part of myself hidden, like you had to.'

'Don't you?' he asked, pointing a length of baby's breath at her in accusation. 'You have plans, my dear, things you want to do. I follow your Pinterest boards, I see your sketches.'

Lily darted a look at him. 'Stalk much?'

'Yes, I do,' he said rather proudly, causing her to giggle.

The trill of the bell announced the arrival of a customer, and as Lily walked to the front shop floor area, she heard him calling after her.

'There you go, don't ask who the bell tolls for – it tolls for you! Opportunity knocking!'

'Sssh.' She batted her hand behind her as she walked away.

When she saw who it was, she blushed furiously.

'Sorry about that, good morning! Would you like the usual?'

'Good morning, yes please.'

She smiled briefly at the man in front of her, before turning away to get to work on the bouquet he ordered twice a week. Monday and Friday morning, regular as clockwork.

'So,' the deep male voice said, 'good weekend?'

Lily almost snipped off her finger instead of the stem of a gerbera daisy as she had flashbacks of her weekend.

'Er ... not bad, a little boring really. You?'

The voice hesitated. 'Er, same really. Dinner with friends on Saturday evening. I had a bit of work to get done, so I wouldn't call it a weekend, really.'

Lily nodded, wrapping the blooms in tissue paper and cellophane. She took them over to the counter.

'Okay for you, before I ribbon them up?' She allowed herself then to look at him fully. He looked back at her momentarily, before glancing at the bouquet with a nod.

'Perfect, thanks.' She smiled at him. He was dressed in his usual work gear, and with it being January, he had a beanie hat on. Dark brown tendrils of hair licked around the edges, and she knew from memory that under his hat was a crop of thick curly locks. Down from the hat, he had a beautiful pair of deep chocolate brown eyes, hooded with thick lashes the average girl would kill for. She noticed he looked tired, with a day or two of stubble on his chiselled chin. She forced herself to look away before she peeked at his adorable lips. She could already feel her cheeks burning with heat.

She concentrated on wrapping the bouquet with ribbon, taking care not to curl her fingers instead whilst using her scissors with shaky hands.

'All done,' she said, relieved, and she passed them over the counter. He was looking at her, not moving, and Lily frowned. 'You okay?'

He started, reaching for the bouquet clumsily. His fingers brushed hers, and Lily felt the roughness of them against her own. She shivered a little, and from the look on his face, he saw it. Damn.

‘Sorry,’ he said, rubbing the back of his hand across his mouth, ‘half asleep today. How much?’

‘Twenty pounds as normal, please,’ she replied, looking intently at the bouquet in his hands, rather than at him. ‘You need coffee. There’s a little café next door, with some seating. It’s nice and quiet.’

He raised his eyebrows a little as he handed over the notes. ‘Really?’ Something tugged at the side of his mouth, like a smile trying to escape.

‘Yes, it’s nice. I love their caramel latte. Do you like coffee? Or tea? They have tea.’

‘Do you mean now? I just, I have to go to work –’

‘Oh no! I didn’t mean with me, oh God no. I just mean you could have a rest before work, wake up a bit.’ She was panicking now, and she knew it. She had just accidentally kind of asked the man out! He looked at her open-mouthed, as though he was struggling to think of something to say. No doubt trying to make a swift escape from the crazy florist. Damn, a regular customer she couldn’t afford to lose either.

She looked behind her frantically, to see Roger staring at her, a ridiculously large grin on his face. She motioned behind her back for him to come and rescue her, but he just shook his head as if to say *nope, you dug this hole, you dig yourself out*.

He spoke again, his deep voice cutting through the high-pitched squeaking in her head. *Here it comes*, she thought. *The embarrassing it’s not me, it’s you – crazy loony woman I have no wish to spend time with*. She had to will her own eyes to stay open. She almost wished her parents were here. A good bicker would defuse the tension.

‘I could do tomorrow, same time. I have a late start but I would like to chat with you, actually.’

Lily’s mouth would have dropped to the wood floor if her lower face wasn’t frozen in a terrified lock-jaw grimace. She willed herself to speak. The first attempt came out as a whisper, so she cleared her throat and tried again. This time she sounded like Joe Pasquale, but she ran with it. ‘I, I don’t think ...’

He looked straight at her, probably seeing a slight sense of panic crossing her features as she fumbled her refusal. The look on his face was so confusing that she couldn’t finish her sentence.

‘Go on,’ Roger said into her ear, his body suddenly so close she could feel his cardigan buttons digging into her spine. ‘For once in your life, take a chance.’ Lily was still staring, stuttering at the man before her, but Roger’s words stopped her dead.

‘Yes, tomorrow’s great,’ she said in a flourish of bravado.

‘Lovely! She will see you then!’ Roger stepped even further forward, giving her a sneaky poke in the back with his finger. She managed to smile at the customer, or at least that’s what she thought it was. She might have looked constipated, at best. He smiled and nodded.

‘Great,’ he said easily, as though he made coffee dates all the time (he probably did, to be fair – the man was sex on a stick) and giving her a little wave and a smile that melted her heart, he left. Turning at the door, he looked at her again, a deep look that nearly knocked the feet from beneath her. For a second she thought he was going to come back, change his mind, but he just looked at her as though he was asking her a question she didn’t know the answer to.

She looked right back at him, wondering what he was thinking, and why she asked herself this question every time she saw him. He smiled again, a tiny twitch on his lips, and then he strode away. It seemed that no answers would come today.

Lily stood at the counter, frozen solid, his cash still clenched tight in her hand. Her face felt as though it was on fire, and her whole body tingled. Roger had gone in the back and came through with the finished wreath, heading to the van. He gave her a tap on the arm that threatened to topple her mannequin challenge pose off balance.

‘Wow, girl, I should give you a pep talk every morning! That, my dear, took balls. Not tiny balls either!’ He tittered at his own joke as he set off on his delivery.

Just outside the shop, after walking to his flatbed truck, Will Singer opened his door, jumped in, and laid the blooms carefully on the passenger seat. He wondered to himself at how his morning had turned for the better. Monday mornings were not so bad after all – it seemed this one at least had improved. He looked at the carefully put together blooms and thought of the girl behind the counter. He’d had no intention of asking her out; he just knew that this was something he could never do. When she had talked about the café, something in him had just woken up, seized the day. Carpe diem and all that. Before he had engaged his brain, his tongue had made a move.

He shook his head at himself in the central mirror. He put the key in the ignition and, placing his hands on the wheel, he realized he had forgotten again, and his heart dipped back into his boots.

Reaching over into the glove box, he pulled out a small cardboard box, the size of a brooch box. It rattled as he pulled it open. His smile faded, and he frowned. Back to reality, he thought, sliding the gold wedding band back onto his ring finger. The ring felt like a brand of hot iron around his skin, and not for the first time, he wondered how long he could keep juggling the people in his life.

Sometimes, when he lay in bed at night, listening to the silence around him, he tried to put the pieces together, but they would never fit. He could never make everyone happy at the same time. Whatever he did next, he would end up hurting someone along the way.

Now, with this latest morning event, he had a whole new piece to fit into the map of his life. This piece was brand new, shiny. It made him happy to think of it. He made a promise to himself there and then. He would keep this piece separate. He wouldn’t even try to blunt the edges to make it fit. He would keep it to himself, just for a little while, and then he would sadly let it go.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Morning, Mrs Evesham, looking good with that swing!’ Stuart shouted as he flew past the blonde on the green. She waved at him, wiggling her bottom as he drove past. He was in his element, riding his personalized golf cart like it was a Maserati around the Willard Westfield Golf Club and Spa. Spencer Willard was the founder, long departed, and apparently a bit of a character.

Stuart liked to think he was keeping the spirit alive, giving the people who subscribed to the place the authentic Willard experience. Being the resident golf pro and sports manager, it was his prerogative that the business did well. He was always on the lookout for new talent, longing for the day a pampered child would walk in and be the next Tiger Woods, under his expert tutelage. Then he would be off, back on the tours, manager to the stars. Or his father would finally relent, give him the much-needed money and clout to play again on his own talent.

That was the plan anyway. Since his own tours had ended relatively early, and the sponsorship deals had dried up, his father had cut him off, declaring him to be a disappointment. The black sheep in the sporting family. It was only thanks to the nagging and pleading eyes of his mother that her husband eventually pulled a few strings to get him this job, up in the sticks of Yorkshire. Coming up to eight years later, Stuart Woodward was still wondering what the hell had happened to bring him here, and when something would come along to get him out of it. Back to the life that he should have, the existence worthy of a Woodward.

Stuart came from a long line of sporting heroes: rugby stars, tennis pros. His cousin Gerry even played football for England. Golf, whilst still considered a sport by many, was frowned upon somewhat by his family. His father loved golf – watching it, and playing it on a Saturday – but as for making a career out of it? Not so much.

Stuart frowned as he pulled into his parking space. Thinking back to the summers of his childhood made him shudder, even more than the cold snap in the post-Christmas weather. He was distracted from thoughts of him being belittled in the garden with his little plastic golf set by a vibrating in his pants. He climbed out of the cart and answered the phone in one swift movement.

‘Stuart Woodward. I put the swwwwiinnggg in your swing!’ There was a little hesitation, and then he heard Lily’s soft voice.

‘Wayne’s World quotes again? We have spoken about this,’ she said teasingly, and he smiled into the phone at the sound of it. Just hearing her voice made him forget about his family pressures. She made him relax without even trying, and he loved her for that.

‘Hey, baby, sorry, I thought it was a work call.’

‘And that’s how you answer work calls?’ she asked, obviously amused. ‘I er, I just wanted to know if you were free for lunch today. I can’t meet tomorrow now, I have a meeting with a . . . supplier.’

Stuart caught the waver in her voice. ‘You okay? You sound weird.’ It was true – she didn’t sound herself. Stuart could hear it in her voice. Not for the first time, he wondered whether she was as happy as he had been assuming she was. In truth, even Stuart expected her to wake up one day and realize he was more Beast than Prince Charming.

He started to walk down the drive to the large gravel path that ran to the golf club. Even in this weather, it was beautiful – even if the greenery was a little worse for wear. He would have to get a gardener in. Since the last person left, he had struggled to fill the position. Probably because Amazonian women with big racks were not often chomping at the bit to work in gardening. His last hire looked like a budget version of Charlie Dimmock, minus the personality and the incredible natural scaffolding. And she didn’t know one end of a conifer from the other. He suddenly became aware that the line was quiet.

‘Sorry, babe, what was that?’

‘I said I am fine,’ Lily replied, sighing a little. ‘It was a little fraught this morning at home, that’s all. I really think we need to talk about getting this wedding started, maybe it will give them something to talk about, as well as improve my living situation.’

Stuart winced. The golf club, being an old-fashioned establishment, didn’t allow him to have permanent guests overnight in his accommodation, a small cottage on site, but when they married it would be a different matter. No more excuses to hide behind. No more free rein. Could he do well as a married man? He knew himself well enough to doubt it.

‘I know, Lily, but we can’t rush these things just to stop your parents killing each other, can we.’

He could hear the tut down the line, and as he walked to his office, he knew that Lily was mad. The tone of her voice confirmed it, and he nibbled his lip nervously.

‘I somehow don’t think a six-year engagement could be seen as rushing things, do you? Seriously, Stuart, sometimes I don’t know how we ever got together. Forget lunch, I just realized I would rather work.’ And with that she slammed down the phone at the shop. Stuart stared at his phone. It took a lot for Lily to get mad; in fact she was the nicest person he had met, which was lucky for him. She trusted him completely, which made his guts twist. Lately though, he had been noticing subtle changes, and her putting the phone down was a first.

Sitting down at his desk some time later, still in shock, he looked at his golf lesson bookings for the day. *Please*, he thought to himself. *Let one of these people be my key to a new life.* Judging by the list of members on the page, today was not the day. He perked up a little when he saw that Mrs Evesham – young trophy wife of the rather portly (and loaded) Mr Evesham – was his first booking. Nothing like a bit of a laugh to pass the day. A nice bucket of sand to dig his head into.

Back on Foxley Street, Lily slammed down the black portable shop phone into its cradle and forked it aggressively. Roger, surprised at Lily’s outburst, quietly clicked the kettle on and reached for the biscuit tin. Lily sat at the counter, head in hands.

The shop was in a lull, people heading to work now, dropping children at school. The deliveries were done, so now she had a slot of time to check the online orders for the day and work on any new designs she had on the go. Her head wasn’t in the game though; in fact her brain was heading to the golf club with a pair of garden shears and a thirst for blood.

‘I mean, is it me?!’ she suddenly shouted, throwing her hands in the air and rapping her knuckles on the desk. Roger shook his head, wide-eyed, bringing her a coffee and a delicious Garibaldi over. She took them gratefully, nodding her thanks to him as the cup warmed her chilled bones. Winter sucked.

‘No, darling, and pardon me for eavesdropping but, why ARE you with him?’

Lily opened her mouth to answer, but she floundered like a fish instead.

‘I, er, I ... I love him, of course!’ She ignored the eye-roll she knew Roger was giving her, choosing not to look at him. ‘He is funny, and he can be sweet at times.’ She gurned a little as she thought of Stuart, cracking bad jokes and being generally insensitive to others. *Not lately, maybe, but back when they were dating. First few dates, at least.* She thought back to how they had met, when he had come into the florist’s to get some flowers for a client whose husband had taken ill. He was so sweet, going above and beyond like that. Lily had been impressed, despite her parents’ misgivings at the time. Lily had ignored them, believing their meeting to be fate. A nice meet-cute to tell their grandchildren about.

A bit like the one this morning, she thought to herself as she remembered the events of her day. *What are you playing at, Lily?* She tried to rationalize her conversation with the dishy dark-haired client less than an hour ago, but she knew she wanted to go meet him tomorrow, even if the meeting was arranged by accident. What worried her more was the fact that she had not only kept it from Stuart, but had even made sure he wouldn’t turn up. She realized that Roger was talking, and she snapped her head back into the conversation.

‘Funny and sweet are all well and good, but will it still be funny when you are seventy?’

‘Oh Christ, Rog, I am only thirty this year – give me a break! I have a hard time thinking past next year at the moment, let alone into my pension years. Who knows what the future holds, eh?’

Roger smiled sadly. ‘Who was it who said life is what happens when you are making other plans?’

Lily shrugged at him.

‘Whoever it was, they nailed it. And as far as I can see, you are not living your life or making other plans.’

Lily turned to him, the shock registering on her features at his words. She thought back to earlier. *Take a chance, for once in your life.*

He smiled kindly. ‘Now, shall I go and get us a sarnie?’

Roger’s cheeks had flushed, and she realized he was worried he had upset her. She nodded, flashing him a grin that didn’t quite reach her eyes. ‘I’ll pay, and sod it, let’s have a bun too.’

Roger rubbed his tummy comically, making her giggle.

‘Deal. I can work it off at Zumba later.’

CHAPTER THREE

Lizzie Baxter stood on the back step, looking out of her conservatory doors to the garden beyond. It was a rather long, thin garden with a sprawling lawn and a ribbon of trees around it. Flowers filled the borders, although most were sleeping at this time of year. The leaves from the trees were blowing all over the frosty grass, and the contrast between the dark, empty trees and the blanket of colour underneath was quite striking in the morning light.

She sipped at her herbal fruit tea, pulling her cardigan around her a little tighter as the wind blew. There was no sound other than the rustle of trees outside, and the chime of the antique clock on the wall behind her. No sounds at all. Sometimes, when she had been home all day, she questioned her own hearing, turning the television or radio on, just to check she could actually hear it. She always could of course, but the house deceived her more and more as the weeks passed.

Irvin was sitting in the den, reading his morning paper with his coffee. She knew this because this was their new routine. Retreating to various rooms with hot beverages, and some semblance of

a plan for the day. She came in and closed the doors against the chill. The house looked bare, too clean, and Lizzie knew it was more than the post-Christmas decorations despair.

Before they sold the shop to Lily, Lizzie had been fizzing with excitement. No more running the day to day, dealing with deliveries, listening to Lily telling them her plans for the business – it was hers now, to run as she saw fit. She had worked with them since leaving horticultural college, studying for her art degree long distance, alongside her employment. There would be time now: time to read, to garden more, travel to all those places that they hadn't gotten to see with having a busy business, and a child to raise, a mortgage to pay.

Retirement, however, was a huge anticlimax. The child was raised, the business was looked after, the mortgage a distant memory. They had hung up their floristry shears six months ago, but the only thing they had done since was fight over what they should be doing with their free time.

Walking through their detached home, Lizzie marvelled to herself at how far they had come since they first moved to their very own Westfield home, fresh from their parents' houses, full of hope for their future. They bought the business, had Lily, and never looked back. Now their only child was due to get married, and they should be embarking on a new chapter in their lives together. Lizzie somehow felt like their book was being snapped shut.

She thought of the old cliché, being on the same page. The truth was, she and Irvin weren't even reading the same story. It saddened her so much, her heart broke when she thought of it.

It was January, the start of a new year. Lizzie couldn't muster up the energy to even ring the new year in. New Year's Eve had been a wash-out. Irvin had played golf all day, using a voucher Stuart had given him for Christmas. She had rattled around the house, ignoring the house phone ringing with invites to various parties and dinners with their friends. She just couldn't face the well-meaning questions and chats about resolutions. By the time the bell struck twelve, she was snoring away in the spare room. Irvin hadn't even come to find her.

This is not how it should be, and they both knew it. Lizzie just didn't know what to do, and now the time she had on her hands felt like a millstone, not a gift.

She went into the hallway, hearing the tinkle of the letterbox as the post landed on the mat. Stooping down to pick it up, she winced as her knees screamed in protest. Leaning on the hall dresser for support, she pulled herself back up and sat on the seat next to the hall phone. Another ticking clock on the wall next to the dark wood staircase reminded her of the passing seconds, minutes, hours.

It was a funny old thing, time. It waited for no one. You could scream at the clock and it would still move, tick, tick, tick. Birth, death, sorrow – they all seem to slow it down, but never stop it. Suspend people in the illusion that no time had passed. She thought back to when she was younger, and her parents took her to the coast in the summer. She would marvel at how long the days seemed to last. The holidays were an endless time of fun and frolics.

Now, in retirement, she felt the breath of time huffing and puffing at her back. Six months had flown like a week, and they had no milestones to latch on to left. For funny it was that one day, every rite of passage, every event of childhood was a memory, not a goal. They say that youth is wasted on the young. Lately, Lizzie had to agree. The thought depressed her immensely. She wondered if Irvin felt it too, if this was the crack that started the fissure between them.

She looked through the small pile of post. A card from her friend, probably smugly wishing them a happy new year. A couple of special offers from catalogues, all containing things she either already had or would never need. She was just about to throw the lot in the bin when she came across a brochure for the community centre. The cover in large print said *New Year Blues?*

'Yes,' she said loudly. The ticking clock carried on uninterrupted. She read on.

Got the post-Christmas blues? Looking for a new challenge? Sign up to a course and learn a new skill.

'A new skill ...' she said to herself. She saluted the clock. 'Maybe not. What am I going to learn: flower arranging?'

Ignoring the sting of pain in her knees as she stood, she tucked the brochure into the letter rack and walked to the kitchen. Time for a sandwich, and then she could always make a start on the Christmas thank you cards. Opening the fridge door, she sagged against it. It came to a lot when the highlight of your day was a cheese and pickle bap, but here she was. She eyed the corked bottle of Chardonnay from last night, but dismissed it at the last minute. Whatever her retirement was going to be, daytime drinking was hardly a goal to work on.

‘Irvin?’ she called into the atmosphere. ‘Do you want a sandwich?’

CHAPTER FOUR

Lily woke up before her alarm and lay looking at the ceiling she had slept under her entire life. There was a crack running across the ceiling, about seven inches long. It stepped out from the light fitting, a wrought-iron flower design her mother had installed throughout, and ran across the white painted surface.

She remembered when it had happened. Years ago, her father had been getting the Christmas decorations out of the loft, and tripped. He caught himself quick enough, but not before a hairline crack had split Lily’s perfect ceiling. Her mum had gone mad, berating her father for being so daft, so dangerous. Lily had stood in her bedroom doorway, watching her dad pull the tree box down the ladder after him, shoulders hunched. Bump, bump bump, went the box, down each step slowly.

Her mother was stood halfway up the stairs, hands on hips, a dusting of flour from baking on her apron. Lily had been twelve at the time, and she remembered being shocked that her parents were shouting. They just didn’t do it. Just as her teenage self had worried what this might mean, she heard her mother laugh. Her dad turned around too, setting the tree down on the thick landing carpet. As he turned, he winked at Lily, and she relaxed. Soon they were all laughing too, putting the hoards of Christmas decorations up together, as always.

For years, that crack was the only reminder of that day. A subtle hint about how lucky they were as a family, to have each other. Now, as she stared yet again at that crack, she could almost see it widening, the fissure growing before her almost thirty-year-old eyes. Maybe Roger was right: she should get out. Get her own place, maybe even set a date for the wedding. The thought of her birthday, the big three-oh, was freaking her out, and nothing was going to change. Not before September anyway.

Not without Lily actually doing something to change, and when would that happen? She knew herself too well. She would take the path of least resistance, as always. Whatever they wanted, whatever route was easier. The thought depressed her and she huffed in bed, throwing a pillow at the wall. It made an unsatisfying flumph as it hit the plaster. Figured. She couldn’t even make a mark with her own tantrum.

Lily got out of bed and padded to the bathroom. She’d had the room to herself as a kid since her parents had the en suite, but nowadays she shared with her mother, who had seemingly taken up residence in the spare room. As she left her room, she peered around the corner. All quiet. To be honest, most days she expected to see sandbags across the landing, her parents firing up the mortars. All was peaceful. She sighed with relief and headed for the shower.

As she shampooed her long blonde hair, she thought of her morning coffee meeting and felt the butterflies fizzle in her stomach. The meeting wasn’t even a date, not really – more an ambush of a fit customer – but it still filled her with nervous excitement. There was something about the man who came into the shop that brightened up her day, and she was looking forward to actually speaking to him without the eagle eyes of her parents, or Roger egging her on in the background.

She had noticed him when he first started coming into the shop just over a year ago. He looked so tired, so worn down. Her mother had always made conversation with him, chatting away the silences when he came in twice a week. All nothings, every time. They discussed the weather, the politics of the day, the *X Factor* results.

Over time, he had gotten brighter. He looked less drawn, more at ease. His eyes were different though. Was it the darkness, the depth of the brown they were? He had sad eyes that never quite matched his lopsided half-smile. They looked at odds with everything in the world, and she found herself counting the days in between her seeing them.

It had become somewhat of a puzzle to her, a conundrum to solve. She found herself punctuating her working week with his visits. She almost wrote them in her diary, like a girl would record her secret thoughts. She wished that she did write them in her diary to be honest, if only to have something to jot down in there at all. The only thing she wrote in there lately were changes to deliveries, and the usual birthdays and anniversaries that everyone writes in a journal.

She often daydreamed about him, like now, when she had washed her hair three times. What his story was, the places he had seen. What work did he do? He sometimes came dressed up; sometimes he wore scruffy jeans, ratty T-shirts. He often had the telltale sign of dirt under his fingernails, so she knew he worked with his hands, out in the open.

Sometimes, when she was daydreaming, or reading one of her romance novels, she thought about what kind of job he did. Farmer? Builder? Did he live local? Westfield was a pretty close-knit place. Everyone knew the colour of your pants on the line, or so the saying went. Not that she dare ask around about him, of course. She just knew she wouldn't be able to ask casually. Roger was already on to her.

Stuart worked outside for the most part, but he didn't have hands like him. His hands were smooth, moisturized, not a callus in sight. In fact, you would think he was a hand model the way he went on sometimes. She had once asked him to put a few shelves up in the shop and he had looked at her as though she had asked him to hack someone's head off. In the end, Roger had done it, Stuart 'supervising' from a distance. Lily was still amazed to this day that Roger hadn't nailed him to the wall by his thumbs.

After that, she hadn't bothered to ask him again. She still had some plans for the shop DIY wise, but she was determined to wait till she had more money in the bank, then at least she could hire a handyman. Simon from the village often did the odd job or two on a weekend, when he wasn't busy working at the greengrocer's with his dad, or chasing down new clients for his own business. He had been busy though lately in other ways, wining and dining the new girl who was working at the boutique. She seemed nice, not that Lily had spoken to her in person yet.

Lily didn't have many friends, not really. She was popular at school, being a kind girl who loved flowers. People liked her – it was easy. Who didn't like a girl obsessed with flowers?

The thing was, she was left behind. Because Westfield was a small village, people moved on. Few moved in, though the ones who did tended to stick, once they fell in love with the countryside. After school, there was college, university, travelling. The next steps in life that people took, when they left the nest. Lily had waved off every one of her friends, one by one, and watched them fly off, while she clung to the sticks of her parental home. The point was, until yesterday, she had never really minded. Even Simon had left, but now he was back, called to his roots. Eager to set down some of his own.

Until Roger had spoken those words. *Take a chance, for once in your life.* The sentence haunted her. For once in your life. That was just the thing. She never had taken a chance. Sure, she had her own business now, but the truth was, she had been destined to have the shop since she was born. Her parents helped her save up her deposit, guaranteed her loan. The pampered princess way of earning a living, really.

The shop thrived, had for years, and it was a pretty safe investment. She knew the shop by heart, having had many of her first milestones either here or in the house she had lived in all her life. Even when she went to college, she was a short bus ride away, and her dad had ferried her in half the time, on his way to a delivery. She had been sheltered like a bird born in captivity, happy with its lot

in life, till they heard the songs from the forests nearby. That sentence was a song in the forest, and now Lily couldn't block out the noise it had produced.

Stepping out of the shower, she slung on her robe and dashed into her bedroom to get ready. She wanted to get to work early, to compose herself for her morning coffee date/meeting/awkward experience. Stuart hadn't even called last night, since she put the phone down on him, and she knew he was either letting her cool off or still scratching his head trying to work out what had gone on. Either way, she just hoped he remembered she was busy today. She would deal with him later. Once she had worked out in her own mind just what she was doing.

Downstairs, Irvin was sitting at the kitchen island, spreading damson jam onto hot buttered toast. Lily smiled at her dad, who looked a little like Danny DeVito, with the wit of Ricky Gervais. Her mother, in comparison, looked more like Glenn Close. Beautiful, tall, and thin with an elegance to her that you didn't learn from any magazines. Lily was an odd combination of the two: having inherited her mother's good bone structure and body proportions, and her father's odd sense of humour and general lack of grace.

Stuart had taken her golfing once, early on in their dating life. She thought it had gone quite well, but she hadn't been asked back. She was too embarrassed to ask the reason why. She assumed that her hitting the duck in the pond with a stray shot wasn't a factor. Or the dent she had put into Stuart's prized chariot.

Whatever the reason, she never went to the golf club any more, and Stuart seemed reluctant to have her there again. A shame really, because with a bit of work on the gardens, it would be a fantastic wedding venue. Not that she had mentioned that to him, of course. She was starting to realize that Stuart wasn't big on talking about wedding plans, but which guy was? It was a badly kept secret that the groom just pretty much turned up on the day, and had no clue about what a centrepiece was, let alone what type of flowers were involved. Why would Stuart be different?

She kissed her dad on the top of his head, and he patted her arm.

'Morning, darling, sleep well?'

Lily nodded. 'Not bad, I have an early start today so I need to get cracking. Where's Mum?'

She saw her dad's face drop a little. 'Still asleep I think. You know she moved into the spare room, don't you?'

Lily nodded. 'Judging from the amount of face creams in my bathroom, I gather she means to stay there too.'

Irvin winced, and her heart went out to him.

'I know, I know. Your mother is a stubborn woman. She always has been.'

Lily rolled her eyes. 'I don't see you trying to sort things out either, Dad. It's been a while since you two have even talked, you know?'

He nodded and seemed to be about to say something when his wife walked into the room. She looked tired, and a little gaunt, and Lily saw that her dad seemed taken aback.

'Talking about me, were you?' she said sniffily. 'I do live here too you know.'

Lily groaned. 'Mum, we weren't talking about you, not like that. It's just that you seem so unhappy.'

'Me unhappy!' Lizzie proclaimed. 'I'm fine!'

Irvin shook his head. 'No, Lizzie, you're not.'

Lily looked from one parent to the other, wishing herself from the room. It was looking like another breakfast from the fruit bowl dash.

Lizzie sighed, looking all the more tired, and straightened up her dressing gown.

'Well, Irvin, whose fault is that, eh?'

They both looked at each other, lost in what they wanted to say and what they felt the other wanted to hear.

‘Let’s face it, Irvin, we are not getting on.’

Irvin went to shake his head, but Lizzie held up a hand to silence him. ‘You know I’m right.’ Irvin nodded slowly, dropping his slice of toast back onto his plate, with a ching on the bone china.

‘This retirement was supposed to be a new start – our time. We had so many plans, and what happened? Nothing!’

Irvin stood up from the stool, walking over to his wife. They stood a foot apart, but Irvin didn’t come any further. They looked each other up and down, neither knowing what to say next. He broke first.

‘Do you want a cup of tea?’

Lizzie looked at her husband in shock. Had it really come to this? Them offering each other food and beverages in perpetuity, till one of them shuffled off the mortal coil? She suddenly pictured them, wizened and grey, sat like bookends at each end of the fireplace, rotund from too many biscuits. She looked around, realizing that Lily was gone. She felt a pang of shame. Their poor daughter had obviously fled after yet another awkward morning.

She took a step back, shaking her head. ‘No, Irvin, I bloody well do not.’ She looked at him one more time, like he had just stepped out of a spaceship before her eyes, and flounced off down the hall.

Irvin was left in the kitchen, listening to the kettle click off in the silence. Like an automaton, he walked to the appliance, pouring the hot water onto the teabag in his favourite cup. As he stirred in the milk, he had a pang for his old life, the one where they rushed about, busy lives intertwined. Many a time they had snuggled on the sofa together, exhausted from work and raising their daughter, and been content to just read a book or watch a film together.

Now, they sat in separate rooms, their house sterile, impersonal. Funny how things changed. Irvin wasn’t a fan, it had to be said. He sighed, sitting back down at the island stool. He just didn’t know how to fix it. The thing was, retirement was terrifying him. He didn’t feel ready to curl up and coast through the rest of his life reading the paper. Five minutes later, he was still nursing his tea when the front door slammed shut.

Lily crept out of the house like a stealth ninja, almost snagging her thick tights on the rosebush as she darted across the drive to her van. Looking at the expansive front drive, she clicked her car open. Quietly closing the door behind her, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her little pink van was always sandwiched between her parents’ cars these days. Mum’s smart little Mini and Dad’s Volvo were normally tucked up together on the drive, but now even her van was some kind of referee between their warring vehicles.

At this point, Lily was glad that she was an only child for the first time in her life. Having brothers and sisters would have been lovely, but given this situation, she wasn’t sure that other casualties of war would have been a good thing. She turned on the engine and flicked on the radio. Reaching for a battered CD case in her door pocket, she pulled out a black CD and fed it into the player. A moment later, heavy metal blared out of the speakers and Lily pulled off the drive. A nice bit of music to blast the anger out of her before she started work.

Heading further into Westfield, Lily waved at various people as normal. Heading past the greengrocer’s, she saw Simon writing the day’s offers on the blackboard outside. Pulling up, she wound her window down. Simon jumped up, pretending like a mime artist to be blasted away with the force of the music. Lily laughed and flicked the stereo off.

‘Sorry,’ she tittered. ‘I forgot you have no taste in music.’

Simon held his hands to his chest like she had shot him. ‘Your words hurt you know, Lilypad.’

Lily rolled her eyes. ‘Oh go and cry to your One Direction records,’ she countered, pretending to wipe her teary eyes with her closed fists.

Simon snorted. 'What can I do for you this fine morning? You still needing those jobs doing? 'Cos I tell you, I am a little busy at the minute, but I will try at the end of the month.'

Lily nodded. 'I figured as much. So much for having my friend back from the fast lane. How's it going with your girlfriend?'

Simon blushed and Lily realized that her friend must really be smitten. Since school, she had only seen him act that way before when Mrs Lambert had popped a button on her blouse during chemistry. It was quite a scandal, she remembered. Howard Lee had fainted, although the school had put that down to the heat from the Bunsen burners. Everyone in 9C knew different, of course. He had been nicknamed 'Wooley Howey' for a whole year after. Not surprising that he was a plastic surgeon now. He probably owed his career to Mrs Lambert's breasts.

'It's going well,' he stammered, clearing his throat. Lily smiled at him, and he grinned back sheepishly. He never really dated while he was away studying; Simon wasn't the type to be a player. This girl meant something, and they both knew it.

'I need to meet her!' she said before she could stop herself. 'Let's have a night out!'

Simon looked surprised. 'What, you mean an actual night out, with drinks and dancing?'

'Don't be a git,' she scolded. 'I mean it – let's arrange it. I would love to meet her, and we haven't caught up in ages.'

Simon shifted from foot to foot, looking at the ground.

'What's wrong?' Lily asked, suddenly concerned. 'You and her okay?'

'Me and Elaine?' His face lit up at the mention of her name, and she was so happy for her friend. When all the others had left, Simon had stayed in touch, learning his trade as an architect, nipping back when he could to pitch in with the business and see his parents. He was always there to talk to, and she was so pleased he had met someone. As kids, they had a lot in common with their parents' businesses and expectations, and they had soon fallen into an easy friendship that had lasted through puberty and beyond.

Their parents did think that they might get together at one point, with the amount of time they spent together, but for Lily and Simon, it was unthinkable. They were as like brother and sister as two friends could be. Simon knew her as well as she knew herself, most of the time.

'No, we are great, it's just ...' He looked so awkward, and she realized just what had caught his tongue.

'It's Stuart, isn't it,' she stated flatly. Simon shrugged, pulling an apologetic grimace.

'It's just, you know, me and him, together ... all night ...' He looked so nervous, and Lily knew he was not trying to upset her. Simon and Stuart had spent a fair bit of time together over the years, but they had never really gelled. It was still at the polite 'hey up' stage, and then the words pretty much dried up. Not even sport, the universal conversation opener of men worldwide, had bridged the gap between them.

There had been no thrown punches or beaten chests, but the nights always ended up being damp squibs when the two of them were in a room together. Not even Lily could get them to interact in any meaningful way, and she had resigned herself to having them only meet on special occasions. Given that she would want Simon as her 'male of honour' should the wedding ever actually happen, it was a touchy subject for everyone.

'Okay, okay, no Stuart,' Lily concurred. 'I can play third wheel, be worth it to meet her.'

Simon looked relieved. 'Great, shall we say Friday?'

Lily nodded. 'Sounds great. Let's do it.'

She waved goodbye, pulling away as Simon held up his hands in mock horror at her music. She flipped him the bird and turned it higher. What was it about Stuart that seemed to rub people up the wrong way?

CHAPTER FIVE

Will Singer looked every inch the thirty-two-year-old man he was. The bathroom mirror rarely did anyone any favours, but this particular winter morning it appeared to be magically channelling the mirror from *Snow White* in terms of stark clarity and downright truth. *Who's the hottest man of them all? Certainly not you, dude.*

He had badly needed a shave. People were starting to comment on it, but the clean-shaven Will was not a great improvement. At least his dark stubble had detracted from the huge Kardashian-sized luggage wedged under his eyes. Without his hairy mask, Will felt naked, unable to hide.

Even worse was the fact that the lack of hair on his face left people free to roam over his other features, in particular the mop of hair sprouting from his head. He looked like Lionel Messi mixed with Mufasa the lion. It did well for them, but Will wasn't sure it was such a great style for him. Any longer and he would have to buy an Alice band like Beckham. Start sporting a man bun. He was pretty sure the villagers had never seen a man bun. It might scare them enough to dust off the pitchforks and torches. He had a sudden vision of his uncle Archie dressed like Braveheart, rallying the twin set and mohair-clad villagers into action from atop a horse. *'People of Westfield, we shall not lie down and die. The man bun must be destroyed!'*

He chuckled to himself at his own humour. He would have to tell Lily that joke later.

He frowned at himself in the mirror, opening the medicine cabinet in desperation. Looking through the arrays of random creams and potions, he picked a fairly normal-looking moisturizing cream and started to massage some into his rather green-looking cheeks. Turning to his hair, he combed it the best he could, deciding in the end that he had to wear a hat for work anyway, so he could use this as a passable excuse this time.

Of course, there was nothing to say that there would be a next time at all. There shouldn't even be a first time, but here he was, getting himself ready for the first date he had been on in years. A coffee date, in the daytime. Nothing too bad. Nothing that he should reproach himself too much for. He was just glad that the butterflies in his stomach and the elated feeling he experienced at the prospect of seeing her again were invisible to others. He could keep denying them to himself, but it wouldn't be as easy if his feelings were on display. Will was more than used to keeping his cards close to his chest. Lily just made him feel like he wanted to show her his hand, and that feeling alone told him he had to be more careful than usual.

'Just a coffee, Will, just a little chat, a drink, and then leave.'

He had meant to ask her advice that morning – he had been meaning to ask her for a while, but he wasn't sure how to approach it, and whether he was playing with fire by asking her at all. He already knew, he didn't really have to ask this particular person, but he had reasoned it in his head loosely enough to convince himself it was at least half plausible. It was the perfect excuse.

If he was truthful with himself, he would probably pick at the thread in his brain as to why he had taken this course of action, but instead he smoothed the collar of his blue shirt, smoothed down his unruly locks as best he could and, giving the mirror a final look, dashed down the stairs of his home.

Once he'd closed the door behind him, pulling on his coat as he headed down the drive, his mood lifted. He could feel the tension leave his shoulders as he put the keys in the ignition. His neighbour, Mrs Phelps, saw him from her front window and she gave him a little wave and a smile. He returned her wave, not lingering on her face for too long. He tried to keep to himself. It was easier that way, less complicated. Less chance of anyone getting hurt.

He felt the knot between his shoulder blades return. Today was a mistake – he just knew it. Yet he didn't stop the car; in fact he even sped up a little as he hit the centre of the village. For a second he even thought of stopping for flowers. He laughed at himself when he realized how daft that was, eyeing himself in the mirror.

'It's official, Will. You are losing it.'

Pulling up on Foxley Street, he made sure to park a little further down from the florist's and the coffee shop. He tucked the car out of the way, and then stepped out onto the kerb with unsteady legs. He felt like a teenager sneaking off to do something naughty, like drink vodka in the park when he should be in double maths. Passing the florist's, he very casually tried to look in through the window without making it obvious, keeping his head studiously pointed in front of him. He couldn't see Lily, just a customer being served by the enigmatic Roger who worked there. He thought the guy raised his eyebrows at him through the window, but with the cold air stinging his eyes he couldn't be sure.

He walked into the café, the warm air hitting him immediately, bringing with it a smell of coffee and baked goods. It was a similar layout to the florist's, but not as open plan, and its double front allowed for a large kitchen and serving area, leaving ample space for some comfy sofas and low tables in the front.

There were a couple of older ladies sat by the door, chatting away with a full tea service laid out on the table. Will noticed that one of them was knitting furiously, not even glancing at her busy needles. He spotted Lily then, sitting on a low sofa right in the back, her head bent over a book. He took a breath as he watched her from the doorway.

She was wearing a pair of black-rimmed reading glasses that framed her heart-shaped face, and made her straight hair look a lighter shade of blonde than usual. She often had her hair tied in a loose bun, but today he noticed she had it brushed down. It was longer than he'd thought, and he wondered how else she would differ from what he was used to seeing at the florist's week in and week out.

She was utterly engrossed in what she was reading, and he wondered what it was that had her interest. He realized he was standing agog in the entrance when he heard a soft polite cough behind him, and as he murmured his apologies, shuffling aside, she spotted him. Her face lit up with a friendly smile, and she hurriedly thrust her book into her bag as she stood. Will managed to see the cover before it was pushed out of his view. He found himself grinning back at her.

She seemed genuinely chuffed to see him, and he realized that no one had greeted him like that in a long time. It made his body tingle with warmth, although that could be put down to his body finally warming up from the cold. He motioned for her to stay sitting down, and he walked over. He noticed that the cougher behind him had joined two other ladies, and he felt three pairs of eyes following him with interest as he made his way over. He ignored the whispers, hoping it was just his imagination that they were discussing him.

'Hi,' he said gently. Lily was sat with both hands on her knees now, and he noticed with a pang that she was wearing an engagement ring. He hadn't noticed it before, and he wondered if it was a new development. He cursed himself for not seeing it before. *Of course she has someone*, he scolded himself. *Pot, kettle?*

'Hello,' she replied softly. 'Do you want a coffee?'

He shrugged her off. 'No, I'll get them. Caramel latte, right?'

She looked surprised and nodded, blushing a little.

'Thank you.'

Wow. I would buy her a caramel latte every day for the rest of her life if she blushed like that. He felt his own cheeks warming, and he nodded stiffly, heading to the counter before he made a fool of himself. He caught sight of the ladies as he turned, and they were still watching him. They looked amused, and he suddenly got the feeling that this café was somewhat of a fishbowl for the locals. His uncle Archie had warned him that Westfield was a bit close-knit, but he had laughed it off at the time. His uncle's words were something along the lines of 'Watch your back, the women folk are mad round here. Have you hitched up before you can draw breath, if ya let 'em.'

Archie had then realized what he had said, and patted his nephew on the shoulder in a conciliatory gesture. 'You know what I mean, lad. Keep your business private eh, better for everyone that way.'

Coffees ordered, he added on an order of fruit toast, realizing that it was still only quite early and she might be a bit peckish. He hadn't eaten either, so he ordered enough for them both. His stomach rumbled as he stood there, and he hoped no one would hear it before he ate something to pacify the grumbling. The waitress offered to bring it over, so he went to sit down, making sure to choose the sofa across from her, rather than doing what he wanted to do, which was snuggle up on hers. She was watching him when he turned around, but looked away so quickly he wasn't sure if he imagined it.

Busted. Lily winced inwardly. He had been getting the coffees in, and she had been trying to work out what his bottom looked like under his winter coat. He was dressed nicely, a shiny pair of black lace-up boots with a smart pair of dark trousers, topped off with a stylish black coat, and black and white checked scarf. He had his hat on as usual, and she wondered whether he wore it all the time, or whether it was just part and parcel of the January cold.

He came back over, standing in front of the opposite sofa, and as if he had been reading her thoughts, he pulled off his scarf and coat. He turned slightly, folding them over the back of the couch, and she not only got to look at his shapely behind, but she saw a glimpse of his front, too. As he lifted his arm to pull off his hat, his dark blue shirt rode up a little, flashing a peek of a washboard stomach, separated by a thin line of dark hair, which disappeared into his belt. Happy trails indeed. A girl could don a cowboy hat to ride that.

Her eyebrows shot up into her hairline at the sight, and she snapped her gaze away quickly to regain her composure before she sat down. Looking across the café at, well, anything but his taut stomach, she locked eyes with a grey-haired lady who was knitting. If Lily hadn't been so flustered, she would be convinced that the woman was laughing at her, but she pushed the thought from her mind.

'So,' he said, bringing her attention back to him. 'I realized this morning that I didn't even introduce myself the other day. I'm Will Singer.'

He held out a hand to shake hers. She took it, and jumped as a shock passed between them, like static. He seemed to jump too, but he didn't let go. In fact, his grip tightened a little. She looked straight at him in surprise, and saw that he was looking right back at her with his large puppy dog eyes.

'Hi, Will,' she breathed a little too quietly. 'I'm Lily Baxter.'

He nodded, giving her hand a tiny shake in greeting. He clenched his fist a little tighter, moulding her hand into his, and her engagement ring – which was a little loose since Stuart had neglected to get her size, or get it adjusted – dug into her pinkie finger. She wasn't mad at the time; after all, asking for a girl's ring size is a bit of a giveaway. Unless he could have stolen one off her finger, how else would he have found out? She should just get it adjusted herself, but that would involve asking him who made the ring, and she didn't want to get into yet another financial conversation with him about the cost of the ring, blah blah blah. Money was always a little bit of a sticking point in their relationship.

She realized that Will was looking at her ring himself, and she broke the grip as quickly as she could. She was about to explain, mention Stuart, but the waitress came to the table with their order on a tray and they both sat back on their respective sofas, the spell broken. Lily clasped her hands together on her lap, covering her trinket, suddenly feeling as though the band was on fire.

'Hello, Lily Baxter.' To his credit, Will never skipped a beat in the conversation. 'So, how's your day going so far?'

'Pretty rubbish, as it goes,' she replied, picking a piece of fluff from her midnight blue dress and reaching for her coffee. *Wait – what?* She flicked her eyes to his as she took a deep gulp of her latte. It nearly burned her tongue out, but she pushed the pain away and tried to act cool. He was peering at her intently, a faint smirk playing across his lips.

'Really? Tell me, what happened.' He seemed to sag into the sofa a little, and he reached for his coffee. She noticed he shook a little. *Nerves? Caffeine withdrawal?*

‘Well, it’s parental problems actually. Are you cold?’

He looked surprised, and shook his head. ‘No, I am warming up nicely thanks. Parental problems you were saying?’

He couldn’t help wishing she had said something else, like that she had just called off her engagement and fancied running off with the next man who bought her coffee.

Lily huffed, taking another gulp. Will said nothing but he pushed the plate of fruit toast closer to her. She took a slice without thinking twice.

‘Yep, I am twenty-nine and I still live with my parents. It’s embarrassing to be honest, but up to now, it’s been great really. Since they retired though, it’s been a nightmare. I am thinking about moving out, to be honest. I should have done it a while ago, but I just ... didn’t. I don’t know why, but something has to give.’

Will nodded, listening intently but saying nothing. She blushed under his gaze. ‘I am really sorry, I have no idea why I told you all that. How has your day been so far?’

Will pushed the plate a bit closer, and Lily took another slice, sinking her teeth into the buttery goodness. He smiled as he watched her eat it.

‘Pretty standard really. *Talking to the mirror. Hating my life, the usual.* Do you know where you will move to? Will you move in with your fiancé?’ She paused mid chew and he pointed to her ring. ‘I assume you are engaged, yes?’

Lily nodded, her mouth too full of toast to reply properly. She forced it down quickly, wiping at her mouth with a napkin.

‘Yes, sorry, I should have said when you asked.’ He said nothing, sipping his drink. ‘And ... what about you? Have you lived in the village long?’ She was floundering and she knew it, grasping at any question to change the subject. Deflect from the fact that she had accepted a date whilst being engaged to another man. A man she loved, despite her recent reservations. A man who had asked her to marry him, and had gone to the trouble of buying her a ring. She pushed down the pang of guilt she felt in her gut.

Will luckily threw her a gentlemanly lifeline and didn’t push further. *Or, this isn’t a date*, Lily reminded herself. He’s a nice man, who probably needs a friend, dealing with a hijack by a crazy woman the kindest way he can. He seemed to be thinking about something, so she stayed quiet, waiting for him to speak. The less she spoke right now the better.

She looked at his lashes as he took a sip from his drink. They were as dark as the rest of his hair. Manly, but long and feminine at the same time. They dusted his lower lashes as he looked down. Lily imagined what they would feel like fluttering against her cheek. The man before her was so unlike Stuart in every way. As was the way he made her feel. If only she didn’t have verbal diarrhoea today. If only she didn’t look like a cheating predator. If only ...

Will looked at her then, offering her a small smile. He looked distracted. *Probably planning his escape over the table tops.*

‘I have lived here about a year, moved from Harrogate. Fresh start. My parents passed some time ago so it’s nice to be around family. My uncle Archie works for the estate locally, so I have roots here too. I actually wanted to pick your brains a little about the local area, if I could.’

Lily nodded, the smile freezing on her face. So this wasn’t even a date at all, but a business meeting. She was a little confused now, but having her relationship status uncovered before she’d had a chance to mention it had wrong-footed her. She had no right to feel disappointed, but she couldn’t ignore the punch she felt in her gut. Maybe him screaming and vaulting out of the café would have felt like less of a rejection.

‘I will help, sure,’ she said, moving her head like a nodding dog. ‘Lived here all my life, will probably die here too.’ *Wow. Good job it wasn’t a date, ’cos that was smooth. Pity party for one.*

Will laughed awkwardly, his heart going out to the girl in front of him. The truth was, he *had* been wanting to ask her some questions about the area, to suss out possible work, but when she had mistakenly alluded to a date, he had seized the chance without thinking. It hadn't been his plan at all, even though he had definitely noticed her before. Who wouldn't notice her? She was beautiful; her piercing green eyes and blonde hair were like catnip to him. She had no clue just how lovely she was, but Will sure did. He felt a stirring in his gut.

'Great!' He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He was trying for jovial and friendly, but he came off as slightly manic. To him, anyway. Lily leaned forward too and he caught a hint of her perfume. She smelled like flowers. Go figure. He resisted the urge to take a deep whiff of her. 'I am a landscape gardener and ...'

'I knew it!' she exclaimed suddenly, bouncing on the spot. He jumped and she laughed. The ladies turned their heads to look at the commotion. Lily went bright red, and put out a placating hand to them. They nodded, and went back to talking quietly. 'Sorry.' She giggled, a little ashamed by her reaction but apparently grateful for the distraction. 'I just knew you had to work outside.'

Will looked at her in puzzlement, which made her shrink with embarrassment.

'Your hands,' she exclaimed, reaching for one of them, turning it palm up. Her touch sent a shiver down Will's arm, and he knew she must have felt it. Will felt like she had woken him up from a dream. It was as though they were charged to each other, like static fizzing between them. He kept his hand relaxed, not wanting to do anything that might make her let go. He was taking a chance here, a risk, but he couldn't stop himself. She seemed to realize what she had done, and she gently released him. Will could feel the warmth leave his skin.

'Working hands, you see?' She held both her palms up to him, and he noticed she had calluses on her hands too, the odd scratch and scrape dotted on her fingers.

'Green thumb club, eh?' He grinned. She smirked back at him.

'Definitely. What did you want to ask?'

He told her of his plans, of leaving Harrogate and wanting to build up a local business. He was tired of the commuting, and wanted to keep things a bit simpler. Not exactly a lie; it was truth, just not the whole shebang.

Lily listened to him without interrupting, only taking her eyes off him to see off the second round of coffee and toast he'd ordered. He noticed her skin was a tad pale, and by the way she ate and drank, she obviously didn't have chance that morning to have breakfast either. He had felt a burst of pride when she took the second order without preamble, as though he had helped her a little. He liked the thought of making her day easier. He wondered whether her fiancé looked after her, where he was now. Did the guy know what he had?

'I do know of a couple of people looking for gardeners and such,' she said when he had finished. 'Why don't you bring some cards into the shop, and I can hand them out for you?'

Will flashed her a grateful smile. 'That would be great. Other than Archie, I don't really know anyone here, and between working and commuting, it doesn't leave much time for socializing.'

She nodded. She knew how it felt to not have many people in your camp. The thought gave her an idea.

'It's no problem – just drop in whenever. And, just an idea, but are you busy Friday night?'

Will looked at her in question. She had already told him she was engaged. Or rather, she didn't deny it when he asked her. She shrugged when he didn't reply.

'It's no worries if you are busy; it's just that my friend Simon and his new girlfriend invited me out. I haven't met her before, so it might be a good opportunity for you to have a night off, meet some people.'

Will shook his head. He didn't fancy the idea of playing fifth wheel on a couples' night. The thought of seeing Lily with her fiancé put the night's appeal right up there with gonad piercings and mucking out the stables for his uncle. 'I think I would be in the way, but thanks.'

Lily frowned. 'No! You will be doing me a favour, honestly. I have known Simon since school. He is like my little brother, and watching him suck face with his girlfriend all night while I play gooseberry doesn't sound like much fun. This way, I have someone to talk to.' She looked away from him, and he realized she was a bit upset. His heart went out to her.

'The thing is, Will, I have been told that I am a bit stuck lately, and I am forcing myself to actually do something about it. It sounds to me like you could be in the same boat.'

Will studied her face. Just being near her today had lifted his mood. He couldn't imagine anyone saying that she was anything less than a joy to be around.

'You're on,' he said, his deep voice breaking the silence. 'First tequila shot is on me.'

The look Lily gave him had his laugh ringing out in the café, whilst the ladies looked on.

CHAPTER SIX

'Good of you to join us, William!' Agatha Taylor's voice trilled out as he walked up to the main house. Agatha's estate was massive, and rather beautiful. He strode around the fountain and braced himself for Agatha's rather large dogs to come bounding out. As though she read his mind, Agatha smiled kindly. 'Taylor has just taken the children out for their morning walk. They will be gone a while.'

Will relaxed visibly. Last time, Buster had head-butted him in the testicles by accident, and the thought of it even now made his eyes water. He resisted the urge to cup himself comfortingly. His uncle Archie was stood next to Agatha, and the two looked as different as heaven and earth. Archie was his uncle on his father's side, and was a strange man. Even if he loved you to distraction, to the outside world he looked as though you were barely tolerated. He was pretty sure that Archie cared, but he wouldn't stake the farm on being loved by him. The Singer men were often something of an enigma. At the moment, with his turbulent private life, this trait served him well.

He was getting the measure of his uncle more and more as they worked together, and Will was fast realizing that Archie was an amazing man. Looking at him now, with his trademark boots and scowl, he looked even harsher against the backdrop of the hall and Agatha, who was dressed like the Queen. All she was missing was the straight face and the tiara. Archie grunted a hello, and Will nodded in response.

Agatha was staring at him with a wry smile on her face, and he felt as though she was in on a joke he didn't quite get yet.

'Sorry I'm late – I had a meeting that ran over. What's to be done today?'

Agatha looked at him like a cat would eye a fish in a tank, patting Archie on the shoulder.

'Archibald dear, you can make a start if you like. I will just have a chat with young William here. I shan't be long.'

Archie, rolling his eyes at the use of his Sunday name, nodded and practically ran. As he passed his nephew, he tapped him on the arm.

'Sorry, lad,' he whispered. 'Grin and bear it.'

Will moved closer to Agatha, thinking she had a job she wanted him to do that perhaps Archie wasn't up to. She reached for his hand instead, clasping it between her own soft warm ones, and gave it a little rub.

'How are you, dear? You enjoying being in Westfield?'

Will nodded, realizing that she had clocked his lack of wedding ring. 'I am fine, Mrs Taylor I love being here. I appreciate the work too.'

Agatha batted away his thanks. 'Oh pish posh, Archie is family, so that includes you too. You remind me rather of Benjamin, our vet in the village. Have you met?'

Will shook his head. Agatha looked wistful for a moment. ‘I never had children of my own, apart from my dogs of course. I would rather have liked a son or two.’

She seemed to shake herself out of her thoughts, and looked kindly at him again.

‘Are you managing to pick up any work in the village?’

Will shook his head. ‘Not much, but I hope that will change soon.’

‘Productive coffee meeting then? Jolly good. Well, I shall leave you to get on, William. Lovely to see you again. If you need anything, please let me know.’

Will waved her off as she sashayed primly up the large stone steps to her home. It wasn’t till later, when he was busy pruning the hedges, that he realized he hadn’t told anyone about the meeting with Lily, or the fact that it involved coffee at all.

Roger stamped his feet in frustration. It was quite funny to see a man in mohair have a paddy, and Lily resisted the urge to laugh.

‘Lily Rose Baxter!’ Roger whined. ‘Tell meeee!’

She clipped the ribbon on her latest bouquet and walked over to the window display, placing it in a bucket to keep it fresh.

‘Roger, there is nothing to tell. He knows I am engaged, he is new to the area, is looking for work and wanted to speak to someone in the business. He is a landscape gardener, I told you. I said he could bring some business cards in, and I would recommend him to some people for their gardens. Plenty will be wanting them shipshape for spring, so hopefully he can get some work.’

Roger looked crestfallen. ‘That’s all?’

Lily didn’t look at Roger. Truth was, she was a little gutted herself. ‘That’s all.’ Apart from the fact that I can’t stop comparing him to Stuart, and thinking about his lashes. His eyes. The jolt I get just from touching his hand. She was pretty sure he felt it too. It was something she had read about many times – mainly in the romance novels she loved. She had never had that with Stuart. Ever. She felt a little panicked that she might never feel it with him. Was it a sign? She pushed the thought away. No good thinking like that.

‘He didn’t ravish you over the pork pies? Fondle your fancies?’

Lily laughed. ‘No! He bought me breakfast. That was it. Now, please, can we get on with some work?’

Roger pouted, taking his anger out on a sprig of baby’s breath as he thrust it viciously into an arrangement.

‘I am devastated. I was sure he was the one.’

‘Stuart is the one! You know, my fiancé?’ She waggled her fingers at him. He flicked his hand dismissively. ‘That Kinder egg monstrosity. No way! You deserve a man who can pick a ring that doesn’t look like it belongs to Cruella De Vil.’

Lily looked at her ring. It was ugly, to be fair, and Stuart had wasted no time telling her how expensive it had been. In fact, he had told everyone within a five-mile radius at the time. Truth was, Lily would have been happier with a prettier ring that cost a fraction of the price. Still, he was her husband to be. He picked the ring, and that was that. At least wedding bands were plain. She was grateful for that. Not that there was any sign of there being a wedding. This ring had been on her finger for years. They hadn’t even had an engagement party, as Stuart was busy building up his clientele.

‘You are mean to Stuart you know. He is trying.’

Roger came over, hugging her to him. ‘He is *very* trying, my dear. I don’t mean to be awful; it’s just that there is just something about him. Since you took me on when your parents retired, I have seen and heard a lot here, and I am not happy with a lot of it. He is a light stealer, my girl.’

‘Like Dumbledore?’ she teased, imagining Stuart running around Foxley Street with long white hair and a cloak nicking the street lights.

‘In a way, yes,’ Roger retorted, poking her in the ribs. She jerked away, motioning to the kettle. Roger nodded, scarce drawing breath before starting again. ‘He is a walking ego, and you are smaller, duller, when you are around him. I don’t like it. Your parents do it too, and you don’t even realize how much.’

‘Duller?’ Lily cried, horrified. ‘Do you mean boring?’

Roger eyed her sympathetically. ‘I rather meant dimmer, like a candle about to go out, but whilst we are on the subject ...’

‘We are not on the subject! Not at all, and I don’t want to talk about it either!’

She sloshed water into two cups, before realizing that they were empty. She tutted loudly, throwing the contents into the sink before starting again. She banged down the sugar canister. *Why did everyone have an opinion on her life suddenly? Her parents, Simon, Roger!* When she signed for the business – something she had been dreaming about since she was a little girl helping out her parents in the shop – she thought that life would change. Her real life would start. She would move out, get married, be the grown-up she wanted to be, instead of just waiting for that milestone to occur.

Now she was here, what did she have? She owned the shop, sure, with a hefty mortgage, but nothing else that adults normally go through had kicked into gear. She still awoke in the same bedroom every morning, waiting to move on. At this rate, she would be wearing a wedding gown to work in her fifties, sat like Miss Havisham doling out floral creations to every other lucky bugger who had something to celebrate.

Ever since she had been a girl, she had loved the idea of romance and love. Disney has a lot to answer for, she decided. They sold girls the idea that they could be princesses, mermaids, warriors. Women who could rock a ballgown whilst brandishing a bow and arrow – and they would fall in love. Even a beast could be a prince. They sold that idea that the ideal man was out there, just waiting to find the other half of his heart like them.

Well, when would that happen? Would Prince Charming insist on a long engagement? Would he hell. He had Cinderella on the back of his horse, racing to the altar before they had even swapped numbers, let alone bodily fluids. The point was, Lily felt like she was finally seeing her life through the lives of others, and the view was not all roses around the door. The fact that it was bothering her now, and not before, had her more confused than ever.

Had she just sleepwalked through the last twenty-nine years? Stuart wasn’t perfect, sure, but she had loved him enough to say yes when he asked her to marry him all that time ago. They did okay – between them they managed to be relatively happy. In light of how her parents had turned out, maybe that was the thing to aim for. Relative happiness. Someone you didn’t want to plunge the bread knife into twenty years down the road.

The thunderbolt. Everyone talked about it. It was woven into the books she read, the films she watched. They all sold this idea that the right one was the one who made your heart thud, your palms go sweaty, and your pupils dilate. Anything else was settling, taking the easy route. Before today Lily would have declared it a fanciful notion, a plot trope that was as magical and elusive as unicorn poop. Since the breakfast with Will though, she had to admit, the idea wasn’t as far off as she had thought. Maybe she shouldn’t fear settling, but fear that bolt of lightning.

She made the coffees, leaving Roger’s on the work surface, and she walked out of the back with hers. Her shop came with a back area, all enclosed with walls and fences, and she had a couple of greenhouses she managed to get cheap from a mate of Simon’s. She intended to grow orchids and other flowers, selling them in her shop. Another thing her parents didn’t agree with. They had just kept the back swept clean, using it only to store deliveries, accessed through a gate at the back.

She loved it out here. It even had a spiral staircase leading to the first floor. If she moved in upstairs, she could have her coffee out here every day, walking down the back steps into her own little garden area. She thought of moving here again, and she felt a frisson of excitement. Roger was

right – it would be perfect. Her parents would have to sort themselves out then, if she wasn't there as a buffer. Surely they would speak to each other if they were alone in the house?

Deciding that Roger could do without her for an hour or so, she reached in her jeans pocket for her set of keys. The little gold key on the chain glinted at her in the early morning light. Time to make a start on her life.

'Cinders,' she said to herself out loud, 'it's time to get cleaning.'

Stuart was sat in his office at the golf club, looking at the calendar in disbelief. It was only a few short weeks till Valentine's Day, and he had nothing planned. He knew that Lily wouldn't make a fuss, but the very event of 14th February often showed him up as less than romantic. The ball at the golf club was the perfect cover. Lily wouldn't get mad if he had to work; she understood. He just wished all occasions could be explained away as easily.

His excuse stash was running low with the people in his life. Compounded by the fact that he had been engaged for six years, and Lily's impending thirtieth birthday, Stuart was feeling an ulcer coming on. He swigged at the bottle of Gaviscon on his desk, pulling a face at the taste, and opened his work diary. He needed to pull some hours in, make himself scarce. Ideally he would like to avoid Valentine's Day altogether, but that was a feat that would require some serious planning, and a steady supply of Rennies. Picking up the phone, he got to work.

Lily was pleasantly surprised when she opened up the flat. There wasn't much up there, and her dad had used the bedroom as an office, so the facilities weren't too dusty. It was quite modern too, and she could easily move in, with a lick of paint and a few pieces of furniture. She looked out of the front window of the living room, which overlooked Foxley Street, and gasped. The view was amazing. She could see the fields beyond the few houses and streets dotted around, and although it was misty, she could see the top of Mayweather House too.

She drank her hot drink, watching the world go by, imagining herself living here. A space of her own. She could see a couple of people working in the fields nearby, and she wondered with a jolt whether one of them was Will. She tried to peer further, but movement on the street below caught her eye. She groaned loudly, grabbed her empty cup, and headed for the stairs.

Her mother was here. She felt like a naughty schoolgirl, being caught skiving off school. She locked up quickly, racing down the steps as fast as she dared. She was just heading into the shop when she heard her mother's loud tones coming through the door. Poor Roger. When Lily walked in, willing her face to not betray her bizarre guilt, Lizzie was giving him tips on a floral centrepiece he was working on for the local hotel.

'You see, dear, that colour just won't pop as much as it could, using that colour ribbon. I would definitely change it for the yellow. Nice spring tones. Hello, darling!' Her mother spied her and set off rapidly, grabbing her in a too tight hug. Lily couldn't breathe momentarily as her mother squeezed her, and Roger pretended to hang himself with a piece of peach-coloured ribbon behind her back. Lily mouthed 'sorry' at him and he blew her a kiss in response. All was forgiven obviously. If they could survive this visit, of course.

'Ow, Mum, you're crushing me. Can I help you at all?'

Her mother released her slightly, and Lily felt her lungs fill again.

'Well actually, dear, it's how I can help you!'

Lily looked back at her with trepidation. The icy digits of dread were finger-walking up her spine. 'Help me, how?'

'Well,' her mother said, busying herself with fluffing out her hair. 'I thought I would come back to work!'

Lily's mouth dropped open. Working with her mother again! Not a snowflake in hell. She glanced at Roger over her shoulder, and he was busy trying to catch flies with his own horrified expression. Lily took a step forward, taking her mother's rather cold hands in her own.

'Mum,' she said softly, as you would speak to a tiger that had crossed your path unexpectedly. 'I did love working with you, but ... Love Blooms is kind of my thing now, and I have Roger ...'

'Oh Roger could get another job, dear! I could save you money. I wouldn't need a wage as such.' A flash of silver glinted in Lily's vision, and she saw that Roger had picked up his shears and was stealthily walking up to her mother with a look that screamed bloody murder. She raised a hand to him, warning him with her eyes not to bludgeon her mother to death in the middle of the shop. Roger turned on his heel, scissors still in hand, and headed for the front door.

'I am going to take my lunch now!' he practically screamed as he stormed across the room and slammed the shop door shut behind him. His tone of voice made it sound like he was wanting to say something a lot less tactful and polite. Lily made a mental note to double his Christmas bonus next year, if only to reward him for not shivving anyone.

'Mum,' she tried again. 'Bit rude, don't you think? Roger works here now, and to talk like that in front of him was a bit impolite.'

Lizzie had warmed to the theme of the conversation now, Lily could tell, and she wasn't one to be stopped easily. 'Exactly, he WORKS here. I could help you out for a fraction of the cost. I know the business and I am family.'

Lily gripped her mother's hand tighter. 'I know, Mum, and I appreciate the gesture, but I need to be independent now, and do my own thing.'

Her mother was about to open her mouth again when Irvin walked in.

'Morning, Lily, just thought I would come to see you. I had an i – oh, what are you doing here?'

Irvin stopped still, a paper bag in his hand. It was then that Lily noticed a similar bag sticking out of her mother's handbag.

She was being used as a pawn yet again. Except this time, they had come to her work, her sanctuary from home, and they had come laden with bribes. Vanilla slices were her downfall, and the reason she was always a size 12 rather than the 10 that everyone coveted in magazines. They knew this, since she was the person they had raised in this world from scratch. Lily felt herself getting mad, but her parents were too busy circling each other like tigers to notice.

'Hi, Dad,' she said, trying to douse down the shake of anger in her voice. 'What did you want?'

'Er well,' he said gruffly, and she let him dangle a little before she relented and saved him.

'Did you want to come back to work, by any chance?' Irvin's face lit up and she wanted to cuddle him. Her dear old dad. He was struggling too, she knew that, but she hadn't realized just how much till now.

Irvin Baxter was always the easier going of her two parents, the one who would blow off the routine to do something fun, while her mother looked on tutting and complaining about getting back to put the meat in the oven. They were both slowly driving her crazy, but as usual, it felt as though the switch had only just been flipped in her head, and she was noticing everything for the first time. She needed to change things, and fast. She looked from one parent to the other, and took a deep breath. She needed to stop being the passenger in her own life.

'Mum, Dad. I love you both, but you can't keep doing this to me.'

Her mother opened her mouth to object but Lily cut her off. She had to get this out now, or she would be shouted down as usual.

'No, Mother, let me speak.' Both Lizzie's and Irvin's eyes widened and they said nothing. Lily felt a little surge of confidence flicker through her. 'I bought this business from you because I didn't want to be handed something; I wanted something of my own. I worked hard to get it how I want, and I have big plans. I can't have you two working here – it just won't work.'

Irvin's shoulders sagged and she knew that her father understood. She saw a look of shame cross his features, and she wanted to hug him tight again. Her mother was a different story. She looked positively ferocious, and Lily knew what she had to do.

'I love you both, but I am a grown woman, with my own business. I need to build my own life too, separate from you two. Whatever is going on with you two, I can't be in the middle any more. I just can't. I'm sorry. That's why I am moving out.' Her mother looked ready to explode. Her dad looked like he was about to burst into tears.

'This week,' Lily added quickly. 'Or sooner, if I can get my furniture organized.' She risked looking at Lizzie, just to check whether or not her head was spinning around like a top. Her dad broke the silence thankfully, crossing the room to take his only child into his arms. She smiled, letting her dad envelop her. He smelt faintly of mints and suddenly she was four again and sitting on his knee in the shop, whilst he taught her about the different flowers and arrangements they used. She squeezed him tighter, and he pulled back to look at her.

'I am proud of you, Lily, you know that, right?'

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak as she saw her dad dab at something in the corner of his eye. He pressed the paper bag gently into her hand and left the shop. Her mother, who had been frozen like an exhibit at a taxidermist convention till this point, suddenly came to life, nearly spiking her heels through the floor as she marched across to her handbag. Picking it up, she took out the paper bag and rammed her handbag onto the crook of her arm.

'Mum,' Lily started softly, trying to cushion the blow a little, 'I just need to start living my own life.'

Her mother made an odd snuffling noise from the back of her throat. 'So, where are you going to live then? I don't think you can stretch to two mortgages, and Stuart isn't allowed to have a non-MARRIED partner at the cottage, is he? Or do you want him to risk his job for you?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.