

THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS VILLAGE

Bella Osborne



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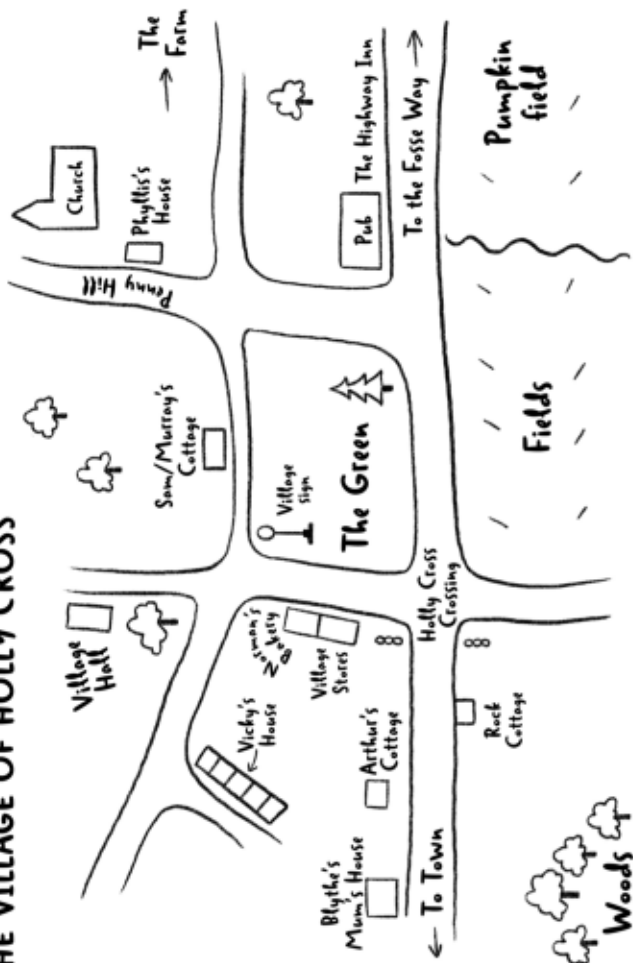
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For Lesley Elder – life coach extraordinaire and
without whom I wouldn't be an author

THE VILLAGE OF HOLLY CROSS



Prologue

Last December

The Holly Cross Christmas Fayre was in full swing and Blythe was enjoying a chat with Murray, one of the older village residents, when the two elderly sisters from Rock Cottage approached the stall he was manning.

‘Murray, we’re after a hook-up,’ said one, as the other nodded her agreement.

Blythe almost spat out her hot chocolate. ‘A hook-up?’ she asked.

‘For our front door,’ the lady explained.

‘Is this what you’re after?’ asked Murray, holding up a plastic hook.

Blythe was still giggling to herself as the sisters moved on and Murray adjusted the many ivy- and moss-covered wreaths in front of him.

‘At least that’s one sale,’ said Murray. ‘Leonora has spent hours making these wreaths and nobody is interested.’

‘Maybe people will buy one as they leave, save carrying it around all evening,’ said Blythe, hopefully. Murray didn’t look convinced.

Holly Cross was a picture of twinkling lights and happy faces. Blythe watched the other local residents all happily

chatting, some jangling charity collection buckets, others buying presents and some petting the live reindeer that were part of this year's Christmas display. Every year Holly Cross was turned into a winter wonderland and folk travelled from all over to see it and, in the process, the village raised money for charity and had a lot of fun at the same time.

Murray gave her a nudge. 'Next ones to get married – you mark my words,' he said, nodding in the direction of Norman, the local baker, and his friend Phyllis who were sharing a joke.

'No way. Norman and Phyllis?'

'You heard it here first,' he said.

The jolly scene was interrupted by a massive bang as an old white van backfired. Everyone turned. Phyllis squealed and two reindeer leapt so high Blythe thought they were taking flight. The Brownies gasped as the reindeer cleared the temporary fencing and ran amok around the fayre. Their shocked handler was fully occupied with hanging on to the other two reindeer who seemed keen to join their mates who were charging in between stalls creating havoc.

'Baubles!' shouted Murray.

'On it!' replied Blythe dashing off to try to save some as they tumbled to the ground.

Twenty minutes of madness followed as everyone tried to corral the creatures until Murray had the idea to get everyone onto the other side of the green and let the animals calm down. It worked because the reindeer then became distracted by what was on the stalls. One was happily munching on a stick of sprouts while the other was busy eating its way through something else.

'My wreaths!' hollered Leonora, pointing at the reindeer who was happily chewing on his second one.

There really was nothing quite like a Holly Cross Christmas, thought Blythe.

I

29th May

Blythe watched Amir stick his aubergine to the wall. In actual fact she'd fantasised about doing something similar, although that had involved a staple gun and quite a bit of screaming on Amir's part. This was an even bigger nightmare, even though the aubergine in question was only on a sticker. It meant Amir had broken Blythe's almost record-breaking sales run at Happy Homes Estate Agency. In the Warwickshire company's thirty-four-year history no single sales representative had achieved the most sales every month for a whole year. But this month Blythe had been on track to achieve just that until Amir had set out to ruin things.

He adjusted his sticker on the wall chart. It was so appropriate he'd chosen aubergines to record his sales. She looked at her row of unicorn stickers, one short of Amir's eggplants. She now needed just one more to tie for first for this month, keep her crown and go down in history. It wasn't up there with walking on the moon or even the first mooning (incidentally recorded by a Roman soldier in 66AD who mooned and caused a riot where thousands died). But it was notable in the history of Happy Homes

estate agents or at least it would be if bloody Amir hadn't made it his mission to derail her plans.

'No hard feelings, eh?' said Amir, giving her shoulder an unwelcome squeeze.

Blythe tried to slap on a smile but instead she bared her teeth and Amir retracted his arm to a safe distance. 'It's not the end of May,' she said, her voice coming out as a low grumble.

Amir huffed a derisory laugh. 'It is the last *working* day of May. Face it, Blythe. I won.'

'But it's not just this month. It's the year. I was about to—'

'Yeah. Sorry about that,' he said, sounding about as sincere as an MP apologising for having an affair.

Blythe opened her mouth but before she could say anything their boss, Ludo, barrelled out of his office and enveloped Amir in a bear hug. 'Is this what I think it is?' Ludo's bright eyes were at odds with the rest of his grey appearance. 'Have you done it, lad?'

Amir wobbled his head. 'If you mean, have I produced a record month of sales and beaten Blythe. Then yes I have.' He looked smugger than the Cheshire cat in a grinning contest.

'By one sodding sale,' she muttered under her breath.

'That's fantastic,' said Ludo. 'And, Blythe, you had such a fabulous run. Well done to you too. I'll get the champagne.'

'Hey. Hang on!' said Blythe, quite loudly, making Ludo do a pirouette any ballet dancer would have been proud of. She had everyone's attention. 'The month's not over.' She checked her watch. Ludo nodded encouragingly at her. 'There's still a whole working hour today and then there's... more hours tomorrow.'

‘It’s Sunday tomorrow and Monday’s a Bank Holiday.’ Amir lifted his chin. ‘Do you have any planned viewings?’ he asked. ‘Any offers out waiting to be accepted? Anything that’s likely to come in before the clock ticks over into June?’ His stare was icy. They’d been fierce rivals since he’d joined six months ago and now he was challenging her position as top sales representative and Ludo’s favourite – she wasn’t sure which hurt her the most.

She racked her brains for any properties on her books that were anywhere close to a sale. There really wasn’t anything. Then she mentally went through her list of potential buyers. She’d been chasing a young couple who were trying to sort out their deposit but because each time she rang it kept going to voicemail she feared they were screening her calls. Blythe scanned her client list for someone else. Anyone. ‘There’s that guy from London, Sam Ashton.’ She felt her cheek twitch at the mention of him.

Amir’s Cheshire cat grin broadened. ‘The bloke who you call every week with properties matching his criteria and he pooh-poohs every single one?’

‘I thought you said he was a time-waster,’ chipped in Heather, the office junior.

Blythe widened her eyes at Heather. She needed her onside because if Amir did any more swaggering he was going to slip a disc. ‘No, that was someone else.’

‘You said there was a WOTs file. And that WOTs stood for Waste of Timers.’ Heather looked confused. Blythe giggled nervously. Heather flicked through her notebook where she’d jotted down meticulous training notes and read out loud. ‘For some people, looking for their ideal home is a hobby. Ask the right questions to ascertain if

they are delusional, dilly-dallying, time-wasters or simply fu—'

'Fantastic notes there, Heather,' cut in Blythe, before Ludo's eyebrows jumped so high they merged with his receding hairline. 'But that's not Mr Ashton.'

'But...'

Heather held up her notebook in front of Blythe who snatched it from her, closed it, put it on the desk and sat on it.

'Excellent. So in summary. There's still everything to play for and we'll find out on Monday who has won for this month.' Blythe ignored Amir's smug expression and focused on Ludo who she could see was torn between mollifying her and celebrating Amir's achievement.

'Fair enough,' said Ludo, giving Blythe an indulgent smile. 'Amir, well done. Whatever happens on Tuesday, that's a fantastic sales sheet.'

Amir smacked Ludo on the back. 'All in a day's work.' He put on his knock-off Ray-Bans. 'If it's okay with you I'm going to call it a day. Anyone want to join me in the pub?' He twisted to eyeball Blythe. 'I'm celebrating.'

There were murmurs of agreement but not from Blythe. 'I'm too busy, *working*. But you enjoy it.'

'Don't worry I will,' he said, and he sauntered out of the office.

Blythe realised she was clenching her teeth. She knew she was clutching at straws and not the robust, plastic unenvironmentally friendly, last-for-a-million-years type – her straws were flimsy, paper and decidedly soggy. But they were all she had.

After an hour of scouring her property and potential client lists and reviewing the company inbox, just in case a buyer had happened to drop in, she knew she was facing defeat. She'd worked so hard and couldn't face that it might now be for nothing because petty Amir had decided to get off his butt for one month and put a spanner in the works. She'd pulled out all the stops last month, even selling her own house in record time, forcing her to move back in with her mum and stepdad while she found somewhere else. And this month she'd worked all hours. She really couldn't have done more.

The office was empty and the street outside was quiet as most people had rushed home to enjoy another glorious summer's evening. But Blythe wasn't joining them. She was stubborn and wasn't going to give up just yet. She checked her phone for the umpteenth time: still no reply from the young couple. The only other vague possibility was Mr Ashton. The client she had had on her books for almost five months and who had never actually visited any of the properties she had suggested. She was going to give him one last try.

Blythe went through their property portfolio and packaged up the best homes that ticked Mr Ashton's numerous 'must have' boxes and she pressed send on the email. She made herself a coffee, figuring that would provide enough elapsed time before she called him.

She dialled Sam Ashton's number and with each ring her optimism lost another life like a hero dying in a computer game. 'Don't go to voicemail,' she whispered, in the hope the God of property sales was looking kindly on her.

'Sam Ashton.'

Blythe threw up her free hand in delight before focusing hard. 'Hi, Mr Ashton. It's Blythe Littlewood from Happy Homes estate agents. I'm sorry it's late but I—'

He spoke over her. 'Sorry, I'm in the middle of some—'

'That's fine, I don't need your time now but I do need it tomorrow,' she butted in. Keen not to lose her opportunity she spoke as fast as she could. 'I've just sent you a fabulous selection of our top properties, which all meet your exacting criteria. You're going to be spoiled for choice. So have a look tonight and let's talk offers tomorrow. I'll come in to the office specially.' Blythe grimaced and crossed her fingers. She was a very rare species, an almost mythical creature like the unicorn; she was an honest estate agent with scruples and a conscience. It was something Ludo had instilled in her and which made the agency the most trusted in the area. She'd never been this pushy before and it didn't sit well with her, but needs must. Amir had driven her to this. She glanced at the wall chart and the mass of aubergines. She knew where she'd like to shove a particularly large—

Sam Ashton interrupted her thoughts by sighing heavily into the phone. 'Fine. Ten tomorrow?' Blythe blinked. Had she heard that right? Was he taking the bait? 'Miss Littlewood, are you still there?'

'Er, sorry. Of course. Yes. Absolutely. Ten o'clock sharp tomorrow. Thank you, Mr...'

The line went dead. Rude. Blythe put the phone down, slumped back in her office chair and punched the air. It was a very soggy straw but it was all she had and she was going to cling on to it for all she was worth.

30th May

Blythe wasn't sure how she ended up being out of bed so early on a Sunday morning. When she'd lived in town she only saw her friend Vicky once or twice a week but now she'd had to move back in with her mum and her stepdad, Greg, Vicky lived just around the corner. It was one of a number of benefits that had softened the impact of her break-up. A sigh escaped as she thought about her ex now playing happy families with someone ten years older than her. That had been a blow to her ego. She was missing him less, which was a good thing. She'd sold the house they'd shared in double quick time – partly because it matched the buyer but mainly because she needed to get away from all the 'what might have been' memories. But that was in the past and Blythe had to concentrate on getting back on her feet. Usually Sundays were for long lazy lie-ins, snuggling on the sofa with a good book and the occasional hangover, although today she was careering around their sleepy village being dragged along by a huge bear of a dog.

'Vicky, explain to me again why we're doing this,' said Blythe, holding on tight to the ridiculously large fluffy grey

and white dog who was named Princess but appeared to have no comprehension of that fact.

‘So I can get a good reference from the owner,’ said Vicky, grimacing like she was losing in a tug o’ war competition as Princess’s brother battled to wrench her arm from its socket.

‘Yeah, that’s the bit I don’t get.’ Vicky was a single mum to her daughter, Eden. She worked part-time in the local candle factory. How walking the owner’s dogs would get her a good reference for a job, Blythe had no idea.

‘It’s my new business venture – dog walking,’ said Vicky proudly, although she looked like she was skiing behind the old English sheepdog rather than walking it.

‘Then we’re getting paid for this?’ Blythe felt a fraction better about her early start.

‘Not exactly,’ said Vicky. ‘But if we do a good job they might be my first client.’ She briefly grinned at Blythe before the dog jerked forward and she went flying, landing in a heap on the path. Thankfully she was still hanging on to the lead. ‘Barnaby!’ she yelled, making the dog bound back and jump all over her. ‘Oof!’ Vicky rolled onto her front but the dog found it was even more fun to tug on her ponytail. ‘Barnaby, sit. Siiiiit!’ Barnaby ignored her.

Despite the large dogs it was always nice to have a walk through the scenic landscape that surrounded the village of Holly Cross. Nestled in the Warwickshire countryside it was where Blythe and Vicky had grown up. The village and its inhabitants held a special place in Blythe’s heart. And whilst it hadn’t been on her life plan to move back in with her mum and stepdad she was enjoying the feeling of being cosseted that they and the village gave her. Although she could do without them kissing at breakfast – it was enough

to put anyone off their muesli. And worse than that it made her feel like a child again. All those mortifying moments when she'd walked in on her mum and Greg kissing and all the times Greg had insisted on picking her up from parties.

Blythe held on tight to her charge who was keen to join in. 'Would you be walking these two on a regular basis then?'

'Daily.' Vicky tried crawling away. 'Sit, Barnaby. Bloody well sit!'

'On your own?' asked Blythe, trying hard not to let it show on her face how much of a bad idea she thought this was.

Vicky wriggled away from the giant dog's slobbering jaws and got to her feet. 'Once they get used to me they'll be a lot calmer, I'm sure.'

'I'm not,' said Blythe under her breath as they carried on their walk. 'They'll eat you alive given half a chance.'

'I was sorry to hear about Murray dying,' said Vicky, pulling a sad face.

Blythe was interested how Vicky had made the connection because Murray was an elderly gent from their village who had recently passed away from old age and had not been eaten by out-of-control furry demons. 'Me too,' agreed Blythe. 'I know he was in his eighties but it was still a shock. Does that sound daft?'

'No.' Vicky shook her head and Barnaby tried to jump up and bite her ponytail. 'You two were mates.'

The phrase made Blythe raise an eyebrow. But on some level Vicky was right. Blythe had been popping round to Murray's on a regular basis. Partly because when Murray was away she fed the semi-feral cat who frequented his

garden and partly because she enjoyed having a cuppa and a natter with the old man. Because he wasn't just an old man; he was someone with a wealth of life experience, a listening ear and somebody who offered sound advice. Blythe was really going to miss him. 'I guess we *were* mates. He always seemed happy. Never let anything get him down.'

'His funeral was held last week up in Manchester somewhere; that's what people were saying in the pub. I don't think anyone from Holly Cross went.'

'That is sad. I wonder why—' But Blythe didn't get to finish her sentence before the two dogs started to play-fight, tangling their leads and wrapping up the two young women like they were about to be kidnapped.

Once they had managed to untangle themselves, which actually took quite a while because both dogs thought it was a fun game and kept circling them and making things worse, they were able to continue on their country hike. 'How do you feel this is going then?' asked Blythe, now holding on to Princess's lead with both hands.

Vicky wrinkled her nose. 'Not quite as easy as I'd hoped.'

'Maybe you could walk them separately,' suggested Blythe.

'Not cost-effective. I need to do six walks a day to earn enough money from this, but if I walk multiple dogs at a time it could be a gold mine.' Vicky looked genuinely excited at the prospect.

'Would it not be easier to get some extra hours at the factory?' asked Blythe.

'They have been really good but next step is back to full-time working, which I can't do. I could fit the dog walking around my shifts and do it before and after school with Eden.'

‘With Eden?’ Images of the five-year-old flying behind Princess loomed large in Blythe’s mind.

‘Yeah. Fab mum and daughter time plus I would be my own boss and as most people are out at work all day they don’t really care what time their dog is walked as long as they are taken out and get some exercise. And, who knows, if this really takes off I could then be employing other dog walkers and making shedloads without even having to leave the house.’

‘Is there that much money in it?’ Blythe was intrigued.

‘Ten pounds a time soon adds up!’

Vicky looked thrilled and Blythe didn’t have the heart to give her a reality check. Blythe swapped hands with the lead three times before she could get a look at her watch. ‘I’ll need to head back soon because I’ve got to have a shower and go into the office.’

‘On a Sunday?’

Blythe brought Vicky up to speed on the whole sorry situation of Amir trying to snatch away her record-breaking sales achievement.

‘He sounds like a shit,’ said Vicky.

‘I think that’s a fair summary.’ Blythe puffed out a breath. ‘In any other situation I wouldn’t begrudge him. I really wouldn’t, but I’ve worked my bum off this last year. If I’m honest I’m surprised Ludo brought him in. With the sales I’ve been doing it’s not like it warranted someone else. But Ludo said that was exactly why we needed another senior negotiator: because I was in danger of being overworked.’

‘Don’t you believe him?’

‘Ludo is the most honest person I know. So I know he

genuinely thought bringing Amir in was the right thing to do. I don't trust Amir though.'

'Is Amir dishonest?'

'I don't have any evidence but a few things don't add up. And to get that many sales in one month when he'd been jogging along at almost half that many until now seems fishy to me.'

'But you got almost that many,' pointed out Vicky.

'Almost.' Blythe noisily sucked in air. 'I can't believe I got so close.'

'Oh well, never mind,' said Vicky breezily, making Blythe do a double take.

'Never mind?'

'Yeah.' Vicky shrugged. 'I know you wanted to set a new sales record but it doesn't really make any difference. Does it?'

'I would be the irrefutable top agent.'

'Ooh, like Danger Mouse,' said Vicky with a giggle, but the look Blythe was giving her made her put on a pretend serious face. 'I know you want to prove to your real dad that—'

Blythe was stunned. The mention of Hugh brought her up short, or it would have done if Princess would have let up her pulling for a second. Her dad had taught her many things: the importance of being professional, not to mix business with pleasure, and that no matter how much you loved someone they could still just walk out of your life. Twelve months of record sales was something her father, a London property guru, had said was impossible.

'What? It's got nothing to do with him. Nothing at all,' said Blythe, although it had set her wondering what it might be like to get a little praise from her father.

'Oh, okay. Sure.'

'I just want to be the best I can be. That's all. And I just need two more sales.' It was so frustrating.

'This cockney customer bloke...' began Vicky.

Blythe laughed. 'Just because he's from London doesn't make him a cockney.'

'Don't most of them speak like they're on *EastEnders*? You ain't my muvver; apples and pears; Gawd blimey, Mary Poppins.' Vicky's cockney accent was on a par with her business ideas.

'Obviously not. His accent is sort of neutral.' She'd spoken to him so many times. Mainly he sounded terse or bored and for some reason she guessed he was a similar age to her parents.

'Is he likely to put in an offer on a house over the phone?' asked Vicky.

'Probably not. I mean it does happen once in a blue moon with overseas clients and investors but I think that's about as likely as Barnaby listening to a command.' Although at the sound of his name Barnaby whipped around in Blythe's direction, spinning Vicky around like a top. His sister barked excitedly, making Blythe jump, and in a moment of confusion the lead was snatched from her hand. 'Nooooo!' she shouted, as Princess raced off with Barnaby close behind despite the fact he was dragging Vicky along with him.

Blythe gave chase but Princess was fast. She charged into long grass and apart from popping up a couple of times she then disappeared.

'Find her, Barnaby,' instructed Vicky. For the first time that day Barnaby sat down.

They searched and searched and eventually Blythe spotted a flash of white fur deep in the thicket. 'She's here!' she called although Vicky and Barnaby were nowhere in sight. Blythe pushed her way through the overgrown bushes and brambles, scratching her arms and at one point getting a bramble caught in her long hair, which she had to tug free. Eventually she found herself a few feet away from the dog.

'Come here, Princess,' she said, in the cheeriest voice she could muster.

Princess barked at her and danced up and down the small patch of earth on the other side of a tangle of brambles.

'Come on,' encouraged Blythe clapping her hands together. Princess stared at Blythe and then at the brambles. 'Really? You're scared of spiking your paws. Is that it?' Princess's tongue lolled out of her mouth as she panted. 'Seriously. For a very big dog you are a complete wimp.' Blythe checked her watch. She was running out of time fast. But then she could get away with not having a shower as nobody else would be in the office and it was only a phone call with Mr Ashton. Still she needed to get a move on – Sam Ashton was her last hope of at least landing a draw with Amir.

Princess barked and broke Blythe's train of thought. 'I'll come to you then,' she said, wondering why she was talking to a dog who clearly wasn't very bright if she'd managed to get herself surrounded by thorny bushes. Blythe stamped onto the brambles nearest to her, and they sprang back in protest and adhered themselves to her jeans. 'Bloody hell,' she grumbled trying to yank her clothes free. The more she stamped them down the more they attached themselves to her – they were nature's Velcro. Princess got bored and lay

down with a hearty huff. 'If you think I'm carrying you out of here you can think again,' she told the mutt. Blythe stamped down on uneven ground, toppled, and reached out to stop herself falling. Unfortunately what she grabbed was another thorny section. 'Arghhhhhh!' She let go sharpish and as she fell she tried to avoid the brambles but instead landed in a pile of nettles.

A huffing and puffing behind her announced Vicky's arrival. 'There you are! What are you lying down for?'

'Princess won't walk on the brambles.' Blythe shook her head but before she could explain further Princess stood up and, using Blythe as a bridge, she trotted out of the bramble thicket to join Vicky and Barnaby. 'Good idea,' said Vicky, grabbing Princess's lead and looking impressed.

'I didn't intend her to... oh, never mind,' said Blythe.

They eventually returned the giant hounds to their owner who seemed pleased with the long walk they'd had but didn't even so much as tip Vicky, although she was buoyed up that she had at least one potential client for her new business. Blythe had left Vicky to it and dashed home, got straight in her car and set off. Thankfully town was quiet. Blythe hurriedly parked her car, grabbed her bag and headed for the office, marvelling at the stinging sensation in her arms and neck thanks to the nettles and thorns. She could have done the phone call from home but then she'd likely have her mum and stepdad hovering in the background, which wouldn't sound very professional, and anyway all the information was on her desk computer because Ludo worried about data protection and wouldn't let them have

laptops that could be stolen. And there was still the remote chance Mr Ashton may ask some detailed questions or want more information emailing. If she was going to give this last straw her full attention then it was best that she was at her desk with everything she needed to hand. Blythe vowed that if Mr Ashton didn't buy anything today then she was going to move him to the WOTs file.

Blythe pulled out her office keys and was about to open up as her phone rang. It was Vicky. 'Hi, Vicky, is it urgent because I have to call Ashton dead on ten?'

'Sure. I wanted you to know I have my first clients! I'm going to be walking Barnaby and Princess daily!'

'Congratulations, I think,' said Blythe, screwing up her features at the thought of the giant beasts and feeling something sting in her cheek. 'We'll celebrate later. I've got to go because I want to get ready for this client.'

'I thought you said he was a waste of time?'

'I did and I know it's pointless because he's a time-wasting numpty who is likely never going to buy anything but I have to try.'

'Well, I hope he buys the biggest house you have,' said Vicky. Blythe was aware of someone standing on the pavement very close to her. She glanced over her shoulder and a casually dressed man in his late twenties smiled back at her. In actual fact he looked quite amused at something. Blythe ignored him. She turned the key and shot inside the office.

'Thanks, Vicky. I've gotta go. I'll catch you later.'

'Pub?'

'If you like. Bye.'

Blythe ended the call, hit the on button on her computer

and went through to the back to grab a quick coffee. While she was waiting for the kettle to boil she heard someone try the door. 'Sorry we're closed!' she called, adding under her breath, 'which is why the closed sign is up.' Some people were dumb. She hastily made a coffee and dashed back to her desk to pull up the property details so she could see which of Mr Ashton's criteria she was going to focus on with each of them. She checked the time. Dead on ten o'clock she picked up her phone to dial his number and it sprang into life. It was Mr Ashton, which was quite annoying because even after everything she wasn't late calling him.

She composed herself for her last-ditch attempt at getting a May sale and put on her most professional voice. 'Good morning, Mr Ashton, bang on time. I had my phone in my hand. Which of the properties I sent would you like to know more about first?'

'I was hoping I could have a sit-down.'

What did that mean? Blythe closed her eyes so she could concentrate. 'The Regency semi in Leamington has a beautiful window seat...' She paused while she brought the details up on her screen.

'O-kay. But I'd be happy with that chair there.'

Blythe peered at the photos on her screen. 'I'm sorry, which chair?'

There was a tap on the glass door. 'That one.'

Blythe was preparing a scowl for whoever was at the door until she saw it was the man from earlier. He now had a mobile held to his ear and he was pointing at her. 'Crap,' she said, and then realised her mistake. 'I'm so sorry. Are you?' She pointed to the man outside and he nodded. Blythe stood up so fast she knocked her chair over and bumped

her desk, spilling her coffee and hurting her thigh. 'Well, this is a lovely surprise...' She wondered why she now sounded like her grandmother. She shoved the phone into her neck while she wrestled with the door. She snatched it open and the man outside beamed an amused smile at her.

'Mr Ashton?' she said.

'Hi Blythe, call me Sam,' he said, ending the call and offering her a hand to shake.

Blythe shook hands and then realised she must have looked like an idiot as she still had her phone tucked into her neck. She quickly shoved it in her pocket. 'Come in. Sit down. Can I get you a coffee?' she said, the whole time wondering why the hell he was there in person.

'No coffee for me. I just had one while I was waiting for you to open.'

Blythe raced around to her side of the desk and sat down, which was when she noticed the spilled coffee. She grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on her desk and began mopping. 'I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you,' she said.

'Oh, I thought we said ten o'clock?'

'For a phone call.' She knew she was pulling that tense-emoji face she did in awkward situations but it was hard not to.

'I thought we were viewing all those houses you sent me.' Sam frowned hard. 'I've come up from London especially to see them.'

This was the best and worst news in one sentence. The chances of him actually making an offer on a property over the phone had been minuscule so now she had a real chance of selling one and setting a new sales record. She had desperately wanted to show him properties but he'd always

said he was too busy to travel up and now he was here and she had no appointments booked in with vendors. *Don't panic*, she told herself, while a mini version of her inside her brain had a total meltdown. 'And see properties is exactly what we will do,' she told him firmly. Although she did not want him sitting there while she grovelled to vendors to let her view their property on a Sunday morning with a moment's notice. 'How about you have a little mooch around the town. Get a feel for the place while I make some calls?'

'I don't think—'

'You could grab another coffee, see the sights. There's a clock tower, the church is stunning and—'

He seemed to sense her desperation for him to clear off. 'I'll be back in twenty minutes.' He checked his watch, stood up and left.

At the sound of the door closing Blythe puffed out a breath she'd been holding in and slumped back in her chair. This was a nightmare. Sam opened the door again and she sat bolt upright, almost giving herself whiplash. Blythe pasted on a smile.

'If we're visiting people, you might want to...' He waved a finger in a circle motion around her head. He grinned at her and closed the door.

What was that about? She picked up her phone and flipped the camera so she could see herself. Her usually straight golden hair was like a mad professor's but with added leaves and twigs. There was a smudge of dirt on her forehead and a scratch covered in dried blood on her cheek. 'Argghhhhhh!'