

ALICE ROSS

Forty
things
to do
before
you're
Forty



Alice Ross

**Forty Things To Do
Before You're Forty**

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‘A lovely feel-good read.’ Jill Loves To Read
A time for new beginnings...
Professional baker Annie Richards is used to spending her days covered in flour, single-handedly raising her five-year-old daughter, Sophie. She certainly doesn't have time for any men in her life. But there's something about handsome writer Jake O'Donnell's twinkling dark eyes that are proving quite distracting! And when she's in the middle of icing her most decadent wedding cake yet, it's rather difficult to stop herself daydreaming about saying 'I do' to her very own happy ever after...
Perfect for fans of Trisha Ashley, Cathy Bramley and Claire Sandy. Praise for Alice Ross: 'A perfect read for sitting in your garden with your glass of Pimms!'
The Writing Garnet 'A lovely feel-good read.' Jill Loves to Read 'Perfect with a bowl of strawberries and cream in the garden on a nice summers day.' Brizzleless Books 'Fantastic!' Whispering Stories Book Blog 'A lovely summer read.' Book Lover Worm Blog

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The truth is that Annie Richards is just too busy to fall in love!

Running a successful cake-making business, acting as caretaker to a grand country house, not to mention single-handedly raising her five-year-old daughter, is more than enough to keep Annie's -flour-dusted – hands full! So can someone please remind her why she agreed to train for a marathon as a 'Forty things to do before you're forty' pact with her so-called best friend?!

With every hour of the day already taken up, the arrival of crime writer Jake O'Donnell at Buttersley shouldn't really have any impact on Annie's life at all. There's definitely no time in her carefully scheduled day for dreaming about drop-dead gorgeous authors. Is there?

But between whipping up batches of her signature limoncello cupcakes, Annie realises that Jake, and his twinkling dark eyes, can't just be ticked off her mental to-do list as easily as she thought. Especially when it seems that no. 40 on her list could be creating a truly decadent wedding cake – for her very own wedding...

Forty Things To Do Before You're Forty

Alice Ross



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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ALICE ROSS

lives in north-east England.

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

Jake O'Donnell didn't swear. Normally. Today, however, he made an exception. Stopping his jeep at the gate of the third field of cows the grating voice on the sat nav directed him to, he uttered a couple of expletives before stabbing at the button and switching it off. He could do a better job without it, despite not having a clue where he was, or being able to rely on that old-fashioned time-served method of following a map: his misjudged faith in modern technology meant he hadn't brought one. Oh well, he couldn't be any more lost so he might as well carry on driving until he stumbled upon his destination of Buttersley, or met someone who could point him in the right direction. Still, there was one consolation he concluded, as a waft of warm June air scented with manure drifted through the open window: he was - however inadvertently - discovering the delights of the Yorkshire countryside and, with the sun beating down from the dazzling cloudless sky, he couldn't have chosen a better day for it.

Annie Richards's calves ached. And she had a stitch. And she could feel a blister bubbling on her left foot. But she was determined not to stop running. If she could just make it back to Buttersley, she would have completed five miles - the longest distance she had ever run in her entire life. Visualisation! That was what the running magazines recommended. She needed to visualise herself completing the Buttersley 10k race in a few weeks' time. Oh yes. She could imagine it now: the deafening roar of the huge, flag-waving crowd spurring her on - although, given how small Buttersley was, it would more likely be a low-key rumble from a handful of pensioners flapping their bus passes. Still, that rumble would, hopefully, make all the hours of training, the blisters and the aching muscles worthwhile. If it didn't, Annie knew exactly who to blame: her best friend Portia Pinkington-Smythe.

Were it not for Portia, Annie would never have contemplated running anything other than the bath. She often wondered why she couldn't have a normal female best friend instead of a gorgeous war correspondent, who also happened to be a member of the super-rich aristocratic Pinkington-Smythe family. But, for all their differences, the two of them had forged a bond which had lasted three decades - ever since their first day at boarding school. Had it not been for the nominal fees Annie's mother's head teacher post entitled her to, it was likely the two girls' worlds would never have coincided. But Annie was immensely grateful they had. Particularly over the last few years. Indeed, without Portia she had no idea how she would have coped. The girl had proved a lifesaver, although, given that this running business had been her suggestion, she might well be a life-ender if Annie dropped down dead with a heart attack.

'Oh, look - a list of forty things to do before you're forty,' Portia announced a couple of months ago, sitting in Annie's kitchen cradling a mug of coffee and flicking through a magazine. 'I'm going to pick ten for you and you have to make sure you do them in the next five years.' She rummaged around in her handbag and pulled out a red pen.

Across the table, Annie spluttered on her herbal tea. 'Er, don't forget that it's not just me turning forty in five years' time. We're in this together remember. And you're a month ahead of me.'

'I'm perfectly aware of that, thank you,' replied Portia, shaking back her mane of glossy dark hair. 'But I'm not the one who is in a rut.'

'Neither am I.' Annie set down her cup with great purpose.

Portia began circling things on the list. 'Oh no?' she asked, without looking up. 'When was the last time you had a proper night out? Met someone new? Did something ... exciting?'

Pushing back her chair from the table, Annie stood up and took the four steps necessary to reach the kitchen sink. 'I don't want to do anything exciting,' she said, turning on the tap and squirting washing-up liquid over the dishes in the bowl. 'I'm perfectly happy with my life as it is.'

'So you keep saying. But it's not normal for a gorgeous woman in her prime to sit in every evening watching TV and playing with Lego®.'

'Um, in case you had forgotten,' pointed out Annie, frothing the bubbles in the bowl with her hand, 'I am a single mother with a five year old child. And I think you're overegging it with the "gorgeous".'

'No I'm not. You are gorgeous. Or at least you would be if you made more of an effort; wore some make-up every now and again. There are lots of yummy mummies around these days. The celeb mags are full of them. '

'Those mummies have wall-to-wall hairdressers, wardrobes full of designer clothes and a squadron of personal trainers. This one owns a tiny cake shop which just about funds a bi-monthly cut-and-blow and her daughter's shoes.'

'Well, it's not right,' huffed Portia, putting down her pen and taking another slug of coffee. 'You're always putting yourself last. It's time you did something for you.'

Annie rolled her eyes. Honestly, as much as she loved her best friend, it was glaringly obvious sometimes that they inhabited completely different worlds. 'And when do you suggest I find time to do that?' she asked archly.

'You could leave Sophie with your parents for a couple of weeks and fly over to Majorca. Stay at the villa. You'd have a great time. And ... you might even find a sexy rich man.'

Annie turned off the tap and spun around to face her friend. 'You know I can't leave Sophie with my parents. They're far too old to cope with an energetic five year old, who, incidentally, now has to go to school. Besides, I don't want a sexy rich man. Or a man of any description. Do I need to remind you how my last relationship ended?'

Portia sniffed derisively. 'That's because Lance is a louse. They're not all like that. I know you find it hard to believe but there actually are *some* decent men out there. You've just got to give them a chance. Look here – number thirty-eight on this list: fall madly in love.'

'Written by a deluded romantic,' tutted Annie. 'I'd rather trust a funnel-web spider than another man. Life is much more straightforward without them. Now, what else is on that list?'

'Run a marathon.'

'Now that –' Annie chuckled, '– is a much more tempting proposition.'

And so Annie had seized that last challenge and ran with it – literally. Given that anything remotely resembling aerobic activity until that day had been a trot around her bijou lounge with the vacuum cleaner, she was building up gradually, starting with the 10k. Needless to say, the first sightings of her in her running shorts, puce-faced and dripping with sweat, caused much consternation amongst the village residents, several of whom questioned her sanity. But Annie was relishing the challenge. It was a long time since she'd set a goal and thrown herself into achieving it. All goal setting belonged to a former life, one which now seemed a million light years away. Things had changed dramatically since then. *She* had changed dramatically since then. Yet, despite these dramatic changes, she was determined to complete this race – even if they had to carry her over the finish line – which, given her stitch, blister and aching limbs, was more than a remote possibility.

The glorious sunshine, dazzling blue sky and stunning Yorkshire countryside still abounded but Jake's appreciation was waning. Rapidly. It felt as though he'd been driving for days – weeks even – instead of the six hours it actually was. He drove so rarely these days, he wasn't used to it. Nor was it an activity he enjoyed, which was hardly surprising given what had happened five years ago. And on roads just like these - apparently innocuous, idyllic country roads where fatal disaster seemed unimaginable. Yet Jake could imagine it all too well – even now, years on. Still, now wasn't the time to dwell on that. He shook his head in an attempt to temporarily dislodge the memory of that fateful

day. He would never erase it permanently. It was etched on his mind like the words on Nina's marble headstone – something else he did not want to think about just now. He took a deep breath in and concentrated on his driving. Tension gripped his shoulders and his back ached. All the roads were beginning to look the same and he hadn't seen a signpost for miles. He desperately needed a pint and something to eat. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. Almost two o'clock. No wonder he was starving. At this rate he may have to resort to boy scout tactics and go and catch a fish or something. But no – there was hope. He pushed his sunglasses a shade higher up the bridge of his nose. He could see a runner in the distance. There was life out there after all. His spirits lifted as he applied a little more pressure to the accelerator.

A serious stitch pierced Annie's left side. But she couldn't stop running. She only had a mile to go. That should take her approximately ten minutes. Ten minutes before she could kick off her trainers and sink into a steaming hot bubble bath. She attempted to visualise *that* scenario but failed. The stitch was too bad. Instead, she turned up the volume on her iPod. Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* flooded her ears – the perfect tune to spur her on. Taking a deep inhalation, she gritted her teeth and continued running.

Jake eased off the accelerator as he approached the runner. It was a girl, with a ponytail of honey-blonde curls swinging from the back of a pink baseball cap. Courtesy of her black running shorts, though, it was her legs that really caught his attention – long, toned and tanned legs, moving at an impressive rate. Manoeuvring the jeep parallel to her, he pressed the button to lower the passenger-side window.

'Excuse me,' he ventured, one hand on the steering wheel as he leaned towards the open window.

The girl appeared not to notice him. Jake could see that she had earphones in. He rolled the car a little further ahead. As it hit her eye-line, she started slightly and turned to face him, still running. He could just make out the lower part of her face, the rest obscured by the rim of her cap.

'Excuse me, but I'm looking for Buttersley. You couldn't point me in the right direction could you?'

She pulled out her right earphone. Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* drifted out. 'Sorry,' she puffed, holding out the earphone to indicate she hadn't heard him.

'Buttersley?' repeated Jake, raising his eyebrows optimistically.

'Left at the junction and you're there,' she replied, tossing him a cursory smile.

'Great. Thanks.'

She didn't look at him again, but held up her hand in reply, before stuffing the earphone back in.

Well, thank goodness for that, mused Jake. He was on the right road – at long last. He glanced in his rear-view mirror as he drove away. The girl was still running – with those legs. He swiped a bead of sweat from his brow and suddenly felt quite peculiar.

An hour later, eventually arriving at his destination via the village pub where he'd tucked into a hearty portion of fish and chips followed by apple pie and custard, Jake almost had to pinch himself. Fate had definitely shone on him the day he bumped into Jasper Pinkington-Smythe at the London airport a few weeks ago. Jake was flying home to Scotland after a meeting with his literary agent. Jasper had been en route to his family's villa in Majorca. He asked Jake what he was up to and Jake muttered something about having a stab at writing a book. The predictable 'what about?' followed. Never comfortable talking about his writing, Jake mumbled something vague about a murder-mystery set in a medieval castle.

'If you're looking for somewhere atmospheric to write it, you could always use Buttersley Manor - our family pile in Yorkshire,' Jasper chuckled. 'Not quite a castle, but it's medieval and even has the obligatory ghost apparently.'

'That's very kind,' Jake replied. 'But I couldn't.' He hadn't seen Jasper for years. It didn't seem right. Jasper, on the other hand, didn't seem remotely bothered by that fact.

‘Why not? The place will be empty for the next six weeks. Seriously. You’d be doing us a favour. Always better to have someone in it. Security and all that.’

‘It’s really good of you to offer, but I couldn’t,’ Jake insisted.

And the subject had been dropped. Or so Jake had thought. Emptying his rucksack at home later that evening, he’d discovered a large brass key wrapped in a brown paper bag. On the bag were a couple of blobs of strawberry jam and scribbled directions to Buttersley Manor. Jasper had obviously hidden it in the bag when Jake wasn’t looking.

Jake’s initial reaction was to return the key. But, bitten by curiosity, he couldn’t resist Googling the manor. The images had blown him away. Seeds of inspiration had sprouted just looking at them. But he couldn’t possibly take Jasper up on his offer. It didn’t seem right. Then again, hadn’t he said the place would be empty for the next six weeks? Hadn’t he insisted Jake would be doing them a favour? And, if the man had been resourceful enough to slip Jake the key, didn’t that provide some indication of how much he wanted him to go? Flicking through the pictures Jake decided he did want to go. Very much. Six glorious uninterrupted weeks in a majestic setting, where he could write to his heart’s content. What more could an author ask for?

Now, inside the manor, wandering from wonderful room to wonderful room, breathing in the heady mix of wood polish, dust, and centuries of Pinkington-Smythe family history, Jake couldn’t believe his luck. The place was a writer’s heaven, a creative paradise oozing atmosphere from every knot of wood, stone fireplace and panelled wall. Excitement bubbled in his stomach. He would stock up on provisions, find the perfect writing spot – a small drawing room on the ground floor overlooking a lawn looked promising – and he would absorb himself in the writing of his next book. Lose himself, once again, in another imaginary world – one infinitely preferable to the real world.

Of course, Jake had not always harboured such reclusive tendencies. A short time ago such an existence would have seemed complete anathema to him. A life without the buzz and banter of the office – without the adrenalin rush of split-second, multi-million pound decisions, and without the constant need to keep one step ahead, to keep one’s pulse on world affairs and second-guess the markets – would not have seemed like a life worth living. But that had been five years ago. Before Nina’s death. Before her beautiful young life had been abruptly ended on a country road by a cocky seventeen year old.

At first people blamed shock for Jake’s change in behaviour. Time is a great healer, they said. But it wasn’t. Jake could still remember opening the door to the chubby policeman as if it had been yesterday. The man’s hands had been covered in flecks of white paint. For some unfathomable reason it was those flecks of paint Jake had focused on as the devastating news had drifted from the constable’s mouth. The words had bounced off him like hailstones off a tin roof. He’d heard them but couldn’t take them in. It wasn’t until Nina’s funeral ten days later, as he stood in the graveyard watching the mahogany box which contained her beautiful body – the body he had known so intimately – being lowered into the hole in the ground, that the implications of what had happened struck him. Nina was dead. And so, too, was the child she’d been carrying, the child they’d created together, the daughter he would never now hold in his arms. That evening he cried until the tears ran dry. Then he sat up all night and made some life-changing decisions.

‘But you can’t sell the business,’ his second-in-command, Mark, protested the following day. ‘You’ve spent years building it up. Look at all the blood, sweat and tears you’ve put into it. You’re exactly where you wanted to be – the most successful fund manager in Europe.’

‘Well, maybe I don’t want to be there any more,’ Jake countered. ‘Maybe now I want something completely different.’

‘You’re rushing into things. Why don’t you take a few months off? Go travelling or something? Do ... I don’t know ... whatever you feel like doing.’

‘This is what I feel like doing.’

‘But you’re in shock. It’s only days since Nina ... since Nina ...’

'Died, Mark. Nina is dead,' Jake cut in, amazed that such a tragic incident, which had ended two lives and touched so many others, could be summed up in three short words.

'Exactly. Which is why this is not a good time to make *any* decisions, never mind one so drastic.'

'It's what I want to do.'

And so, despite the media furore and industry speculation, Jake organised a management buyout, offloading the business to his employees. He sold his Chelsea apartment and bought a small cottage in Scotland on the banks of Loch Tay - a modest, peaceful house in a secluded spot, nestled amongst the heather. After a few months the invitations to London parties and requests to visit dwindled. Jake had been relieved. London – and his old life - seemed a million miles away, as if it had all belonged to someone else.

Becoming accustomed to his own company, Jake spent weeks exploring the Scottish countryside, days walking from dawn 'til dusk. Then, as winter drew nearer and the days grew shorter, he looked for something to occupy his time indoors. He decided to write a book.

From a germ of an idea, a dark mystery set in Victorian London sprouted. With only a vague idea of the plot, once Jake began to type, the words flowed and flowed - at an astonishing rate. It took only ten weeks for him to complete the book. Ten weeks in which he completely absorbed himself. He didn't listen to the radio, he didn't watch TV, he didn't read a newspaper, he scarcely set foot outside the house. Then he looked at the four hundred pages filled with neatly typed words and wondered what to do with them. In the absence of any better ideas he emailed them to a literary agent in London using the pen name Martin Sinclair. To his amazement, he received a reply eight weeks later, saying they were very interested and would like to meet him.

It had been strange flying down to London for the meeting. There was a whole world out there he'd completely forgotten about: a bustling, busy world he no longer belonged to. He made his way to the agent's office in Mayfair where he was introduced to Tanya. He had intended to say little about his past but, to his dismay, Tanya recognised him immediately.

'Oh my god,' her glossy red lips gasped. 'This is fantastic. Marketing will have so many angles to go at. Jake O'Donnell – billionaire financial genius – now a successful author.'

'No,' Jake protested. 'I want the book published under my pen name.'

As if addressing someone of below-average intelligence, Tanya's voice adopted a quelling edge. 'Now that would be silly. Using your real name we could triple sales, quadruple them even. You could make a fortune – well, another fortune,' she added, with a knowing titter and a flutter of heavily-mascaraed lashes.

Nausea engulfed Jake at the mere thought of all the media hype. 'I don't care,' he maintained. 'Either the book goes out under my pen name, or it doesn't go out at all.'

And so, despite Tanya's pouting and whingeing and unsubtle attempts to use her feminine wiles to persuade him otherwise, Jake won. His first novel had been published under his pen name, as had his subsequent two books. And in each one the author biography merely stated *Martin Sinclair lives in rural Scotland*. Unlike other authors Martin Sinclair had no website, no blog, and, most significantly of all, no media photograph. The agency remained unimpressed but, with the books contributing significantly to their profit margin, on the whole they kept quiet. It was a situation Jake was more than content with. And now, at Buttersley Manor, he itched to start work on his next offering, to lose himself in a new book. To erect yet another temporary shield to protect himself from his feelings. Feelings he had had never admitted to another living soul.

CHAPTER TWO

'Mum, can we go to Disneyland for our summer holiday?'

Icing a cake, with her back to her daughter, Annie's heart sank. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and closed her eyes for a moment. As much as she loved being a single mother – the privilege of having her daughter all to herself; the luxury of no one interfering with her child-

rearing decisions – occasionally it was just, well ... hard. Especially at moments like this. She took a deep breath in and plastered a smile on her face before turning around to face the child.

‘We can’t go this year, sweetheart. But remember we are saving up to go when you’re a little bit older.’

Sophie didn’t look up from her colouring-in at the kitchen table. ‘Bethany Stevens is going in the summer holidays.’

Well, she would be, Annie resisted saying. The Stevens’s hot-tub business was doing so well they were struggling to keep up with demand. ‘We’re going to that lovely little cottage at the seaside like we did last year,’ she said, cramming as much enthusiasm as she could into her voice. ‘Remember the great time we had on the beach every day - looking for crabs, and building sandcastles, and throwing the ball for Pip?’

Sophie nodded but Annie could see the disappointment written all over her pretty little face. She blinked back tears. Honestly, she could kill Lance at times. If he hadn’t run off to Japan, then, between the two of them, they could have given their daughter everything she wanted. Not that she wanted to spoil the child. Far from it. She did her best to ensure Sophie appreciated the value of money. But, as much as she could merrily strangle Lance with one of his designer ties, it would have been good for Sophie to have her father in her life: a father she saw for more than a few hours a year, and one who contributed more to her upbringing than a monthly cheque. Not that, according to Lance, being a part-time father had been his original intention. Oh no. Much to Annie’s amazement, he appeared overjoyed when she eventually plucked up the courage to tell him she was pregnant. It was, after all, a mistake; a slip up after a boozy night out. It was she who had been most shocked at the discovery. At twenty-nine she hadn’t been ready for babies, she had a successful career as a museum conservator and she loved her job. But having a baby didn’t have to interfere with her career, Lance assured her. Between the two of them they could have it all. And Annie believed him. She sailed through her pregnancy with Lance super-glued to her side. He attended every scan, every hospital appointment, every ante-natal class. And at the birth he held her hand and mopped her brow – just like in the films. He continued in this perfect supportive partner role for eight weeks after the birth. Then, arriving home from work one evening, he made an announcement that turned Annie’s perfect world on its head. He was taking a new job – in Japan. Alone. Naturally he came up with a raft of excuses and reasons – not one of which Annie understood. She had been too dazed to argue with him. Too stunned to plead or question. Motherhood alone was enough of a shock. Combined with the desertion of what she’d thought was her perfect partner, Annie felt as though she had been run over by a tank.

Weeks later, when she could think more logically, she recalled seeing the advert for Lance’s new job. She’d accidentally knocked his industry magazine off the coffee table on her way out to her six monthly ante-natal check. It fell open at the Vacancies page and the ad had been circled in red. Floating around in a pregnancy-induced bubble of happiness, her baby kicking in her belly, Annie hadn’t given it a second thought. Lance, on the other hand, while acting out the role of The Perfect Father To Be, had seemingly given the matter a great deal of thought; planning and plotting behind her back, attending interviews and negotiating start dates and salary, without allowing her the slightest indication of his intentions. ‘Betrayed’ didn’t come close to how she felt, but that emotion had been overridden by another: foolishness. How could she have been so stupid, so gullible, not to have realised what he was up to? How could she have placed so much trust in one man? Trusted him with both her future and her child’s?

Had it not been for Portia, Annie had no idea how she would have coped those first dreadful few months. Given that Lance had abandoned his daughter, Annie had no wish to do the same. She couldn’t face the thought of leaving her child with minders every day. Consequently, she shelved all plans to return to work, and somewhere cheaper than London to live became a priority. Portia offered her the little gatehouse to Buttersley Manor – the Pinkington-Smythe’s ancestral family seat.

‘But I can’t live there rent-free,’ Annie insisted. ‘I’ll have to pay something.’

‘There’s no way I could even consider taking money from my best friend,’ Portia tutted. ‘How about you keep an eye on the place for us when it’s empty?’

And so that was the deal. While Buttersley Manor was empty, which was – shamefully – more often than it was occupied, Annie kept an eye on things. When visitors were due, she ensured it was cleaned and aired, the beds were made up, and the fridge and cupboards stocked. It was an arrangement that had worked well for five years. And one Annie was more than happy with. She loved living in the gatehouse. It was only two-bedroomed with a tiny kitchen and living room downstairs, but it was perfect for her and Sophie. They were very happy there – normally – except when questions about trips to Disneyland arose.

‘How about some fresh strawberries?’ she beamed, desperate to make amends.

Sophie’s little mouth stretched into a wide smile. ‘Can we dip them in melted chocolate?’

Annie rolled her eyes in mock despair. ‘I suppose so. But only if you promise not to feed them to Pip. However much he drools.’

‘I promise,’ giggled Sophie.

Jake was exhausted. And hungry. It seemed an age since he’d eaten at the pub. Thank goodness he’d stopped off there before heading over to the manor. If he hadn’t, he probably wouldn’t have bothered with food at all. Inspiration had consumed him the moment he set foot through the door. Subsequently, he’d been writing solidly for the last four hours and now desperately needed some fresh air, a shower, and some sustenance. Leaning over the mahogany desk, he threw open the latticed windows and filled his lungs with the warm evening air. Instantly he felt better. But no less hungry. He really couldn’t be bothered going out again. Besides, the handful of village shops he’d driven past earlier had most likely closed for the day. He would take a quick shower then go and root around in the kitchen. There might be something there he could nibble on.

While Sophie dipped her strawberries in the bowl of melted chocolate and Pip, their scruffy white Jack Russell, sat at her feet salivating, Annie wandered out to the garden to assess the weed situation. She loved her garden. It was small, but, like the cottage, had everything she needed: a well-kept lawn, a couple of flower beds, and a neat vegetable patch. She took a deep breath in, savouring the warm evening air laced with the scent of honeysuckle. She really was lucky living here and, despite Portia’s cynicism and the lack of funds for Disneyland, really was content with her life. Who could ask for more? She had a wonderful, healthy daughter, a beautiful place to live, great friends and her own business. In spite of her grumbles about Lance, she wouldn’t change a thing.

She tilted up her head to the clear blue sky and caught sight of a hawk. Her gaze followed the bird as it glided effortlessly through the air towards the manor, suddenly swooping down outside the open windows of the drawing room. *Open windows?* Ice-cold apprehension skittered through her. She’d been over to the manor that morning to check everything was in order. Aware it verged on the anal, she checked every morning when it was empty. The building was her responsibility, after all, and one she did not take lightly. She harboured a secret dread of going over one morning to discover a burst pipe and hordes of priceless antiques bobbing about in the water. Thankfully there had been no burst pipe that morning. There had been nothing untoward at all. And she’d received no word of impending visitors. Her stomach lurched. What if it were thieves? She wouldn’t be surprised. The place was packed with priceless relics, valuable paintings and exquisite furniture. For her as a conservator, it was both a treat and an honour to be surrounded by such treasures on a daily basis. The P.S.’s though were completely unfazed. Despite much nagging from Annie over the years, they had still not bothered to have an alarm fitted. Well, there was only one thing for it, she determined, taking a deep breath in, she would have to go and investigate.

'I'm just going over to the manor for a few minutes, Sophie,' she said, popping her head through the open kitchen window and, with a shaking hand, grabbing the key from the sill.

'Okay,' muttered Sophie, still intent on her colouring-in.

Annie hesitated for a moment. Should she ask the child to seek help if she wasn't back in five minutes? No. She didn't want to alarm her. After all, it was probably nothing. Nothing at all. Still, perhaps she'd better take her mobile, just in case. She snatched that up from the sill, too. Shoving the phone and key into her shorts' pocket, she sprinted over the lawn which separated the gatehouse from its lofty relative. She headed directly to the open windows of the drawing room. Standing on tip-toes, she peeped inside. To her immense relief there was no sign of any burglars. And it certainly didn't look like anything had been moved. Pinkington-Smythe family portraits still lined the walls. And the Chinese vase – which was worth more than her annual income – still had pride of place on the mantelpiece. Hmm. Maybe thieves had a system. Maybe they started from the top and worked their way down. Should she go and confront them? Or should she call Sid, the local policeman? Or was she overreacting? Perhaps the windows had blown open with a sudden gust of wind. From inside the house. Okay, so that scenario wasn't particularly likely, but she didn't relish the thought of making a fool of herself again in front of Sid. She still hadn't recovered from the embarrassment of last year's incident when she'd been convinced there was an intruder. She'd been so scared she'd locked herself in the loo. After a chaotic couple of hours searching, it turned out to be a pigeon. She wouldn't have blamed Sid if he'd fined her for wasting police time. No, this time she should at least ascertain whether or not someone *was* inside before summoning the law. She tugged her mobile out of her pocket and scrolled down to the number for the police station. Now, if she did find herself in a compromising position, all she had to do was press the green button and help would arrive in minutes. Relatively assured, she ran round to the front of the manor and up the steps to the front door. She turned the large iron handle. It was locked. Of course it was. If the thieves had a key they wouldn't have climbed in through the window. Her heart began to race. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead. She fished the key out of her pocket, unlocked the door and slipped into the stone-flagged entrance hall. Closing the door, she pressed her back against it and listened for a noise – voices, furniture being moved, anything. There was nothing. Right. Well, maybe it was one guy working alone. That was much more manageable. Even so, perhaps it would be sensible to protect herself. Her gaze scanned the hall, landing on a suit of armour. She tiptoed over to it, slipped off the helmet and, with some wiggling, placed it over her own head. Then she moved over to the wall and unhooked a sword and shield. Right. Good. She was fully protected now. So where should she start her search? Upstairs. Yes, that was probably the best place. Summoning every ounce of courage, she placed one foot on the bottom step. And froze. She could hear footsteps. In the corridor to the right. Approaching footsteps. Her blood ran cold, her heart hammered and her legs turned to jelly. Unable to move, she watched in horror as a tall shadowy figure came into view. Oh my God! This was definitely no pigeon. This was a real-life burglar. She should press the green button on her mobile. But that would mean dropping the sword and the shield. Which she might need if he decided to attack her. Well, as she was holding the weapons, she might as well make use of them.

'St-stay right where you are,' she stammered, turning towards him brandishing the sword and shield. 'I'm calling the police.'

'I, er, really don't think there's any need for that,' came a deep male voice.

'Oh yes, there is,' countered Annie, flourishing the sword in what she hoped was a threatening manner. 'And if you've got a gun, put it on the floor and kick it over here.'

She held her breath as he bent down and kicked something towards her. Ah ha! So he did have a gun. Thank goodness she'd had the foresight to relieve him of that. She'd known that watching all those American cop shows would prove useful at some point. Good move, Annie. Very good move. But, to her amazement, it wasn't a loaded pistol that landed at her feet, but a packet of digestive

biscuits. *Biscuits?* Annie furrowed her brow. Who on earth would break into a manor and steal a packet of biscuits? Was nothing sacred where this criminal was concerned?

'Where's your weapon?' she demanded.

'I don't have one.'

Hmm. Annie squinted her eyes against the light. He definitely had something else in his hand. She cleared her throat, 'Wh-what else are you holding?'

'A carton of blackcurrant juice.'

Huh. So he considered himself some kind of joker, did he? Well, Annie wasn't in the mood for jokes. This was no laughing matter.

'Breaking and entering is no laughing matter,' she huffed.

'I couldn't agree more. But I had a key.' He stepped forward, into the pool of sunlight streaming in through one of the windows.

Annie could see him clearly now. And what she saw caused the breath to whoosh from her lungs, the sword and shield to flop to her side, and all her blood to rush to her head. Bathed in the golden sunlight he looked like some kind of Greek god; a tall, muscular, broad-shouldered Adonis in faded blue jeans and a navy V-necked T-shirt. For a few brief seconds she was rendered speechless. And senseless. And a lot of other things ending in -less that she really couldn't think of at that particular moment. His jet-black hair, with just the hint of a wave, was dripping wet. He was obviously fresh from the shower. An image of him *in* the shower crashed into her mind, causing her already shaking legs to almost cave beneath her. She made a grab for the bannister in order to steady herself as she attempted to eradicate the image. His *actual* presence was unsettling enough. To add fantasy to the equation was really not helpful. He did, though, look vaguely familiar. Was this the man who'd asked her for directions earlier? So intent had she been on her running, she'd paid him scant attention. Which now seemed completely ludicrous. She must need her eyes testing. Badly. How else could she not have noticed those sculpted cheekbones, that strong stubble-covered jaw, and those twinkling dark eyes? Oh my God! She was practically salivating. Which was pathetic. And besides, he might have a key but that didn't mean he wasn't a burglar.

'Are you a burglar?' she asked. The question came out more like a strangled squeak.

He snorted with laughter. 'No. Are you?'

'Of course not,' she snapped. 'I'm the caretaker.'

'I thought so.' He nodded pensively, one side of his deliciously sensuous mouth curling upwards. 'The uniform gives it away.'

Uniform? What uniform?

'Would you, er, like a hand with your helmet?' he continued, pointing to her head whilst plainly doing his utmost not to laugh.

Confusion engulfed Annie. 'Wh-what?'

'Your helmet.'

What on earth was he-? Oh no. She was still wearing the helmet from the suit of armour. As if she didn't look ridiculous enough.

'No thank you,' she huffed. Swamped in mortification, she put down the sword and shield, placed a hand either side of the helmet and attempted to tug it off. It didn't move.

'Here, let me help.'

Before Annie had a chance to protest, he set down the carton of juice, and his long legs took the few strides necessary to bring him directly in front of her. He was so close she could smell his citrusy shower gel mixed with his own masculine scent. Through the gap in her helmet her eyes were directly level with the V of his T-shirt from which a few dark hairs were visible. She watched, mesmerised, as a drop of water fell from his head and landed on the bare skin at the V, before trickling down under the T-shirt. To her dismay, she had to summon every ounce of willpower not to slide her hands under the T-shirt to explore exactly where the drop had gone.

'Ready?' he asked.

Ready? For what? Surely he didn't know what she was thinking. He couldn't possibly mean— Before she knew what was happening, in one deft movement he pulled the helmet from her head.

'There you go.' He handed it to her, then stepped back.

Annie attempted to ignore the bizarre wave of disappointment that engulfed her at the distance now between them.

'Thanks,' she muttered, avoiding eye contact, as a deep flush crept up her neck. What on earth was happening to her? She didn't know what it was but she had to get a grip. Take control of the situation. Or at least try and control something – starting with the hurricane of lust that was swirling around her. She tilted up her chin and met his gaze. Bad idea! No sooner had she looked into his eyes than she immediately wished she hadn't. They were exactly the same shade of navy-blue as his T-shirt, framed by long dark lashes and sparkling with humour. The devastating combination set off a swarm of butterflies in her stomach.

'Look, maybe we should start again,' he said, holding out his hand to her. 'I'm Jake. Jake ... Sinclair.'

Annie gawped at the large tanned hand. The thought of touching it made her dizzy. But she couldn't just stand there like a plank.

'Annie Richards,' she said, aware of her blush deepening and a strange swirling sensation sweeping over her the moment she placed her hand in his. So light-headed was she, she thought she might swoon. Not that she made a habit of swooning. She had never swooned in her entire life. But perhaps that was because she'd never met such a devastatingly drop-dead gorgeous male in her entire life.

'I'm an old friend of Jasper's,' he continued. 'He offered me the use of the manor.'

Did he now? Well, trust Jasper to forget to tell her. Not that Annie was surprised. While Portia verged on the academically brilliant, her brother – despite an education costing more than the national debt of some countries – had never been the brightest bulb in the many Pinkington-Smythe chandeliers.

'Have you, um, duelled with many burglars lately?'

Had she duelled with many burglars? Was that an attempt at humour? Because Annie really wasn't in the mood for humour. She was too busy wading through her pit of mortification, searching for the exit sign. 'Um, not many, no,' she mumbled, tucking a wayward curl behind her ear.

'So, if you're the caretaker, you must live nearby,' he continued.

Annie nodded. 'In the gatehouse.'

'Right. Nice and handy then.'

'Very handy. Yes. Thanks.'

Thanks? Why was she thanking him? And why was he standing there looking so ... so ... gorgeous? And so ... *cool*? While she felt like a complete turnip. She glanced longingly at the door. She couldn't just make a bolt for it. She'd have to make some attempt at conversation. She cleared her throat.

'How long are you staying?'

She held her breath hoping it was just overnight. Or a couple of days. Or even until mid-week. She could cope with that. Probably.

'Six weeks or so.'

Six weeks! Yet again Annie's legs almost caved. She made another grab for the bannister. Six weeks. That was what? ... forty-two days. Which would be – she did a quick mental calculation – approximately one thousand hours. Good lord. It was like ... forever. He might as well have said "a whole month and a half", because that's what it equated to.

As if attempting to justify his presence, he added, 'Jasper told me the place would be empty for a while. I'm ... trying my hand at writing a book.'

Annie raised an unimpressed eyebrow. 'Writing a book' sounded exactly like something Jasper's rich, spoiled friends might dabble in; a 'little project' to while away the time between parties. Still, on the positive side, it could mean he'd be holed up with his computer for as long as the whim lasted. Which would be fine. Perfect, in fact. Well, perhaps not perfect. Perfect would be if he wasn't here at all. And her dignity hadn't been through the shredder – twice.

'Right.' She forced her lips into some semblance of a smile. 'I'd better let you settle in. Do you need anything?'

Oh lord. Please, please, please let him say no.

She watched as his mouth stretched into a disarming smile, causing a bolt of desire to flash down her spine.

'Thanks. I think I have everything I need.'

I just bet you have, Annie resisted saying. She quickly checked herself and attempted to dredge up something of her usual professional manner. 'Good. Well ... I'll just tidy up these things and get out of your hair then.'

Out of his hair? An image of her *in* his hair, threading her fingers through it as he trailed a stream of kisses down her- A hastily summoned mental boulder crushed that treacherous image. Heavens! She'd never felt so out of control. She had to put some distance between her and this man. Quickly. Willing her hands not to shake, she replaced the helmet on the suit of armour, then re-hung the sword and shield, aware of Jake's eyes on her. Honestly, did he have to stand there watching her? Couldn't he just go away? Like, back to wherever he'd come from. All the items in their rightful places, Annie turned around and had taken one step towards the door when it burst open. In marched Sophie wearing pink spotted pyjamas and carrying Pip.

'Mum, are you okay? You've been ages.'

Annie couldn't resist a smile at her daughter's concerned face. 'I'm fine, sweetheart. I'm coming back over now.'

'Why is your face all red?'

Annie pleaded with the ground to swallow her up. It didn't. 'I'm just a bit ... hot. I've been talking to this gentleman.'

Sophie turned to Jake. 'Hello, I'm Sophie Richards. Who are you?'

'Sophie!' exclaimed Annie. 'Don't be so rude. This is Mr Sinclair. He's going to be staying at the manor for a few ... weeks,' she said, attempting to banish all signs of panic from her voice. 'He's writing a book.'

Sophie's eyes grew wide. 'Ooo. Is it about dragons?'

Jake chuckled. 'I'm afraid not. Although, come to think of it, a couple of dragons might liven it up a bit. At the moment it's just about a boring old castle.'

Sophie wrinkled her little nose. 'Oh well, someone might like it. We've been dipping strawberries in chocolate. Do you like strawberries and chocolate?'

'They are amongst my two favourite things in the whole world.'

'We've loads left, haven't we, Mum?'

Annie's heart plummeted. She had a strong feeling of what was to follow. She opened her mouth to forestall her daughter, but was too late.

'Would you like to come over to our house and have some? And I can stay up and chat to you because I'm allowed to stay up until eight o'clock on a Friday.'

Annie held her breath. Surely he wouldn't. At the very thought her stomach twisted itself into impressive knots.

'I'd love to,' replied Jake, raking a hand through his wet hair in a way that, given her fantasising just a few seconds ago, made Annie bite back a gasp. 'But I'm afraid I have lots of work to do.'

‘But it’s Friday,’ pointed out Sophie. ‘And Mum always says Friday evenings are for relaxing. So Mr Sinclair should relax too, shouldn’t he, Mum?’

‘I don’t think Mr Sinclair-’ began Annie. But before she could finish, Sophie strode over to Jake, thrust a wriggling Pip into his arms, and began tugging him by the elbow towards the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Rooted to the spot, Annie watched the unlikely trio make their way down the steps of the manor and wondered what on earth she should do now. Should she invent some mythical appointment? Say she’d just remembered she and Sophie were supposed to be at the dentist? At this precise time. On a Friday night? But no – unlike Lance, Annie was no good at lying. Sophie would see right through her and think nothing of exposing her for the fraud that she was. No, the only thing she could do was follow them to the cottage and hope Jake Sinclair would quickly grasp the message that he really wasn’t welcome.

As a babbling Sophie led him over the lawn towards the gatehouse, with Pip licking every square centimetre of his face, Jake bit back a smile. This was like a comedy sketch – with Annie playing the lead role. He stifled a gurgle of laughter as he recalled how funny she’d looked in that helmet, brandishing the sword. By the colour of her cheeks, she’d obviously been mortified by the incident. And was no doubt desperate to get away from him. But how could he have refused little Sophie? Not only was the child leading him, quite authoritatively, by the elbow, but she was also completely adorable: the image of her mother with her riot of honey-blonde curls and sparkling emerald-green eyes. Still, it really wasn’t fair of him. He risked a look at Annie over his shoulder. She trailed miserably behind, staring at the ground. He felt a niggles of guilt that he’d lied to her about his surname. He hadn’t intended to. It had been a knee-jerk reaction by his self-preservation instinct, ever wary of the transparency of the internet. Oh well, he mused, as he swung his head back around and Pip stuck his tongue in his ear, it didn’t really matter. So long as he wasn’t a burglar, Annie Richards probably didn’t give a monkey’s who he was. And it wasn’t as if he intended launching himself on village society. He would keep himself to himself. Which was exactly what he should be doing now. So, once at the cottage, he’d make some excuse and beat a hasty retreat.

Following Jake and her daughter across the lawn to the cottage, Annie tried desperately to keep her gaze on the ground and not let it wander to Jake’s rear, showcased perfectly in those low-slung blue jeans. What was wrong with her? She’d never been fixated with a man’s behind before. Heavens. Maybe Portia was right. Maybe she had been without a man in her bed for too long. She normally didn’t give sex a second thought these days. She was far too busy. And frankly, what was the point in thinking about it when she had no intention of engaging in it? So why, then, was she focusing on Jake Sinclair’s buttocks? She was tired, that could be the only explanation. She’d run five miles today. No mean feat and the longest she’d run in her entire life. No wonder she felt light-headed. And she was disorientated because her nerves had been on edge. She had, after all, been prepared to confront an armed burglar. Yes – that was it. She knew there must be a logical explanation somewhere for her illogical behaviour. It wasn’t Jake Sinclair who’d set her head spinning, her stomach churning and her nerves aflutter, it was a combination of the aforementioned external factors. So, now that she’d established that fact, why did she desperately hope she had no underwear drying about the place and that she’d tidied up? Because, she quickly reasoned, Jake Sinclair probably lived in some minimalist designer pad with hot and cold running champagne, gleaming stainless steel surfaces, and an army of uniformed cleaners. Well, tough. He would have to take her and Sophie as they came. And if he didn’t like the cottage, he need never visit it again. Come to think of it, it would be better if the place was a complete tip and he ran a mile. Because she really didn’t want the man in her house. Or any man in her house.

By the time Annie reached the cottage, she found Jake leaning against the kitchen bench, looking, just as she'd predicted, completely out of place. His presence seemed to fill the room, sucking out all the oxygen. Sophie was nowhere to be seen.

At a loss as to what to do, Annie hovered in the doorway. 'Would, you, er, like a glass of wine? Or something?' she asked, her attempt at a light-hearted tone failing miserably.

'Um, no, I'm fine thanks.'

Annie stared at him for a few seconds. All his previous humour seemed to have evaporated and he sounded a little ... subdued. There was a strange expression on his handsome face. One she couldn't decipher. 'I think I'll have a cup of tea,' she blurted out. 'Would you like one?'

Jake gave a hesitant smile. 'Okay. Thanks.'

'And please can we have more melted chocolate for the strawberries,' chipped in Sophie, breezing in from the living room, clutching another of her colouring-in books. 'Mr Sinclair, you can sit here beside me.' She climbed onto one of the kitchen chairs and patted the one alongside her.

Jake raised an apologetic eyebrow at Annie, before doing as Sophie bid. No sooner had he sat down, than Pip jumped onto his lap.

'Are you a good colourer-innerer?' asked Sophie, flicking through the book.

'I don't really know,' confessed Jake. 'It's a long time since I did any colouring-in.'

'Mum's rubbish. Oh, look. You can do this one if you like.' She pushed the book over to him. 'And then I can give you a mark out of ten like my teacher does.'

Jake choked back a surge of laughter. 'Okay then,' he said, doing exactly as he was told.

Rooting through the tin of crayons, looking for just the right shade of blue, Jake decided he must be losing it. He had to be. Why else was he allowing himself to be bossed about by a five year old child? Albeit a delightful one. Five years ago he'd been renowned for his persuasion tactics, his implacability, his intransigence. When Jake had made a decision everyone had known it was final. So why was he now sitting in the kitchen of a woman who obviously didn't want him there, with a dog that wouldn't stop licking his face, having his colouring-in ability assessed? It was madness. He should go. He really should. He had writing to do. Lots of writing. And he was wasting precious time.

The trouble was, the moment he walked into this tiny, bright, sunny kitchen, an overwhelming surge of emotion had assaulted him. So overwhelming, it almost knocked him off his feet. Because this was exactly the sort of kitchen he'd grown up in; exactly the sort of kitchen he'd imagined sharing with Nina and their child. During the few seconds he'd been alone in the room, he'd drank in every detail: the smell – a delicious mix of currant buns, orange peel, strawberries and chocolate; the glass vase on the window sill crammed with freesias; the little pots of fresh herbs; the buttercup-yellow walls peppered with postcards, photographs and Sophie's paintings; and the small round spice cake with the words *Happy Birthday George* expertly iced on top. Jake didn't know why, but his mood had dipped slightly when he'd read those words. Which was ludicrous. Why should it matter that Annie Richards had a man in her life? She might be gorgeous, have an adorable daughter, and be a very conscientious caretaker. But that didn't mean he was *interested* in her. His interest in the fairer sex had died with Nina. His life – and his heart – were now, thanks to the impenetrable barriers he had spent the last five years constructing around them, definite no-go areas. No, he was only taking a neighbourly interest, he assured himself. And once he finished colouring in this picture, he would go back to the manor and carry on with his writing. Assuming, of course, Sophie allowed him to.

Annie set down the mug of tea on the table in front of Jake and slid the milk jug over to him. He looked up and smiled, causing her stomach to somersault and the colour in her cheeks to intensify. Honestly. Never, in all her thirty-five years, had she felt so awkward and embarrassed. Jake Sinclair was a friend of Jasper's and, like Jasper, probably spent his life jetting around the world mingling with supermodels and starlets, and dining in Michelin starred restaurants. The last place he would want to be would be her tiny kitchen colouring in a picture of a donkey in a straw hat, and drinking a cup of tea. And, more importantly, she didn't want a man like Jake Sinclair in her kitchen drinking

tea. Or drinking anything. She really must have a word with her daughter about inviting strange men back to the house.

Leaning against the kitchen bench, cradling her mug, it occurred to Annie how few men had actually sat at her kitchen table. Lance certainly never had. She and Sophie always travelled to London to meet him during his fleeting visits to the UK. He was, so he claimed, far too busy to make the journey to Yorkshire. Which suited Annie. She didn't want him here. This was her space, hers and Sophie's, and she intended to keep it that way. She sucked in a deep calming breath, attempting to banish the panic that rose at the mere notion of male intrusion into their lives. But she was being absurd. Jake Sinclair was only colouring in a picture. And when he finished, he would return to the manor and that would be that.

'Look, Mum,' said Sophie, holding up Jake's finished article. 'Mr Sinclair is a very good colourer-innerer. I'm going to give him nine out of ten.'

'Wow, nine out of ten.' Annie pushed aside her detailed analysis and raised an astonished eyebrow at Jake. 'You've done well. The most I've been awarded is an eight. And that was only once.'

'Must be one of my hidden talents,' chuckled Jake, reaching for his mug.

As Annie watched him sip his tea, her skin tingled at the thought of what other talents might lie within Jake Sinclair's portfolio; ones that involved that gorgeous mouth brushing against her-

'This is a lovely cottage,' he remarked, leaning back in his chair. 'Have you lived here long?'

Clattering back to the here and now, it took Annie a few seconds to dismiss all inappropriate thoughts and compile her answer. 'Five years,' she eventually replied. 'As long as we've lived in Buttersley.'

'Mum used to live in London,' chipped in Sophie, not looking up from her colouring-in. 'That's the capital of England and I was born there.'

'Really?' Jake's lips twitched with suppressed laughter. 'I think all the best people must be born in London.'

Sophie looked up at him. 'Were you born there?'

He nodded. 'I was. Many many years ago.'

Sophie went back to her colouring-in. 'Mum's old, too. But she used to work in a museum with even older things.'

Annie caught her bottom lip between her teeth and gave a despairing shake of the head. 'I'm sure Mr Sinclair isn't remotely interested in what I used to do.'

'Oh, but I am,' countered Jake, fixing her with those gorgeous dark eyes. 'Really. Where was this museum of yours?'

Annie sucked in a deep breath. It felt like she was divulging her entire life story to someone she had only known a few minutes. Not something she was particularly comfortable with. 'Hampton Court,' she replied at length. 'I used to be a conservator, specialising in historic interiors.'

Jake's eyes grew wide. 'Impressive. But you don't do that now?'

Still leaning against the bench, Annie shuffled her feet awkwardly. 'No. Things ... changed ... when Sophie came along. So we moved here.'

'Mum has a cake shop in the village,' Sophie informed him. 'She makes lots of yummy things. And on Fridays she bakes cakes for my class and I take them to school in a big basket.'

'Well, that's very generous of her,' said Jake, throwing Annie a look she couldn't quite decipher.

Right. That was enough, Annie decided. If they carried on at this rate, the man would soon know her weight, as well as her shoe size. She glanced at the kitchen clock and was relieved to see that it was a little after eight. 'Okay,' she said, plonking down her mug on the bench behind her. 'That's enough colouring-in now. It's time for you to go to bed.'

'Oh, but do I have to?' Sophie crossed her arms on the table and dropped her head onto them.

'I'm afraid so. Say goodnight to Mr Sinclair. Then upstairs.'

Muttering all the while, a reluctant Sophie bade Jake goodnight, tickled Pip under the chin and disappeared up the stairs.

'I'll have to make sure she brushes her teeth,' said Annie, battling the urge to run up the stairs after her daughter and put some space between her and this man who was having the most unsettling effect on her.

'Of course.' Jake picked up Pip from his lap and placed him gently on the floor. 'I'd better get going. Thanks for the tea and the, er, colouring-in.'

'No problem. I'll, um see you around.'

'No doubt.'

Jake rose to his feet, his impressive height and width seeming to fill the room. It was more than Annie could bear. Not waiting to see him out, she flew up the stairs as fast as her aching legs would carry her.

It took all of five minutes and three pages of *The Fantastic Mr Fox* before Sophie fell asleep. Clearly, entertaining strange men had worn the child out. Hopefully she'd learned her lesson, thought Annie as she made her way down the stairs. She, too, was exhausted. No doubt as a result of the roller coaster of emotions her body had been subjected to during the last hour or so, all of which she could attribute to the newly-arrived Jake Sinclair. Thank goodness he had gone now. She would tidy up, then sit in the garden and read for an hour before heading up to-

'Ah!' Annie jumped as she entered the kitchen. Because there, still sitting in his chair at the table, was Jake Sinclair – with a very smug-looking Pip on his lap.

'I'm really sorry,' he grimaced. 'I've been trying to leave but Pip has other ideas. Look.' He set the dog down on the floor, rose to his feet and took a step towards the door. In a flash, Pip was in the doorway making a strange throaty sound which sounded suspiciously like a growl.

Annie's mortification returned – tenfold. 'I don't know what's got into him,' she blustered, marching over to the mutt and scooping him up. 'He's never done that before.'

'Maybe he hasn't quite grasped the guard dog concept yet,' chuckled Jake.

'Maybe,' muttered Annie, burning with embarrassment. Honestly, what must he think of them all? First she waved a sword in his face like some kind of deranged Power Ranger, then her five year old daughter railroaded him into their house and now their psychotic Jack Russell wouldn't let him out.

'Well, I'll definitely be going now then.'

'Of course,' mumbled Annie, still standing in the open doorway with Pip in her arms.

Jake came to a standstill directly in front of her. Annie's heart began hammering wildly and her head started to spin.

'Would you, um, mind if I squeezed past?' he asked.

Annie hurtled back to reality. God! What was she doing? Standing in the doorway gawping at him, that was what. She opened her mouth to say something – anything. But her gaze locked on his and all words flew from her head. Stupefied, she watched as Jake raised his hand and gently brushed the pad of his thumb against her cheek. The slight roughness of his skin against hers caused red-hot desire to shoot down her spine, her breath to catch in her throat and her legs to weaken. Her eyes moved to his mouth. That wickedly sensual mouth she'd been fantasising about a few minutes before. At that precise moment she wanted nothing more than to feel it on hers. To-

'Chocolate,' he said softly, his eyes twinkling.

Chocolate? Annie furrowed her brow.

'You had a smudge on your cheek.'

Of course she did. Just to complete the picture of her being a total idiot. 'Right. Thanks,' she mumbled, attempting to ignore the disappointment flooding her veins. What did she think he'd been going to? Kiss her? Okay, so maybe that idea had fleetingly skipped across her mind. Very fleetingly. But it was a ludicrous one. She didn't want any man to kiss her – let alone one of Jasper's playboy

friends. So what, then, was happening to her? It could only be the running. Completing five miles had clearly affected her in a very strange way. Goodness only knows how she would behave after ten or thirteen. If she carried on at this rate, she would be locked up, a danger to the entire male species. Still, there was one way to minimise making a plank of herself again and that was to keep well out of Jake Sinclair's way; a situation which he, too, would no doubt be happy about given that he probably thought her household on par with some kind of mental institution.

She stepped out of the doorway. 'Goodnight,' she said, with as much dignity as she could muster. 'Night. And thanks again for the tea. I'll, er, see you later.'

Annie managed a feeble smile in reply. *Not if I see you first*, she resolved.

'Oh. My. God!' In shocking-pink hot-pants and impossibly high heels, Lydia Pembleton almost toppled into *Crumbs* - Annie's cake shop. 'I have just had the most delicious mirage,' she gushed, fanning her face with her hand. 'And I say "mirage", darling, because no man could possibly be that good-looking and be wandering around Buttersley *unsupervised*. Any idea who he is?'

Arranging limoncello cupcakes on a tiered stand in the window, Annie rolled her eyes. It did not require the services of a famous Belgian detective to know that Lydia must be referring to Jake Sinclair. She guessed his presence in the village would cause a stir – particularly amongst the single female brigade, over which Lydia reigned supreme.

'I've no idea,' she muttered disinterestedly. There was no way she was going to admit to Lydia that she'd already met Jake. To do so would be to subject herself to an interrogation of which any member of the secret service would be proud.

'Well, I'm going to find out,' resolved Lydia, tapping a long scarlet fingernail against her chin. 'It's a long time since a man's had that effect on me, I can tell you. I wonder if it's one of Mrs Coombes's long lost relatives. Where did she say they were from again?'

'Devon.'

'Hmmm. He didn't look very Devon-ish to me. He looked more ... cosmopolitan. Like one of those really fit South African swimmers at the Olympics. I might go and bump into him – accidentally on purpose. Or do you think that's a bit obvious?'

'Possibly,' sighed Annie. She really didn't want to have this conversation. Or any conversation that involved Jake Sinclair. After the idiotic way she'd acted in front of him yesterday, she wanted to forget all about the man. And she had. She hadn't given him a second thought until now. Well, that wasn't strictly true. Perhaps she'd given him a second one. And a third. But by the tenth, she'd wised up. That thought, and any subsequent ones, had been batted away with all the aplomb of a world-class cricketer.

'I know,' piped up Lydia, 'I could sprain my ankle. Right in front of him. That wouldn't be too obvious, would it? Not in these heels. Mind you, I wouldn't want to damage them. They cost a fortune. Still, might be worth it for just one night with a man like that. I bet he can do things that would make a girl –'

'Good morning.'

At the sound of Jake's deep voice from the doorway, Annie's heart sank. So, too, did the limoncello cupcake she'd been holding. As she whipped around to face him, the cake landed with a splat, right on top of her sandaled foot. Lydia appeared no less startled. For the first time in the five years she'd known her, Annie detected a slight flush under the woman's lashings of fake tan. Like a true professional, though, Lydia slipped effortlessly into character.

'Good morning to you too,' she purred, her voice dropping several octaves and taking on a strange husky quality. 'And isn't it a glorious one?'

'It is,' agreed Jake. He turned to Annie. 'Hello again. Sorry for interrupting but I couldn't resist a look in. Your window display is far too tempting.'

'Thanks,' muttered Annie, failing to quell the wave of pink stealing over her own cheeks, and desperately hoping he hadn't noticed the squashed cake on her foot.

Jake strolled over to one of the cabinets which housed several large iced novelty cakes. 'Wow. These are impressive. Very impressive.' He turned to look at her, his mouth stretching into such a delicious smile that Annie's insides dissolved to mush. Which was pathetic, she chided herself – on so many fronts. Firstly, the ability to make cakes was unlikely to impress any of Jasper's friends, and secondly, whether he was impressed or not mattered little. She didn't need Jake Sinclair's approval. Using her skills and bags of initiative, she'd built up a very successful business over the last few years.

'Have you made all of these?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Every one.'

'Annie is our own little Nigella,' tittered Lydia, whose presence Annie had almost forgotten. 'Aren't you going to introduce me to your ... *friend*, Annie?' she asked archly.

'Oh, yes. Of course,' mumbled Annie. 'Lydia, this is Jake Sinclair. Jake, this is Lydia –'

In a flash, Lydia's teetering heels had her standing directly in front of Jake. '– Pembleton.' She extended an orange hand to him. 'I used to be married to Darren Pembleton.'

Annie watched as Jake took Lydia's hand and stared at her nonplussed. Due to the woman's meaningful tone, the name was obviously meant to impress. By Jake's baffled expression, it obviously didn't. As if to confirm Annie's suspicions, Jake cast her a questioning look.

'Footballer,' she mouthed.

He gave a subtle nod of gratitude.

'When My Darren played for the Premier League I went to see one of his matches,' continued Lydia, oblivious to Jake's bewilderment. 'I sat with all the other WAGs. Some of whom are very famous in their own right. Of course, I'm not one to name drop, but I'm sure you know precisely who I mean.'

'Right,' muttered Jake, evidently having no idea. 'That must have been very ... interesting.'

'There was a picture of us on the front of the Daily Mirror,' ploughed on Lydia, shaking back her straightened mane of overly-highlighted hair. 'Not that I like to brag about it or anything.'

Jake raised his eyebrows to Annie.

'So what are you doing in Buttersley?' asked Lydia, still clutching his hand and running her tongue along her glossy bottom lip.

'I'm staying at the manor for a few weeks. I'm an old friend of Jasper's.'

Annie watched as Lydia's perfectly made-up eyes grew wide. It was common knowledge that the woman's unabashed and unrelenting attempts to wheedle her way into Jasper's crowd always met with rejection.

'How marvellous. Any friend of Jasper's is a friend of mine.' Her dazzling smile showcased two rows of ludicrously expensive dental work. 'And if you're staying a few weeks we'll have to find something to occupy your time.' She lowered her false lashes and shot him a knowing smile. 'I've a few ideas already.'

As Jake extricated his hand from Lydia's, Annie watched a cloud of something that looked suspiciously like horror settle over his handsome face. She wasn't surprised. Lydia on a man-mission was more terrifying than a fortnight's holiday in Gaza.

'Now, is there anything you fancy in here?' she asked, her voice dripping with innuendo. 'Or should I take you around and introduce you to the other shopkeepers? Of course...' she lowered her voice conspiratorially, '... I much prefer shopping in Harrogate myself but I do consider it my duty as a celebrity to be seen supporting local businesses. Someone once asked for my autograph outside the greengrocer's, you know.'

Annie bit her tongue. That had been a case of mistaken identity. The old guy thought Lydia was one of the breakfast TV weather presenters.

Lydia linked her arm through Jake's and steered him towards the open door.

'Look, it's very kind, but there's no need. Honestly,' he protested. 'I'm perfectly capable of –'

'Let me show you what a friendly bunch we are here. Although, of course, some of us are friendlier than others,' she chortled.

As they disappeared through the doorway, Annie released a long sigh of relief. Thank goodness he'd gone. She was far too busy for a distraction like Jake Sinclair today. She only hoped Lydia was kind to him. Even a man like Jake would be risking it walking into Lydia's lair. Not that Annie cared. It made no difference to her what Jake got up to with Lydia. None at all. She was just thankful that he hadn't noticed the squashed cake on the top of her foot. Now *that* really would have been embarrassing.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three hours later, Jake arrived back at the manor completely exhausted. He could hardly believe what he'd just experienced. In fact, the idea even crossed his mind that he'd been set up. That there might be hidden cameras dotted about the village monitoring his every move because this couldn't be normal village life. Could it? He'd always imagined Yorkshire villages to be quiet, sleepy places, populated by farmers and old ladies with lilac hair and tweed skirts, not the likes of Lydia Pembleton in shocking-pink hot-pants and silver stilettos.

Talk about bad timing. If only he'd walked straight past Annie's shop, he could have saved himself a great deal of trouble – and a whole chunk of time. But he hadn't wanted to walk past Annie's shop. And it hadn't just been the delightful window display that had tempted him. It had been Annie herself. There was something incredibly refreshing about her. She seemed so natural, so unaffected. And, from the snippet of information Sophie had let slip about her baking for the class every week, was obviously incredibly generous. All the things, in fact, that Nina had been. Despite it being an emotion in which he did not normally indulge, Jake felt a stab of jealousy. Whoever 'George' was – whose cake he had spied in Annie's kitchen – he was one lucky man. Lydia, conversely, was the very antithesis of all that Jake valued. Conceited, self-absorbed, and selfish. Ignoring his protestations, she had dragged him – quite literally – around the entire village, introducing him to every unsuspecting person they encountered.

He glanced at the clock. It was almost half-past-twelve. The entire morning had disappeared in a Lydia-induced blur. He'd only intended being out for half an hour to stock up on provisions. Now he was way behind schedule. What was more, he could feel the niggling of a headache. Jake rarely got headaches. It must be as a result of Lydia's cloying perfume. The heavy scent had permeated his hair, his clothes and his skin. He decided to take another shower and change his clothes before making a sandwich and settling down to write.

Ten minutes later, Jake scratched his head. He was baffled. The water had been piping hot a few hours earlier. Too hot if anything. But now it was ice-cold. Perhaps the settings on the boiler needed adjusting. But where was the boiler? He'd searched all the obvious places but couldn't find it. Well, there was only one thing for it. He'd have to go over to the gatehouse and ask. And if Annie was still at work, perhaps 'George' would be able to help. Tugging his T-shirt back on, Jake sprinted down the stairs and over to the cottage.

The kitchen door was wide open when he arrived. He popped his head inside. Sophie sat at the table, her little face creased with concentration as she fiddled with some pink wool. Beside her was a kindly-looking lady with lily-white hair, wearing a floral skirt and sensible blouse which, despite the heat of the day, was buttoned right up to her neck. Pip lay in his basket snoring soundly. Jake allowed himself another quick glance around the room. Yet again it looked incredibly inviting, the brilliant sunlight bouncing off the yellow walls. And yet again something tightened in the area of his heart. He quickly pulled himself together and knocked lightly upon the open door.

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