

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BILLY AND ME

Giovanna
Fletcher



'Gloriously romantic'

Jill Mansell



PENGUIN BOOKS

Billy and Me

Essex-born Giovanna is an actress, blogger, vlogger and presenter. She is married to Tom Fletcher from McFly/McBusted and is mum to their three boys Buzz, Buddy and Max. She lives in Middlesex with her family and is a patron of CoppaFeel! as well as a Number One *Sunday Times* best-selling author. Together with her husband, she wrote the *Sunday Times* bestselling novel *Eve of Man*.

**Praise for Giovanna Fletcher's most recent
novel *Some Kind of Wonderful***

'Her funniest, freshest and BEST yet . . . Giovanna Fletcher is at the top of her game' *Heat*

'Fletcher's writing is as wonderfully readable as ever, and the plot engaging, witty and heart-breaking' *i*

'An empowering read' *Woman's Weekly*

'A fun read with a big dose of girl power' *Sun*

'A MUST-READ. Funny, heart-warming' *Closer*

'Warm-hearted, with a heroine to cheer for' *Sunday Mirror*

'Full of spirit and fun' *Sunday Express*

'A sharp, funny novel about a woman returning (unwillingly) to a single life' *Reader's Digest*

Copyrighted Material

More Praise for Giovanna Fletcher

‘A gorgeous, gloriously romantic read with buckets of charm – I absolutely loved it!’ Jill Mansell

‘A sweet and sparkling debut from a lovely lady.
Sure to be a hit’ Carole Matthews

‘This sweet debut reminded me of *Last Night at Chateau Marmont*’ Louise Candlish

‘Wonderfully warm and cosy. The perfect comfort read to curl-up with and enjoy’ Ali McNamara

‘If you’re looking for a romantic read and a summer treat that’ll take you on a journey and leave you feeling like you’ve made a new friend, you’ll love
Billy and Me’ Vanessa Greene

‘Warm and romantic, this charming read will certainly brighten up your day’ *Closer*

‘Tons of charm and genuine warmth’ *Star Magazine*

‘This is one juicy read’ *Now*

‘Must-read’ *Sunday Mirror*

‘*You’re The One That I Want* is a gorgeously tender, funny and big-hearted novel with wonderful characters you’ll fall in love with’ Miranda Dickinson

‘A heartbreakingly beautiful story about friendship and unrequited love. I was totally and utterly captivated’
Paige Toon

‘Saucy, fun and full of heart. This book ticked every one of our must-have boxes’ *Heat*

Copyrighted Material

Billy and Me

GIOVANNA FLETCHER



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2013

This edition published by Penguin Books 2019

001

Copyright © Giovanna Fletcher, 2013, 2019

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 12.5/14.75pt Garamond MT Std

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-405-90995-2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

To Tom, for being my best friend,
for believing in me and encouraging me to write,
and for making me laugh until I snort.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Me

When I was four years old, all I ever wanted was to have a weeing Tiny Tears doll. I'd never been into dolls really, but when my best friend was given one for her birthday I decided that a doll that cries actual tears and wets itself was exactly what my life lacked. After hassling my parents for a few weeks they eventually caved in – although, if I'm honest, it captured my attention for about a week and then the poor thing was left in a puddle of her own mess (oops!). I have no idea what became of her, but I'm guessing my mum sold her at a car boot sale or something similar.

When I was eight years old all I ever wanted was to appear on Live and Kicking and dance with Mr Blobby. There was something about that big dopey pink and yellow spotted blob that had me entranced for hours. Sadly, my desire never came true – but I still hold my Mr Blobby cuddly toy as one of my most treasured possessions and he happily accompanies me to bed every night (despite his missing eye).

When I was ten years old all I ever wanted was to be a Spice Girl. I used to drive my mum and dad crazy, running around the house, shouting out the lyrics to Wannabe whilst performing a little dance routine I'd made up. I was constantly putting my hand on my hip and swinging it out to the side, making a peace sign with my other hand and shouting 'Girl power!' as loud as I could. I loved them so much that I even named my goldfish Ginger after

Geri – my favourite Spice. I was devastated when she decided to leave. The Spice Girls with no Ginger just wasn't the same, and so my passion to become one of them simply ended (after crying my eyes out for hours, of course).

At some point that extrovert little girl who used to sing to anyone who would listen and dance without a care in the world, became painfully shy and bashful. I suddenly became less confident at school and around other people – preferring the company of a good book to an actual human. It's bizarre how everything changed; at primary school I was the girl everyone wanted to befriend, but by secondary school I had become awkward and tried my best to avoid everyone. I hated attention, people asking me questions or putting me in the spotlight; I preferred to blend into the background unnoticed. I felt safer that way. On the odd occasion that anyone would attempt to hold eye contact with me I'd usually end up shaking like a leaf or turning bright red, causing me to stare at the floor for the rest of the day. Actually, I did have one friend, Mary Lance, who was as socially inept as I was. I say we were friends – but in reality we hardly ever talked to each other, so I guess she was more like a silent partner. It was just nice to have someone by my side at lunchtimes or in class, someone who wouldn't pry into my life. I think we took comfort in the fact that we weren't alone.

At the end of my A levels, when the rest of my year had either secured a place at university (Mary went off to study dentistry at Sheffield) or planned to take a gap year so that they could travel the world, I was still unsure of what I wanted from life. I decided to join those taking a gap year, although not to travel. Wandering aimlessly around the globe and experiencing what the world had to offer did have its appeal, but I just wasn't quite ready to leave

my home or my mum at that point. I was simply going to stay in my home village of Rosefont Hill, deep in the Kent countryside, and get a little job to tide me over until I decided what I wanted to do with my days.

I started my job hunt by dropping off my CV in the village shops – there weren't and aren't that many to target. We have a bank, a library, a post office, Budgens, a florist, a few clothes shops, a hardware store, a café and a teasshop . . . hardly the most riveting high street ever! The last place I entered was Tea-on-the-Hill, perched on the hill's peak, with great views over the rest of the village.

As I entered the teasshop, my eyes wandered over the seven tables covered in mismatched floral print tablecloths, each surrounded by two or three chairs – all different shapes and designs. The cups, saucers and teapots being used by the customers were also contrasting in their patterns. Absolutely nothing matched, but bizarrely it all fitted together perfectly. The smell of freshly baked scones filled my nostrils and 1950s jazz played softly in the background. I was staring at a secret little den for women – why had I never been in here before?

Flying around the room was a woman who I guessed was in her sixties. Her grey hair was set in a big rolled quiff at the front, with the rest of her curls held in underneath a net. I watched her dart between customers – taking orders, bringing out food and stopping briefly for a little natter here and there. She continued to keep a calm smile on her face, even though it was clear that she was running the shop alone.

I stood at the counter and waited for her to come over, which she eventually did whilst wiping her hands dry on her pink floral apron, which covered a glamorous light blue dress underneath.

'Hello there, dearie. Sorry about the wait. What can I get you?' she asked, with a broad smile and kind blue eyes.

In the previous shops I'd walked into I had just wanted to throw my CV into the manager's hands and then bolt for the door, instantly feeling uncomfortable as panic started to consume me, but there was something about this woman that had me rooted to the spot. I even held her eye contact for a few brief moments and almost felt comfortable doing so.

'Actually, I came to drop off my CV,' I said, as I fumbled through my bag and pulled out a freshly printed one. The lady took it from my hands and casually glanced over it.

'Have you ever worked in a shop before?' she asked, squinting at the paper.

'Yes, a florist's,' I said quietly.

'So you already know how to greet customers with a friendly smile?'

I nodded politely as I felt her scrutinize me from head to toe, the smile still plastered on her heavily wrinkled face.

Perhaps I should have told her at this point that I'd spent most of my time there washing dirty buckets in the back room out of sight and not with the customers at all; but before I could speak up she'd moved on.

'How many hours are you looking for?' she asked.

I hadn't thought this far ahead, but one glimpse around the room told me that I'd gladly spend a lot of time here. 'As many as you can give me.'

'And – one last thing – do you like cake?'

'I love it,' I said, giving her a nervous smile.

'Good to hear! You're hired. You've come in at a very good

time actually, my last waitress unexpectedly quit yesterday – with no explanation!

‘Really?’

‘Sadly, yes . . . although she was a grumpy chops so I’m not too bothered. I’m Molly, by the way.’

‘I’m Sophie.’ I offered my hand for her to shake but she looked at the hand, grabbed it and pulled me in for a warm hug instead. I can remember actually gasping at the intimacy, as it wasn’t something I was used to. At first I felt rigid and stiff but once the shock had subsided it became strangely calming and pleasant.

‘Now, do you have any plans for the rest of the day?’ she asked softly, releasing me from her embrace.

I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.

‘Great, let’s class this as your first day, then.’ She slid a tray with a pot of tea and a cup and saucer in my direction. ‘Go take that to Mrs Williams, the lady in the cream blouse with the purple rinse to the left – the one with her nose buried in Bella. I’ll go dig you out an apron.’

Picking up the tray I made my way over to Mrs Williams and carefully placed the pot of boiling tea in front of her. She lowered her magazine and peered up at me over the top of her glasses; I instantly recognized her from out and about in the village.

‘You’re new here,’ she stated.

‘Yes, I’ve just started. Literally.’

‘You live in Willows Mews, don’t you? Your mum’s that lovely lady at the library.’

‘That’s right,’ I nodded, shyly.

‘Aw, she’s ever so kind – always helps me take my books

home. I've got greedy eyes when it comes to books, you see!' She let out a childlike chuckle and screwed her eyes shut. 'Send her my love then, won't you, darling,' she said, whilst pouring out a cup of tea and stirring in two sugars.

'Will do, Mrs Williams,' I said, as I walked back to Molly at the counter.

'You're Jane May's daughter?' Molly asked.

'That's right,' I said, with a slight nod.

'I thought so. Well if you're anything like her then I'm lucky to have you on board,' she said with a kind smile as she held out her hand and gave me an apron.

My first day working in the teashop whizzed by in a blur – there was one hairy moment when a plate managed to slip out of my hand, fly through the air and smash rather loudly into a billion pieces, causing me to blub dramatically – but other than that it went quite smoothly.

My gap year flew by before I'd even had a chance to think about what I wanted to do next, and so I extended it to two years . . . then three years . . . then four, until I suddenly realized that I had no desire to go to university at all; I was happy where I was, and am still just as happy eight years later.

Although I'd started as a waitress, Molly put a lot of faith in me and taught me all she knew about baking cakes and service with a smile. Every day we bake fresh scones, muffins and cakes, and experiment with new recipes, whilst putting the world to rights. At sixty-six years old Molly is continually being told by her doctor that she should be slowing down and starting to take things easy – but she's not one to listen.

I didn't just find a passion and career path when I stumbled

upon Tea-on-the-Hill that day; I also found a best friend. Looking back now, I know Molly had an inkling of who I was as soon as I walked into the shop. I also believe that, knowing who I was, there was no way she would turn me away without helping me, because it's in her nature to help those in need of healing; and I certainly needed some of that.

Copyrighted Material

PART ONE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

I

It's now the beginning of April and after a dreary winter the village has started to come back to life with wild daffodils, tulips and other bright flowers coming into bloom. Different colours burst from the ground, bringing with them a sense of hope and optimism. Rabbits gaily hop across the path in the distance, happy to have the sun shining on their backs once again, and the birds in the trees seem to be chirping louder than usual.

I pull my red woollen coat in around me to keep out the crisp spring air that threatens to chill my bones. My cold button nose is buried deep inside a battered copy of *Wuthering Heights* as I make my way down the tree-lined alleyway that leads to the quiet High Street. Yes, I admit – I'm one of those annoying people who walk through life oblivious to my surroundings, while spying any impending dangers in my peripheral vision, thanks to my literary obsession! I still manage to keep up the obligatory nod of the head or polite 'Good morning' to the people I pass, whilst continuing to stay in the world of Cathy and Heathcliff. Having said that, at this time of the morning on a Wednesday, there are only a few other people milling around, mostly preoccupied shop owners, so I can allow myself to sink deeper into their tragic love story.

Taking strong strides as I make my way up the hill, I spot Molly in the shop, on the phone with her nose pressed up against the window. She gives me a slight wink and a wave, and then continues with whatever she's up to.

'Are you sure she's heading this way?' she quizzes the person on the phone as I come in the front door, putting my book in my bag. 'I can't see her yet . . .' Molly squints her eyes to the point where they're almost shut and then widens them in surprise. 'Oooh, June,' she coos, excitement making her voice go squeaky. 'There she is now! Gosh, what on earth is she wearing that for? She looks like she's in a banana suit!'

I follow Molly's gaze and find that she's looking at Mrs Taylor, who has decided to venture outside today wearing a tight, bright yellow two-piece. Oh, the scandal! I roll my eyes and walk over to the oven to start baking. I can still hear Molly wittering away on the phone while I tie on my red-and-pink spotted apron.

'You know what it is, don't you? It's her birthday next week – her son phoned up and ordered a cake. I suspect she's having a meltdown over that . . . Sixty-five! Hmmm . . . Yes . . . Well yes, June – she never got over Robert leaving her like that. What an awful thing to happen to her . . . Ooh, June, I'd better go – she's heading this way . . . Yes, yes! Call you later.'

Molly hops away from the window, pops the phone back on the counter top and manages to look preoccupied with rearranging the counter display before Mrs Taylor enters the shop. I find myself rolling my

eyes once again as Molly turns to welcome her with a beaming smile.

‘Hello, Mrs Taylor! Ooh, I must say, you’re looking rather colourful today . . . yellow really suits you!’ Ahh, the friendly two-facedness of village life, I think to myself. I block out the conversation and concentrate on the Victoria sponge I’m whisking up.

A short while later, once Mrs Taylor leaves, Molly joins me by the oven.

‘Come on,’ she quips.

‘What?’

‘Out with it!’

‘Huh?’

‘You’ve been banging around for the last fifteen minutes. Why?’

This is news to me as I thought I was hiding my frustration quite well, so I can’t help but look a tad sheepish (old habits and all that).

‘I’m sorry, it’s just . . .’ I’m at a loss for words.

I’ve been ‘that talked-about someone’, and there’s nothing worse than seeing those curtains twitch as you walk past someone’s house or hearing conversations stop as you walk into a room. I could tell her that it annoys me the way everyone in this village thinks they have a right to gossip about everyone else’s business. I could tell her I dislike it when she’s mean about others. And I could tell her that there’s got to be more to life than her constant gassing over the downfall of the locals. But I don’t. Because I know that in truth Molly doesn’t have a bad bone in her body. Surely she’s allowed

to vent every now and then? Especially if it's only over something as insignificant as the colour of someone's outfit?

'I'm sorry,' I say, letting out a sigh as I rub my head. 'I didn't sleep a wink last night. I've got a bit of a headache.'

'Oh, deary,' she coos, feeling my forehead to check my temperature. 'Do you want to go home? Try and catch up on that sleep? I'll be fine here on my own.'

See? She might have a loose tongue occasionally, but that will never overshadow her kind heart.

'No, don't be silly. I'm probably just dehydrated,' I say, as I pour a glass of water and down the lot in front of her. 'I'll be feeling better in no time.'

She looks at me like I've lost my marbles, but eventually my beaming smile wins her over and we both start icing the cupcakes she baked earlier, which have been left to cool.

At the end of my shift I drop in on Mum at the village library, which is several doors down from the shop, towards the bottom of the hill. Being council-funded, and only small, it's not the most luxurious library you've ever seen. It has ten rows of battered books, two old computers (which both take about five minutes to get online), a working area with wooden tables and chairs and a chill-out area with multicoloured beanbags scattered around. It could be a little on the depressing side, but Mum takes great pride in the place and makes sure the rows of books gleam to perfection, that her wall

displays are always fun and inviting, and that she is quick to order in anything requested that they don't have in stock.

I find her on her knees restacking magazines, which I've never seen in here before.

'Hello, you!' Mum says as she gives me a tired smile and lets the magazine she's holding rest on her lap. It's clearly been a long day. Her hazel eyes have dark circles beneath them and they look as though they're struggling to stay open. Her hands go up to her chestnut-coloured hair, which is pulled back into a tight, high bun. She slides her palms along it to check that it's still neat – she hates it when wispy bits fly into her face or get into her eyes.

'Hello, Mum,' I say, bending down and giving her a kiss on the cheek. 'What's this?' I say, gesturing at the magazines in front of her.

'Oh, we thought it might encourage more youngsters to come in here.'

'By providing them with gossip about their favourite celebs?'

'Why not?' she asks, frowning at me. 'I've already spotted some very interesting articles while I've been unpacking them.'

I pick up one of the glossy titles from the shelf and flick through it, scanning the images of flawless men and women on red carpets being compared to their more natural-looking bodies while semi-naked on holiday. 'Do you really think you're going to encourage people to read books by showing them pictures of celebrities looking fat or thin on beaches?'

‘Keep your voice down,’ she whispers, glancing over her shoulder. ‘Reading is reading – no matter what the material. It’s all about getting them in here – they might pick up a book or two while they’re at it.’

I can’t help but think she’s being too optimistic as I put the magazine back on the shelf but, looking at Mum’s hopeful face, I instantly feel guilty for slamming her idea.

‘We’ve also had some new books delivered,’ she continues, as she picks herself up from the floor, brushes dust off her knee-length black skirt and removes bits of fluff from her black shirt. ‘Including a brand new copy of *Jane Eyre*,’ she continues. ‘So you no longer have to battle with those loose or missing pages!’

‘Brilliant! Although to be honest it’s probably my fault they’ve fallen out – I must’ve read that book about a hundred times.’

‘Well, yes. That and the schoolgirls who leave it in their bags to be bashed around . . .’

‘True.’

‘I also heard a little bit of news today.’

‘Mum, I don’t want to hear any gossip!’

‘Oh, Soph, it’s not gossip! Anyway, you’ll like this. Mrs Woodman from Cavalier Hall came in this afternoon. She’s been visited by a location scout or something from a film company. They want to use the hall as the setting for one of their films.’ She grins at me, knowing that I’ll want to hear more despite my protesting.

‘What film?’ I quiz.

‘This is the bit I think you’ll like . . .’ She pushes her glasses up her nose with one finger and pauses for dramatic effect. *‘Pride and Prejudice!’*

‘No!’

‘Yep!’

‘Another one?’ I cry in disgust. Mum looks at me bewildered.

‘I thought you’d be pleased. You love that book.’

‘Yeah, I love the book – it doesn’t mean I enjoy it when film companies come along and butcher it.’

‘Oh, I’m sure they won’t do that,’ she says dismissively. ‘According to Mrs Woodman the film’s got a huge budget and cast. They wouldn’t tell her who was involved, but –’

I interrupt her with a huge gasp. ‘I wonder who’ll be playing Darcy!’ My mind ponders all sorts of possibilities, but only one man stands out to me as the one I’d love to have here in Rosefont Hill – Jude Law.

Unsurprisingly, Mum isn’t the only person Mrs Woodman has decided to share her exciting news with. The next day when I get to work Molly is again on the phone to June, this time speculating about how much Mr and Mrs Woodman would’ve been paid for the use of their home. The news doesn’t stop spreading there. In fact, it seems to be the hot topic with everybody in the village as I overhear snippets of different conversations throughout the day.

The shop has slowly become the ‘cool’ place to hang

out, attracting grannies and mums in the daytime and then schoolgirls from four o'clock onwards. There are a few different groups of girls that come in on a regular basis, but this afternoon we are joined by Janet, Ella and Charlotte – three fifteen-year-olds who simply love talking boys, make-up and gossip whilst sipping their pot of peppermint tea and picking at their skinny blueberry muffins.

As I sort through the cake orders for the next day, I can't help but listen in on their chatter as they mull over the rumours of who might be attached to the film.

Janet, a feisty brunette who's clearly the leader of the group with her bossy ways, is the first to divulge.

'I saw on *getcluedup.com* that Bobby Green is going to be playing that Mr Darcy guy.'

'Who's that?' asks Ella with a confused expression on her pretty face, her wild curly blonde hair sticking out all over the place uncontrollably.

'You know,' sighs Janet. 'That dude from this year's *Big Brother*.'

'The one who peed in the pool?' Ella squeals. 'And had a threesome in the garden?'

I chuckle quietly to myself at hearing the young girls talk so candidly about sex – a topic I'd never have been able to talk so openly about at their age.

'That's the one!' nods Janet.

Ella lets out a huge groan at the confirmation.

'But he's not even an actor! That would be crap!'

I vaguely remember hearing the girls talk of this Bobby Green character over the summer. To say I'd be

disappointed if this ‘lad’ were to turn up instead of a serious actor would be an understatement. In fact, it would turn something that could be incredibly exciting into something decidedly naff!

‘That’s what I read, though,’ sulks Janet, looking deflated that her findings hadn’t impressed her friends more.

‘Yeah well you can’t believe anything you read . . .’

Charlotte, the quiet redhead who seems to quiver in the very existence of these two girls she calls her BFFs, pauses for a moment before deciding to speak. ‘Actually, I heard that Billy Buskin might be doing it.’

I watch as Janet and Ella whip their heads around in disbelief and just stare at their friend.

‘OMG!’ squeals Janet. ‘I would, like, love that! Where did you read that?’

Charlotte instantly becomes introverted, the attention of her friends making her look uncomfortable, a feeling I can easily relate to. She slowly continues to share her knowledge in a quiet voice that I struggle to hear.

‘I didn’t read it. I was told it,’ she mutters.

‘By who?’ says Ella, who already seems sceptical.

‘Lauren Davenport.’ Before the other two can query the source she continues swiftly. ‘Her mum is going to be giving horse-riding lessons to the cast, you know – the ones who have to ride. She said his name was on a list she was given. Although Lauren told me not to tell anyone –’

‘You’re so gullible, Char! I can’t believe you fell for that,’ says Ella interrupting her in a belittling tone,

chilling my insides. ‘As if Billy Buskin would bother doing a film about some old book. He has just done a load of blockbusters. Why would he bother?’

‘But he has just done that war film,’ argues Charlotte.

I’ve no idea who they’re talking about and so zone out and think about Jude. Imagine walking through the village and bumping into him every day! That would be absolute heaven! Of course, he’d obviously bring lots to the role too . . . charm and charisma. I don’t just want him here to ogle at – honest!

I’m not entirely sure where my Jude obsession has come from, but I think it started when Mum brought home a copy of *The Holiday* for us to watch one night a couple of years ago. One look at his playful smile, smouldering eyes and dashing good looks and I’d fallen under his spell. Embarrassingly, I actually feel myself smile back at him onscreen sometimes, as though his romantic words are meant for my ears only. Yes, sad I know, but he just sucks me in. I’m not a big film buff, not by any means, but quiz me on a film that Jude’s been in and I’ll be able to give you the right answer!

Copyrighted Material

Rosefont Hill is a tiny little village, one where everybody knows everything there is to know about everyone who lives here. Nothing newsworthy usually happens, therefore you can imagine what an impact a film crew rolling into town has on it.

Four weeks have passed since the news of their visit broke and the village has continued to be a buzz of excitement. Each shop has had a spruce up, hoping that they'll gain some new trade. The local WI, of which Molly is the head, has examined every potted plant on the High Street and made sure they're watered, pruned and spruced to perfection. Each of the street lamps lining the main road now has a basket of colourful spring flowers dangling from its side. Even the local primary school children have been allowed to contribute by making a huge welcome banner. The large sign, made up of the children's tiny painted handprints, has been proudly strung up at the start of the High Street, ensuring it's the first thing our visitors are greeted with. It seems like every member of the community has done something to get the village prepared for its newcomers, and their hard work has paid off as it looks nothing less than idyllic!

I have to admit that despite my momentary scepticism

early on, I've joined them in their excitement and now find myself looking forward to it all – especially now that trucks full of equipment have roared their way through the village, as well as a few dozen members of the crew. Slowly, strangers have started milling around the village, although most of them seem busy setting up Cavalier Hall for the start of filming, which is apparently due to kick off any day now.

It seems like quite a lot of the village folk have been tarting themselves up somewhat for the event (with the possibility of A-listers and VIPs coming into town they want to look their best). I'm not entirely sure what they're hoping will come of their freshly dyed hair or their new cardis from Marks and Sparks, but looking good certainly seems to be important to them. For instance, I notice now, whilst looking at her from across the counter, that even Mrs Sleep from Pemberton Way has decided to apply a bit of lippy which she certainly wasn't wearing before the film crew arrived. I, however, am the same as usual – wrapped in a red apron, wearing chunky black boots, skinny jeans and a plain white vest top. My frizzy brown hair is whipped up and pinned underneath a massive red polka-dot hankie with a big roll of hair sticking out of the front (I'm still in keeping with the fifties look that Molly loves, I'm just slightly more low-key with it). The finishing touch to my look is a nice dusting of flour from the morning's baking session. Yes, forever glamorous. The white powder sticks to my clothes and my already pale skin and refuses to budge no matter how much I wipe myself down. It's a look

I've grown accustomed to over the years, even if I do appear quite ghostly. My relaxed state is not because I don't care about the starlet arrivals – it's just that looking after my appearance is a bit tricky when I'm baking and stood in front of a hot oven for most of the day. If I were to bother applying make-up in the morning before heading into work, it would simply melt away from my brown eyes within the first few minutes. It would be a waste of time!

'Oh, Sophie,' says Mrs Sleep whilst squinting her eyes and sieving through the loose change in her hand. 'How much did you say that was?'

'Three pounds fifty, please, Mrs Sleep.'

'Ahh . . . do I have that here, dear? I've forgotten my glasses.' The eighty-four-year old holds her hand out for me to look through and I can see that she doesn't have enough money to pay for the pot of tea and slice of Victoria sponge that she's already scoffed. I quickly glance around to check that Molly is occupied elsewhere, then lean across the counter and whisper to Mrs Sleep, 'You're forty pence short . . . but seeing as you're my favourite customer I'll let you off!'

Mrs Sleep chuckles like a cute little schoolgirl being told to keep a secret, with her hand over her mouth. Her eyes light up. She's still smiling to herself as she grabs her shopping trolley and wheels it out of the shop.

I pull two twenty-pence pieces out of my back pocket and toss them into the till straight away, knowing that I'd forget if I left it until later on.

‘You’ll end up skint if you keep giving away money like that.’

The stranger’s deep voice startles me. I look up to see a man, about my age, gazing at me with a smile on his face . . . Now, we don’t see many men in the teashop, we’re far too floral and twee for them to cope with so they usually opt for the café down the road instead, therefore the arrival of this man (and a rather good-looking one at that), makes my heart momentarily stop and my cheeks instantly burn in surprise. He is jaw-droppingly attractive, with brown hair swooped up in a stylish quiff, a healthy tan and deep brown eyes which twinkle as he smiles.

‘Sorry, I didn’t see you there . . .’ I somehow manage to say, softly clenching my jaw and forcing myself not to revert into the old, socially inept me. I’ve come a long way from that little girl who quivered at the attention of others, but I think a large part of that has been down to the safety of these four walls and Molly’s time and care. Every now and then, especially when I’m caught off guard, I have to use every ounce of self-control I possess to keep calm. Of course, with this stranger there’s the added element of him being drop-dead gorgeous, so I have no choice but to let my cheeks continue to blush.

‘That’s OK, you were busy . . . with your favourite,’ he says with a slight smile. ‘Don’t worry, I’ve already checked my pockets and I definitely have enough cash on me.’

‘Glad to hear it . . . I can only have one favourite a day.’

At this the stranger throws his head backwards and lets out a huge laugh. It’s quite unsettling as I’m sure I didn’t say anything funny enough to warrant such a grand reaction. I feel my cheeks flush further.

It’s as if the sudden release of laughter has shocked even him and he quickly becomes quite uneasy as he picks up a menu from the counter and hides his face with it as he browses through it. I look away and give him a couple of moments before I ask, ‘So, what can I get you?’

‘I’ll have a pot of coffee and a piece of lemon drizzle cake, please,’ he says, with less confidence than before.

‘Would you like to sit in or have it to take away?’

He looks around the room. There are only a few other customers in the shop and they’re all quietly reading or nattering away.

‘In, please.’

‘Great, just take a seat wherever you like and I’ll bring it over.’

‘Thanks.’

I watch him as he turns away from the counter with one hand buried in the back pocket of his faded blue jeans. He ponders over which table to sit at before eventually choosing a table in the corner, away from the window. As I start to make up his pot of coffee, Molly appears at my side.

‘Tell me everything!’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask, still flustered at the new arrival.

‘Who is he?’

‘I’ve got no idea!’

‘Where did he come from?’

‘Seriously, Mol, I’ve got no idea. I’ve never seen him before.’

‘Really? He looks a little familiar to me. He’s not Mr and Mrs Williams’ grandson, is he?’

‘Maybe, but I don’t think so. Wasn’t he in the Army? And ginger? I do think I’ve seen him somewhere before, though . . .’

‘He must be something to do with the filming. Just look at him,’ she says, glancing quickly over her shoulder. ‘Oh, if I was ten years younger!’

‘Just ten? Make that forty!’ I joke.

‘You cheeky little . . . I could show him a thing or —’

‘Excuse me?’

We both stop talking immediately and whizz around to find the handsome stranger stood at the counter again. Unsure of what he has heard we stand in silence for a few seconds, quite startled.

‘Sorry there, my love, can I help?’ says Molly, jumping into action and going back to the sweet and welcoming lady that she is, dropping the comical cougar act.

‘I just realized I’m hungrier than I thought,’ he says while childishly rubbing his tummy. ‘Any chance of getting a ham and pickle sandwich as well?’

‘Of course. I’ll bring it over when I’m done.’

‘Thanks.’

As he walks back to his seat Molly turns to me and pretends to faint, causing me to stifle a laugh which makes me snort instead, much to my embarrassment.

A short while later, when Molly has popped out to get some shopping from Budgens, Miss Peggy Brown beckons me over to her table. I’ve noticed that the seventy-five-year old has been looking at the newcomer for quite some time, with a frown plastered on her worried face.

‘Do you know who that is, dear?’ she asks while nodding in the stranger’s direction.

‘Not the foggiest, I’m afraid.’

‘Hmm . . . I’m not sure he’s all the ticket.’

One thing I do love about the elderly ladies in the shop and around the village is their bluntness. There’s no beating around the bush with them, they simply say whatever is on their minds. It’s a quality I’ve come to admire, even if it does mean that they regularly point out that they don’t like my new haircut, colour, or the jeans that I’m wearing.

‘What makes you think that, Miss Brown?’ I ask, suppressing a smile.

‘He has been looking at that same page for the past hour and has been continuously muttering to himself.’ As if to clarify the lunacy of his actions, she widens her eyes and adds, ‘Talking to yourself is the first sign of madness, dear!’

I follow her gaze and watch as the man reads, then

covers his page and mutters to himself – sometimes with his eyes closed or other times staring at the ceiling. He continually taps the heel of one of his purple Converse trainers against the front leg of his chair. His face is alive and animated, as if he's in conversation, or twisted with concentration. I've never seen anything like it – no wonder Miss Brown has been frowning at him!

'It might be worth you going over and checking if he's all right,' she adds.

'Me?' I ask, with my pitch several tones higher than before.

'You wouldn't send a little old lady like me to go and talk to some lunatic would you, dear? I'll keep an eye on you from here and shout if he suddenly attacks. I'll have another tea when you're ready too, please.' she says with a nod, a wink and a firm shove in the newcomer's direction.

As I hesitantly walk towards him he has his eyes tightly screwed shut, his arms and legs crossed, and is tapping his fingers on his forehead in frustration.

'Sorry,' I start.

He stops and looks at me in a mixture of confusion at my interruption and continued frustration at whatever he was doing, the frown still buried deep in his brow. Now that I have his attention I'm overcome with nerves and am tempted to run back to my safe haven behind the counter. I look over my shoulder at Miss Brown and see her eyes widen at me, encouraging me to go on. I can feel my cheeks burning again and I have to drop my gaze to the floor so that I can continue.

‘I’m so sorry to interrupt – it’s just that Miss Brown, the elderly woman who is sat behind me and glaring at you, is a tad worried about your mental health,’ I say, in what I hope is a light and jokey manner. Although, is there ever a jokey way to bring into question someone’s mental health?

I briefly look up to see the frustration leave his face and watch as it’s replaced with a look of intrigue as he sneaks a peek behind me in Miss Brown’s direction.

‘Really? Why? Have I done something to offend her? Did I eat with my mouth open? Slurp noisily on my coffee?’ he asks, clearly amused.

I hear the elderly lady loudly tutting behind me.

‘Actually she’s worried about the fact that you’ve been talking to yourself for the past hour,’ I force myself to continue. ‘According to her it’s the first sign of madness . . .’

Suddenly he breaks out into another huge laugh, making me look up from the floor and take in his joyful face – causing a smile to spread across mine uncontrollably. Once he has composed himself, he leans forward, lightly holds my forearms, pulls me towards him slightly and looks into my eyes as he continues in a calm and quiet voice.

‘Please tell dear Miss Brown that I’m sorry for upsetting her. There’s no need to call the men in white coats yet. I’m just lear—’

I stop listening.

Something jolts within me and I’m suddenly light-headed and shaky. I can’t stop the fear mounting. I can’t

tell my brain that it's ok. I can feel the panic rising through me, causing my mouth to go dry, my breathing to shallow and my mind to get momentarily lost. I'm rooted to the spot.

'Are you OK?' he asks, concern breaking out over his face.

'I'm sorry . . .' I try and say, but no sound is coming from my mouth.

'Hey, you're shaking. Here, sit down!'

Before I can try to protest he leaps from his chair, pulls out the one next to him, gently takes me by the shoulders and lowers me into it.

'Can I get you something? A camomile tea?' he asks calmly before running behind the counter and rummaging around.

The noises he makes pouring and stirring are intensified in my head. SWOOOOOOOOOSH. CLANG. CLANG. CLANG. PLOP. TING. TING. TING.

'Here, drink this,' he says coming towards me.

I take the tea and slowly sip at it, attempting to concentrate on the hot liquid as it works its way down through my body, trying to ignore the irrational terror that bubbles away inside me.

I'm aware of the stranger as he pulls his chair next to mine and reaches out, taking one of my hands in his, gently rubbing the inside of my palm with his thumb. Instead of freaking me out further, it has the opposite affect; it feels soothing and calming, reminding me I'm safe.

I'm grateful that he isn't staring at me. Instead both of us sit and look at our hands. Mine in his.

We sit in silence like this for a few minutes.

Slowly the fear leaves me and the nice feeling of calmness rises within me, causing me to sigh heavily in relief.

‘Better?’ he asks, his hand stopping the rubbing motion but continuing to clasp mine.

I nod slowly. Instantly feeling stupid, I keep my eyes on the cup I’m holding, too humiliated to look elsewhere.

‘How embarrassing!’ I say, closing my eyes.

‘No it’s not. Don’t be daft.’

I look up at him with another sigh. For the last five minutes or so I’d turned into a trembling idiot. It’s more than embarrassing. It’s humiliating.

‘Hey . . . it’s OK,’ he says, giving my hand a squeeze along with a sympathetic smile.

I glance over at Miss Brown and find that, thankfully, she seems to be preoccupied with a crossword puzzle. She’s probably even forgotten sending me over in the first place – little does she know the drama she’s sparked.

‘At a guess, I’d say you were having a panic attack,’ he continues cautiously.

I close my eyes and let out a groan.

‘Oi! I said don’t be daft,’ he says, squeezing my hand again. ‘Does that happen a lot?’

‘They used to. They’ve not happened for a long time, though . . . and never in front of anyone before. I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t be. I know what it’s like.’

‘You do?’

‘Yeah,’ he says, glancing around the shop.

He doesn’t add any more so I don’t question him further. It’s enough to know that he understands in some way and that he doesn’t just think I’m a nutter or some freak.

Closing my eyes, I try to focus on the calmness. Enjoying the steadiness that comes with each breath.

I can still remember my first panic attack. I was eleven years old.

I guess you could say I was in a fragile state – my world had fallen apart overnight, huge changes were happening at home and I was experiencing feelings I’d never felt before. Despite this, I was made to go back to school straight away. I think my mum thought it would help, perhaps make me forget the troubles at home. Or maybe she wanted me out of the way so that she could deal with her own thoughts. Her own heartache. Whatever her reasons for making me go back, I couldn’t help but feel sent away. Banished because she couldn’t bear to look at me.

Waking up that day I managed to take comfort in the normality of putting on my school uniform: a pleated grey skirt, white t-shirt and green jumper, white socks to my knees and black buckled shoes, the same as it had always been since my first day at Rosefont Hill C of E Primary School. It was familiar. However, walking into the school gates, through the main door, down the corridor and into my classroom made me more than aware that things had changed. I felt like an alien, different to everyone else in the room. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me as though they were surprised to see me, their looks scrutinizing my face. Judging me. Looking for clues of my torment or guilt.

Unable to cope with the unwanted attention I kept my eyes on the ground as my feet shuffled along to my desk. I sat down and stared at my pencil case, trying to ignore the fact that I could hear them all whispering and feel them all continuing to watch me.

My skin started to itch, I felt uncomfortable in my own body – I wanted to get out, away from their goggling eyes.

I sat still and silent, wanting to disappear.

My teacher, Mrs Yates, a tubby woman with rosy cheeks and a love of pastel-coloured clothing, entered the room with authority, causing the majority of the class to go to their tables straight away.

‘Morning, everyone. Can get you get into your seats quickly, please. Hush, hush,’ she chimed, sweeping her long blonde hair from her face. ‘Now, later on we’re going to be starting a new painting project, but, before we do that I’d like to us to continue with the Tudor work we were doing last week. Jamie, this is a warning – stop faffing with Luke’s hair and sit down,’ she barked, causing the classroom to fall silent as the work commenced.

I was pleased. I liked the Tudors – all the anger, tragedy and passion that surrounded them. I managed to pull out my textbook and continue with my summary of the Tudor period that I was working on – I’d just got to the interesting bit about Henry VIII making up a religion just so he could get a divorce. I worked away, immersed in their world, blocking out the hub-bub of the rest of the class.

It didn’t take long for Mrs Yates to make her way over and kneel beside me, placing one hand on my back and the other on my writing hand, stopping it from moving along the page, pulling me away from my solitude.

'Sophie, look at you working away. You're such a good girl,' she said softly.

I glanced up to see her looking at me with such big sad eyes and had to look away, unable to cope with her pitiful expression.

'I just want you to know that if at any point you want to talk about what's happened, then I'm here for you. To help in any way I can.'

To help in any way she could . . . it was sweet, but she couldn't give me what I wanted. She couldn't change what had happened, so why would I want to talk to her?

I didn't speak. I just nodded my head slowly and turned my attention back to my work.

She lingered for a little while, probably unsure whether or not to push the matter further, before standing up and walking off with a sigh.

It wasn't long before I had another visitor at my desk; this time it was Laura Barber, my bestest friend.

'Is it true?' she asked bluntly, terror stamped across her face. 'About what happened with your dad?'

I didn't know how to answer. I opened my mouth but no words came out.

Luckily Mrs Yates saved me from the conversation. 'Laura, back to your seat, please. Unless you want to continue your work in your break time instead?' she asked.

Laura gave my arm a tight squeeze and ran back to her desk.

I felt relieved.

At lunchtime I didn't want to join the other kids in the playground. I didn't want to run and prance around joyously and I