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When I Fall in Love

Written by Miranda Dickinson

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MIRANDA DICKINSON

When I Fall In Love

AVON

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For Kim.
Because this story wouldn't have been as brave without you.

A dream you dream alone is only a dream.
A dream you dream together is reality.
John Lennon

CHAPTER ONE

Not supposed to be like this

'Excuse me, miss?'

Elsie Maynard looked up from her half-crossed-out shopping list to see the hulking figure of a security guard blocking her way. 'Hi. Sorry, I'm in a bit of a rush, actually, so if you'll just . . .'

'I'm going to have to ask you to come with me, please.'

This was the last thing she needed today. Not only had her lunch-break been delayed by forty-five minutes by a particularly persistent wafer-cone salesman but also, in her haste to complete all the shopping tasks on her list, she had left work without her umbrella just as the heavens opened. And now *this* . . .

'I've *told* you, I don't have time to stop.'

The huge security guard gave a world-weary sigh and clamped an enormous hand rather too heavily on her shoulder. 'I must insist, miss. I believe you have goods you have not paid for, so if you will just accompany me back into the shop, please . . .'

What on earth was this man-mountain on about? *Of course* she had paid! What kind of person did he think she

was? Incensed at the very notion, Elsie opened her mouth to protest, when a new voice interrupted her.

'Hey. Can I help?'

He was young, arguably handsome, with dark brown hair and green eyes. Everything about him gave the impression of someone in complete control: from his neat haircut to the well-cut suit and overcoat he wore, together with the fact that, frustratingly, he was apparently immune to the large splats of rain Elsie could feel soaking through her too-thin work uniform and tights. Over his shoulder Elsie caught sight of a blonde-haired young woman dressed in a turquoise and black Fifties' diner waitress outfit, looking as if somebody had just tipped a bucket of water over her head – and her heart sank as she realised it was her own reflection in the shop window.

Mr Impervious-to-Rain's smile would probably have been welcome, were it not for Elsie's sneaking suspicion that he was *enjoying* the sight of her, bedraggled, flustered and now squirming with embarrassment on the steps of the high street chemist's.

'I'm fine, thank you. It's just a misunderstanding . . .' she began, but Mount Kilimanjaro had turned his attention from her to seek solidarity with the recent male addition to the street spectacle.

'She hasn't paid,' he confided, pointing a thick finger at the haemorrhoid preparation and earwax softener in Elsie's hand, 'for *those* items.'

Oh. My. Life. In her fury at being accused of theft, Elsie had completely forgotten the two quite possibly most embarrassing items in the whole world that she now held. But of course she had paid for them! Hadn't she?

The young man suppressed a smile and Elsie felt her stomach lurch again as cold raindrops permeated her collar

and began to run down the back of her neck. 'I'm sure it's just a small misunderstanding,' he smiled affably at the gargantuan unsmiling man still gripping Elsie's shoulder. 'Look, here's twenty quid. Can't be any more than that, can it?'

A brief glimpse of softness flashed across the security guard's steel expression. 'Well . . .'

Sensing his opponent weakening, the young man's smile eased wider. 'I imagine you see this kind of thing every day, huh? Lunchtime shoppers, brains left at the office, so many shiny things to buy that they make one tiny slip of judgement . . .' He turned the whiteness of his sincerity on Elsie, a move which may have been intended to comfort but had the direct opposite effect. 'I mean, this girl seems very lovely and not really your average shoplifter, eh?'

The steel returned as Mountain Man surveyed her. 'Takes all sorts.'

'I'm sure it does, officer. But, trust me, I see all manner of felons in the course of my job and I can spot a wrong 'un a mile off. This, sir, is not one of them.'

This? Despite the help obviously being offered by the smartly dressed stranger beside her, being referred to as an inanimate object was a step too far for Elsie. 'Now *hang on* a minute . . .'

Her planned tirade was halted by a raised, gloved hand and a look that threatened dire consequences if she defied his gesture. Fuming, she dug her drenched heels into the pavement and glared at him.

'Come on, twenty quid?' he continued. 'I'll even go back into the shop with you to get a receipt. Can't say fairer than that, can I?'

To Elsie's amazement, the security guard shrugged his bulky shoulders and released her. 'All the same to me,' he

muttered, pocketing the twenty-pound note and turning back towards the store. 'Just tell your girlfriend to pay a bit more attention next time.'

'What? I'm *not* his gir—'

'Absolutely. Stay there, *darling*. I'll be back in a moment.' Smiling like an advert for tooth whitening toothpaste, he winked at Elsie as he accompanied the guard inside the shop.

Gazing down in utter disbelief at the questionable items in her hand, Elsie remained frozen to the spot trying to process what had just happened. One minute she had been dashing around the huge high street chemist on the corner of Brighton's North Street and Queen's Road looking for baby wipes and mascara, the next she had been interrupted by her father calling to ask her to pick up some embarrassing but necessary items for him . . . Maybe her mind had been elsewhere – especially given the important decision she had made that morning – but she had *paid* for the items, she was sure. Who would try to steal pile preparation and earwax remover anyway? Certainly not Elsie Maynard, assistant manager of Sundae & Cher ice cream café, upstanding citizen of Brighton and the last person on the planet to ever consider shoplifting. Even as a teenager she had always maintained an unblemished record, her fear of getting into trouble only strengthened by witnessing the fallout from minor misdemeanours involving her two older sisters (more often than not involving overindulgence in alcohol and trips home in panda cars . . .)

'There, all sorted.' The smiling man was back, a triumphal glow from his recent chivalrous endeavours lighting his face. He handed her a receipt. 'Busy day, eh?'

'I paid for these,' Elsie insisted, the sting of injustice still smarting.

'You didn't. But it's OK, I sorted it for you.'

Pushing the receipt back at him, Elsie grabbed her purse from her damp handbag and angrily flicked through the receipts in the wallet section. 'Look, I don't know who you are, and I'm not being ungrateful, but that bloke was mistaken. I distinctly remember paying for these things with a twenty-pound note. I know this because I only had one twenty in my wallet that I'd just taken out from the cash machine and now, as you can see, it's not . . . Oh . . .' Her heart plummeted to her soggy toes as she pulled out a folded twenty-pound note, exactly where she'd put it at the cash point before she entered the shop.

The young man's voice softened. 'Honestly, it's fine. It happens to the best of us.' He held out his hand. 'I'm Torin, by the way. Torin Stewart.'

Still reeling from the revelation of her unwitting descent into petty crime, Elsie shook his hand. 'Elsie Maynard.'

'Pleasure to meet you, Elsie Maynard,' Torin grinned. 'Under different circumstances would've been preferable, of course, but I'm glad I was able to help. So, how about a coffee? You look like you need one and it'll get you out of this rain.'

Thoroughly mortified and filled with a compelling urge to remove herself from the situation, Elsie pushed the twenty-pound note into his hand and began to leave. 'I'm sorry, I really have to go . . .'

'Hey, why the rush?'

'I'm on my lunch-break, which ended about twenty minutes ago,' Elsie returned, hoping that the pace she injected into her steps would deter him from following her down the street.

Unfortunately for Elsie, Torin was not one to be brushed off so easily. 'Now come on. I just saved your life back there.

Surely that entitles me to at least a coffee with you? It can be my treat if money's a bit tight . . .?'

That was the final straw. Blood pumping furiously in her ears, Elsie spun around to face him. 'Excuse me? I *have* money, actually. What part of "I have to go" do you not understand? I'm late for work and I'm soaked through from this *stupid* rain and, believe me, the very last thing I would like to do right now is go anywhere with you. I've paid you back so I don't owe you anything.'

'Is that the way you thank all your rescuers?' The twinkle in his eye sent a second wave of fury pumping through Elsie.

'Who do you think you are, Lancelot? And *where* do you get off interfering in other people's business, anyway? I am entirely capable of looking after myself, you know. I am not a damsel in distress that needs rescuing by a big, strong bloke. I would have *sorted* the situation, without your help. I would have *managed*. So thank you very much for jumping in, but I really didn't need you to.'

Torin was stopped in his tracks and Elsie felt the smallest glint of satisfaction as she walked away. Fair enough, he had helped to release her from the iron grip of the security guard, but he didn't have to make a virtue of the fact. Or attempt to turn the situation into some kind of emotional blackmail to go with him for coffee, either. Honestly, the cheek!

'Un-be-*lievable*!' a voice shouted behind her.

Elsie groaned as she pressed on, dodging lunchtime shoppers hurrying through the insistent mid-March rain. *Does this bloke ever give up?*

'I *thought* you looked like somebody in need of assistance,' Torin continued, drawing level with Elsie as they stormed together down the street. 'And all I did was try to

save you from an embarrassing and potentially litigious situation. Well, more fool me!'

'You said it,' Elsie muttered, wishing with all her heart that he would get the message and leave her alone.

'Talk about ungrateful! *Some* women would see what I did just now as chivalrous.'

'And *some* women would think you were a pathetic male on an ego trip, making yourself appear superior. "Stay there, darling . . ." as if I was some dumb-nutted bimbo! Chauvinism is not chivalry, mate.'

'Oh, so stopping a security guard from hauling you back into a shop in full view of half of Brighton was *patronising*, was it?'

Of course it wasn't. But Elsie was tired, embarrassed, soaked to the skin and not likely to give in to the annoying man who *still* seemed impervious to rain. 'I'm sorry, I really don't have time for this.'

'Time for what? For being told how unreasonable you are?'

Elsie gave a hollow laugh as she skirted round a café A-board placed unwisely in her path. 'Oh right, *I'm* unreasonable . . .'

'Yes, you are. May I remind you that there was every chance that security guard wouldn't have let the situation go?'

'How do you know that? You can't possibly know that!'

He was matching her pace, step for step, his reddening face pulling closer to hers. 'It was obvious to anybody! You only had to see the gleam in his eye to know that he intended to make an example of you. It could have involved the police, a magistrates court visit, a fine . . . a *criminal record*?'

Halting suddenly, Elsie faced him. 'OK, enough! Believe it or not, I have more important things to think about today

than whether or not I would have ended up with a criminal record if you hadn't intervened. I've said thank you, I've paid you back, what more can you possibly want from me?'

Breathing heavily, Torin held up his hands. 'Nothing. Obviously nothing.' Then, to Elsie's surprise, instead of hurling a clever comeback at her, he backed away, turned and disappeared into the crowd.

If she hadn't seen the look of sincere disappointment in his eyes, Elsie would have just dismissed the whole thing. But the unexpected impact of it sent a whisper of conscience cutting like a scythe through her consternation. Blinking away the raindrops dripping from the edges of her fringe, she stood in the middle of milling shoppers, the events of the past ten minutes replaying over and over in her mind.

The insistent ringing of her mobile brought her sharply back to the present.

'Hello? Oh hi, Dad. Yes, I have your things. I'll bring them over after work.'

Taking one last glance up the street, Elsie shook the nagging doubt from her mind.

'Weirdo,' she told herself. 'Clearly a weirdo.'

CHAPTER TWO

Moving on . . .

By the time Elsie parked her car outside her father's three-storey townhouse later that day, thick grey clouds had laid siege to Brighton's skies, emptying their weight of rain on the streets of the seaside city. Despite her best efforts to shield herself from the torrential downpour by holding her handbag above her head as she dashed from the car, she arrived at the purple wood and stained glass front door soaked once more.

The tinkle of a small wind-chime over the door and heady smell of warming patchouli oil and Nag Champa incense sticks were immediately soothing as she walked into the hallway and headed towards the Indian bead curtain that covered the entrance to the kitchen. It had been many years since she had moved out of this place but it still always felt like home when she returned.

Jim Maynard beamed when Elsie walked into the kitchen. He was out of his work clothes already, his respectable business suit replaced by his favourite Nepal striped patchwork shirt, baggy combat trousers and bright orange Doc Marten boots. Elsie smiled back. She always preferred the

sight of her father in his relaxed attire, with his much-beloved gold earring back in his ear: it was a truer version of himself than his well-respected Brighton businessman persona that he had adopted since taking over his father's classic furniture store business.

'It's my favourite youngest daughter!' he exclaimed, wrapping her up in one of his famous Dad-hugs, which was even more welcome today than usual. 'Good day?'

Elsie opened a brightly painted enamel tea caddy and popped two ginger and cinnamon teabags into a hand-painted kingfisher blue teapot, a gift to Jim from his middle daughter Guin when she set up her pottery business in Shoreham-by-Sea four years ago. 'Annoying day, actually.' She smiled at her father. 'But it's better now I'm here.'

'I'm glad, darling. I knew there was a reason we needed patchouli oil today. Sit down, take a deep breath and tell your old dad about it.' Jim took the whistling kettle from the gas stove and made the tea. 'What happened?'

'Oh, nothing, really. I just had a bit of an ordeal at lunchtime.'

Her father was about to enquire further when the kitchen door opened and a chorus of 'Shoplifter!' filled the kitchen, followed by loud shrieks of laughter.

Elsie groaned as her two older sisters piled onto her, shouting, laughing and ruffling her hair. Sometimes being so close to your sisters (and texting them as soon as anything happened in your day) was a bad thing . . .

'Our little sister, the petty thief!' Daisy Maynard laughed, flicking back her perfectly coiffed blonde hair and clapping slender hands at the sight of her sister's chagrin. 'I'm so proud!'

'We were going to get you a swag bag and mask from the fancy dress shop on the way here but Junior decided

to play up,' Guin added, patting her burgeoning belly. 'You seem to have this one on side already, Els.'

Elsie grinned despite her embarrassment and reached out to stroke her sister's considerable baby bump. 'You've got taste, kid. Just stick with your Auntie Elsie and you'll stay relatively sane.'

'Although she'll have you signed up to the family crime business before you know it,' Daisy added as she and Guin descended into hilarity.

'What's this about crime?' Jim looked from one daughter to the others, trying to keep up. After their mother had removed herself from the family unit when all three girls were at primary school, Jim had assumed the role of sole referee of the whirlwind known as the Maynard sisters and was often left bewildered by their endless energy and the breakneck speed of their conversations.

'Our little sister was almost arrested for shoplifting today,' Guin said, groaning as she lowered herself carefully onto a chair by the kitchen table. Her blue eyes flashed with mischief as she pulled a hairband from her wrist and wound her wavy blonde hair into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. 'Who'd have thought it, eh? Goody-Two-Shoes Elsie a criminal mastermind!'

'It was a misunderstanding,' Elsie protested. 'I handled the situation.'

'Really? *You* handled it?' Daisy asked, eyebrows raised.

'Yes,' Elsie replied firmly, wishing again that she hadn't informed them so comprehensively of the event in a string of texts that afternoon. 'I had a lot on my mind and honestly thought I'd paid. It was obvious in the end that I had made a mistake.'

'Oh.' Jim handed out mugs of tea, not really sure how to respond to this revelation. 'Well, we live and learn, eh?'

Filled with a rush of love for her father, Elsie squeezed his hand as she accepted a mug from him. 'We do. So you see, Dad, everything's good now.'

'I'm glad to hear it. Now, I did a bit of baking last night. Don't suppose I can interest any of you girls in a slice of banana and walnut bread, can I?'

This was met by a chorus of appreciation and, delighted, Jim opened an old Roses tin to serve up his recent culinary triumph. As he and Guin began to chat, Daisy grabbed Elsie's hand and pulled her into the small hallway at the back of the kitchen.

'So?' she demanded, folding her slender arms and giving Elsie a classic Older Sister Stare.

Elsie was having none of it. She had outfaced her oldest sister many times over the years and she wasn't about to be intimidated by her today. 'So what?'

'You *know* what, Elsie Maynard. Why didn't you mention *the chap*?'

Elsie shrugged. 'Dad didn't need to know.'

'How do you figure that? That handsome stranger saved you from being *arrested* for heaven's sake!'

'*Shh!* Keep your voice down . . . And I never said he was handsome.'

Dropping her voice to a harsh whisper, Daisy eyeballed her sister. 'I beg to differ. Anyway, why are you so het up about this? It's OK to admit you needed help, you know. It's no reflection on you. It doesn't mean you can't cope or anything . . .'

Elsie had heard enough. 'Drop it, Dais! Let's just . . . talk about something else for a bit.'

Daisy relented and wrapped an arm around Elsie's shoulder. 'Fair enough, lovely. I'm sorry. So, was he fit?'

'Daisy!'

'Oh come on, Elsie, humour me!'

'I suppose he was, in an annoying, waterproof way. I wasn't looking too closely at the time.'

An indeterminable look passed across Daisy's face. 'Good. That's good.'

Later, when the Maynards were sitting around the dining room table in the large, first-floor living room eating vegetable tagine with tabouleh and pearl couscous (a particular favourite of Jim's), Elsie decided to announce the decision that she had been distracted by when she inadvertently became a lunchtime shoplifter. It had been on her mind all week, ever since she had decided to finally open the small, chocolate satin-covered box by her bed after eighteen months of waiting. This morning, she had made her decision: the first part of moving on . . .

'Right, everyone, I'm glad you're all here – and sitting down – because I've something I want to say.' She smiled at the apprehensive looks of her nearest and dearest. 'Don't panic, it's good news, I think.' She took a breath to steady herself. 'I've decided to start dating again.'

'Oh *Els* . . .' Guin's face reddened and she burst into tears, much to the amusement of her sisters. Since she had first discovered she was pregnant, the normally pragmatic middle Maynard sister had become an emotional wreck, sobbing uncontrollably at everything from songs on her car radio to television adverts for pet food and sofas. Laughing at her own emotional state, she accepted the box of tissues her father always kept close for such occasions and wiped her eyes. 'Man, I am such a *wuss*! I hope all this sobbing isn't going to traumatise my baby. I'm just so – *happy* for you, honey.'

Jim reached across the table and took Elsie's hand. 'My brave girl. And you feel alright about it all?'

Elsie could feel herself shaking, but she knew she was. 'I'm terrified – I mean I've no idea how to go about it, or even how it's done now – but it feels right.'

'We can help,' Daisy said, nodding furiously – a suggestion which slightly alarmed Elsie. Daisy prided herself on being a bit of a matchmaker, even though several of her match-ups for friends had ended in dreadful dates and acrimonious splits. But then, as Elsie reasoned, when you were as effortlessly gorgeous as Daisy Maynard with a successful career and a wealthy architect boyfriend, what would you really understand about the perils of dating?

'Promise me one thing, darling: steer clear of those dreadful dating sites,' Jim interjected, his assertion eliciting shock from his three daughters. 'No, I'm serious. I signed up for two of them last year and they were most disappointing.'

The unexpected revelation of Jim's secret online dating history temporarily hijacked the conversation, and Elsie allowed herself to relax a little as the incredulous reaction flowed around her. After this week's apprehension of telling her family what she was planning, she now felt strangely peaceful. It was the right decision and it was an important one.

I love you because you're brave and strong
and you always know what to do.
xx

The pile of messages, handwritten in a familiar print on small white squares of paper, was stacked neatly inside the former chocolate box. Number 50 on The List:

50. Read the box messages – all of them.

It had taken Elsie eighteen months to bring herself to open it, the thought of its unread contents strangely comforting. When she made the decision last Monday to fulfil the last-but-one item on The List, it had felt like being reunited with an old friend. And as soon as she read the first message, Elsie knew it was the right time. The message made perfect sense – and instantly she knew what to do.

'Wow,' said Cher Pettinger, owner of Sundae & Cher, when Elsie told her the news a week after the shoplifting incident. 'And you're sure you're ready to dive into the shark-infested dating waters again?'

Elsie pulled a face. 'Well, when you put it like *that*, how can I resist?'

'No, no, that's not what I meant,' Cher shook her head, the tall ebony beehive atop it shaking wildly. 'It's just, you know, when you've three divorces under your belt like me the whole dating scene becomes more of a moron-dodging exercise than anything else.'

Elsie smiled at her boss, noting again how at odds her lack of dating success was with the confident forty-something dressed head to toe in vintage Dior. 'I'll bear that in mind. How is the latest flame?'

Cher grimaced as she dropped a newly mixed tub of house speciality Apple, Cinnamon and Nutmeg ice cream into the glass-fronted display cabinet. 'He *was* looking promising until I realised he still lived with his mother. Forty-two years old and still sleeping in a bedroom with He-Man wallpaper.'

'Blimey.'

'Believe it, sister. It's a *jungle* out there. But you know me: ever the optimistic adventurer.'

Cher Pettinger's relationship history read like a cautionary

tale on the perils of dating. Married and divorced three times, she had since endured a string of hopeless beaus, from the owner of the local amusement arcade who had a strange penchant for life-sized dolls, and the toyboy estate agent who was convinced that he was being stalked by MI5, to the ageing lothario hotelier who turned out to be a serial bigamist. But Cher was nothing if not committed to her dating cause, gamely braving the 'jungle of morons' in pursuit of true love.

Elsie liked her boss immensely, despite Cher's infamously dry sense of humour, which had earned her a fearsome reputation in North Laine. She was sassy and assured and undaunted by life – and in Elsie she had found a kindred spirit. Together, over the past three years, they had turned the once hippy vegan café in colourful Gardner Street that Cher inherited from her dotty aunt, Lucy 'Skyflower' Pettinger, into a retro-themed ice cream café that the great and good of Brighton flocked to, irrespective of the season.

Sundae & Cher was filled with 1960s memorabilia, from the gold-framed Elvis and Frankie Valli photographs on the wall behind the green glass counter, to the black and white harlequin tiles on the floor, replica Wurlitzer jukebox, black and white checked tablecloths and red leather and chrome chairs. It had the air of being simultaneously retro and chic, and modern and cool – and Elsie loved to see people's expressions when they walked in for the first time. Of course, the killer detail was that all the ice cream sold in the café was made onsite, in the basement kitchen with its large ice cream mixing machine and large freezer cabinet. This meant that Sundae & Cher could offer flavours nobody else in Brighton could match, changing them regularly to keep the ever-enthusiastic customers coming back for more. From Toasted Popcorn to Blue Cheese & Walnut, Maple

Banana and even a Tomato, Basil and Olive combination, Sundae & Cher's unique ice cream flavours had become a talking point in the famous seaside town. Add to this the effortlessly relaxed and fun atmosphere and it was easy to see why Sundae & Cher fitted into colourfully bohemian Gardner Street perfectly.

Cher was obsessed with 1950s and 1960s fashion, proudly wearing vintage finds from the retro clothing boutiques that lined the streets of Brighton's famous shopping district. Her home, too, was a shrine to retro kitsch, her love of which was evident wherever she was.

As such, she looked every inch the part behind the glass counter of Sundae & Cher – as did Elsie in her black short-sleeved blouse with white collar and cuffs, turquoise satin circle skirt and white frilled apron. It was fun to dress up for work and even though the days were long and busy, Elsie adored being part of Cher's throwback business vision. It was as if Cher's trademark dynamism was infused into the very fixtures and fittings of the ice cream café – a sense of optimism and fun pervaded everything, something which had proved precious to Elsie during the last eighteen months.

Today, as she scooped colourful balls of handmade ice cream into deep blue sundae glasses, Elsie felt more positive about her decision than ever.

'So, want me to set you up?' Cher asked, popping a Belgian chocolate filled wafer stick into the top of the sundaes. 'Because I'm sure I know some suitable gents. Not that I'm saying you won't find anyone under your own steam, you know, but every little helps and that.'

The door opened and a middle-aged man bounded across the harlequin-tiled floor towards them. 'Morning, lovely ladies!'

'And here's one of them now,' Cher winked. 'Dennis, my lovely. How's our favourite morning customer?'

Dennis' ample cheeks flushed. 'Always the better for seeing you, m'dear.'

Cher feigned coyness and batted her false eyelashes at him. 'Such a charmer! So what can I tempt you with today?'

His eyes made a greedy survey of the generous swirling mounds of rainbow-hued ice creams before him (and, arguably, a wider reconnoitre of Cher's generous chest in the process). 'Ah, decisions, decisions. I think I will have one of your excellent breakfast pastries, considering the early hour.'

'Good choice. Anything *with* that, Dennis?'

Elsie knew the script of this conversation by heart. Every Monday and Thursday morning, at nine o'clock precisely, Dennis Keith would visit Sundae & Cher on his way to the small accountancy office where he worked. His ultimate goal was to have three scoops of ice cream with his breakfast *pain au chocolat*, but his sense of British propriety and conscience would never allow him to ask for this outright. Instead, a well-practised bartering ensued, after which he could rest easy that he was not being greedy but, in fact, merely accommodating Cher's culinary suggestion. It wouldn't do to hurt her feelings by refusing ice cream, would it?

'I wonder if I might have a scoop of your excellent *gelato* with my breakfast?'

'Of course, lovely. Which one would you like?'

Dennis made a grand show of indecision, hopping left to right as he surveyed the selection. 'Vanilla – no, wait – Mango and Ginger Swirl looks most inviting . . . But then there's Chocolate Space Dust . . . oh, it's *so* hard to choose!'

Cher leaned over the counter just low enough to

momentarily lure his eyes away from the ice cream. 'Dennis, you know I'll be offended if you don't try all three . . .'

Mission accomplished, his eyes twinkled as he pretended to be surprised. 'Really? In that case, how can I refuse?'

As he walked away happy, Cher twirled her ice cream scoop like a Wild West sharpshooter. 'See? Do I know men or what?'

Elsie grinned and picked up a menu covered in vivid pink Post-it notes. 'No doubting that fact. You thinking of redesigning the menus again?'

Cher handed Elsie a cup of tea. 'Not the menus. The *menu*.'

'Sorry?'

'I've been thinking about being a bit more adventurous with what Sundae & Cher offers. Try to extend our reach a bit. Now we're heading towards Easter I thought it was as good a time as any to have a bit of a spring clean.'

Elsie looked at the written suggestions on the menu stickies. 'I like the idea of porridge and pancakes for the Breakfast list. After all, not everyone can face ice cream first thing in the morning like Dennis.'

'I've asked our friends at Cupcake Genie to do us some seasonal specials, too, and I can tie in the ice cream flavours with some of their ideas,' Cher continued, her eyes ablaze with ideas. 'And there's more . . .' She hurried into the kitchen behind the counter and returned a few moments later with a frosted Tupperware box. She cracked open the lid and scooped a spoonful of palest lilac-coloured gelato from inside, handing it to Elsie. 'Try that.'

The taste was unbelievable – like crushed Parma Violets and rose petals. 'Wow, that's amazing.'

'It's organic and dairy-free,' Cher beamed. 'I made it using almond milk. It works with any of our flavours and it's

something we can offer that nobody else in Brighton does. Then I've ordered a crêpe hotplate, so we can offer handmade crêpes on site with scoops of ice cream, fresh fruit and pretty much any of our toppings. It'll look fantastic and the smell of freshly cooked crêpes will fill the place! If that works, who knows? Waffles made in-house, takeaway ice cream, more of your awesome cookies . . . *anything's* possible.'

'Sounds like you've thought of everything. So when are all these menu changes taking place?' Elsie asked.

'Not for a while. I'm still working on bringing everything together. I want your ideas, too. This needs to be a joint effort, OK?' She looked over to the corner of the café where Dennis was blissfully engrossed in his guilt-free breakfast. 'If only all our customers were as easy to please as Dennis, eh?'

Elsie grinned. 'Maybe we should appoint him Chief Menu Consultant.'

'You're kidding, aren't you? He'd never leave!'

'Fair point.' Elsie placed the menu on the counter. 'So, being more adventurous it is then.'

The wink Cher blessed Elsie with was pure filth. 'In as many ways as we can, girl.'

On Saturday morning, Elsie met Daisy for breakfast in the Driftwood Café on the beach near the Palace Pier. As usual, Daisy looked as if she had been expertly dressed and prepared by a team of beauticians and fashion stylists: her simple white shirt was completely crease-free and elegantly teamed with dark, slim-fitting jeans and brogues, with a large silk pashmina scarf completing her outfit. Elsie had always been in awe of her eldest sister and had spent much of her early teens trying to emulate Daisy's style, until she

reached the age of sixteen and discovered the kooky fashion boutiques in North Laine, which helped her to develop her own style. Today she was wearing a sweet, cherry-print dress over loose-fitting jeans, her beloved red Converse trainers and a bright green cardigan to fend off the cool sea breeze, her hair tied into a ponytail with a length of scarlet ribbon. A good four inches shorter than her sister, Elsie nevertheless bore a striking resemblance to her, both of them taking after their absent mother with their high cheekbones and large, denim-blue eyes, while their sibling Guin was the spit of Jim – tall and athletically built with a mass of thick, wavy blonde hair, the envy of her sisters whose tresses wouldn't know a curl if they saw one.

The late morning sun was warming the deck of the café as Daisy poured tea from a quirky spotted teapot into two oversized cups.

'I hope you realise this is the first Saturday I've taken off in five months,' Daisy said, sliding a cup across the mosaic table top towards her sister. 'You should feel highly honoured.'

'I do.'

'Good.' Daisy stirred her tea, observing Elsie carefully. 'So, how are you with everything? And I mean really, Els, not the Wonder Woman impression you put on for Dad and Guin.'

'I'm good. Don't give me that look, I'm honestly fine with all of this.'

Daisy was far from pacified with this answer. 'Then tell me – because I'm not sure I understand – what brought about your decision to date again?'

'I've started to read the box messages.'

Daisy's spoon dropped onto the saucer with a clank. 'Oh. *Wow*.'

‘I know. And it feels good. The right time, you know? In fact, I read the second one this morning and it’s brilliant. Look . . .’ She took the folded paper from her purse and passed it across the table.

I love you because you’re fearless
and never afraid to start something new.
xx

For someone whose emotional control was legendary, Daisy looked dangerously close to tears. The paper shook gently in her fingers as she read the message and she was silent for some time. ‘What a beautiful thing to say . . .’

‘Not that we should be surprised.’

‘No, I suppose not.’ Daisy handed the paper back to Elsie. ‘I know this will sound strange, considering, but you really are incredibly lucky. André’s never said anything like that to me in all the time I’ve known him.’

‘Do you wish he would?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes I think it would be nice to hear how he feels about me, but other times I just think we’re one of those couples who don’t work that way. Not that it’s important, really.’ She flicked the topic away with a wave of her long fingers as if it were a troublesome fly. ‘So, what are you going to do with this message?’

‘I need to start something new.’

‘Like what?’

Elsie inhaled the salty air rising from the waves crashing on the pebble beach in the distance as a pair of squawking seagulls circled above. ‘I’ve no idea. But I think starting something new would help me to begin to think of myself as a person in my own right, you know?’

'You *are* a person in your own right . . .' Daisy began to protest.

'No, I know that. But I have this whole unexpected life stretching out in front of me now and I should work out what to do with it. I just need to discover what happens next.'

Daisy shook her head. 'You're amazing. The way you've coped with all this . . . well, I think it's wonderful.' Embarrassed by her own emotion, she quickly moved on. 'Have you thought about what you'd like to do?'

'A little. The only thing I've come up with so far isn't really a new thing, though.'

'Tell me.'

Elsie felt a rush of excitement as she spoke. 'OK, do you remember when we were growing up and we used to put on those dreadful musical shows for Dad?'

'On Sunday afternoons! I'd forgotten those!' Daisy clapped her hands and laughed so loudly that a passing waiter almost dropped his tray.

Around the time of Elsie's eighth birthday, Sunday afternoons in the Maynard household became musical spectaculars. Daisy, then twelve, had just joined a kids' drama club at the local Methodist church hall and was convinced she was destined for the bright lights of the West End. As with most things during their childhood, the Maynard sisters' productions were instigated by Daisy, largely as a vehicle for showcasing her own performing skills, dragging middle sister Guin and little sister Elsie in as supporting cast. Not that either of them minded, as both were in constant awe of their confident, headstrong sibling. Each week, the Sunday Spectacular would become more enthusiastic and elaborate, with Elsie and Guin introducing costumes, wonky-eyed sock puppets and, eventually, music

to the proceedings. By the time Elsie was twelve, she had attained the position of Musical Director, playing the family's forever-out-of-tune piano in the dining room as her sisters danced and hammily acted their way through lengthy self-penned productions.

'Poor Dad,' Daisy laughed, 'I can't believe he actually sat through those week after week.'

'He was a very good audience, though. Standing ovations every Sunday, remember?' Elsie grinned.

'How could I forget? You're not thinking of resurrecting the Sunday Spectaculars, are you?'

'Hmm, I'm not sure even Brighton is ready for that much theatrical experimentation. But I was thinking I might join a drama group or an operatic society. I'd quite like to do musicals – even though the old vocal chords haven't had an outing for years. And it would be good to meet new people, get "out there" again. I need to start somewhere, and doing something I enjoy seems like a good enough place to start. Even if my voice isn't up to scratch after all this time.'

Daisy stared at her sister as though she had just proclaimed the sea to be pink. 'Don't be ridiculous! Your voice is brilliant. Far better than anyone else in the family – including Uncle Frank, and he's been making a living in local pubs for years trashing the Great American Songbook. I reckon you could sing anywhere and people would listen.'

'That's kind of you to say but I think I might need to work on it a little before I let it out in public.'

'Nonsense. Hang on a minute . . .' Daisy's eyes widened as a thought occurred to her. 'You could sing *right here*.'

She pointed to the corner of the café's boardwalk, where a rainbow-painted upright piano sat. It wouldn't have looked out of place at a Coldplay gig and had been a feature of

the café since the previous summer when a six-week arts project had left it behind. Its lid bore the invitation: *Play me – I'm yours!* and occasionally someone would accept the challenge, meaning that at any time your organic, Fairtrade coffee could be accompanied by a rock 'n' roll medley, a Chopin piano concerto or a terrible rendition of 'Chopsticks'.

'*Shh*, don't be daft!' Elsie gave a nervous laugh and looked around, praying that none of the café's customers had heard Daisy's suggestion. Thankfully, the other people on the boardwalk appeared to be blissfully unaware of it, enjoying their leisurely breakfasts in the spring sunshine.

But Daisy Maynard was an impossibly gorgeous woman on a mission. 'I mean it, Els! Do it now – go on, sing something!'

'I can't . . .'

'Yes, you can. You're *fearless*, remember?' A glint of pure mischief flashed in her dark-blue eyes as she sat back in her chair, a victorious smile on her face. 'I *double-dare* you.'

Elsie stared at her sister. If there was one irrefutable truth that the three Maynard sisters knew, it was that a double-dare was the ultimate challenge. To ignore it was to practically betray the Maynard family honour – and incur the unending jibes of the entire clan: Dad, Daisy, Guin, and even their late Grandma Flo, who had been a stickler for it when she was alive. No matter the potential consequences of the double-dare subject, nothing was worth facing the repercussions of turning it down . . .

Elsie pulled a face at her sister, but the die was cast. As she rose slowly, the sudden jolt of adrenalin caused by the sheer audacity of what she was about to do almost made her squeal out loud. Daisy nodded eagerly as Elsie walked

across to the piano. Flexing her hands over the multi-coloured keys, she took a deep breath and dived in.

The first couple of bars of 'I Will Survive' were a little shaky – understandably so, given the instantly bemused faces of the customers. But as Daisy began to provide percussion by slapping the stainless steel table, Elsie's confidence grew. By the time she neared the chorus, her heart was pumping like a steam train and she was singing at full throttle.

And then, something amazing happened.

A bespectacled man in a slim-fitting check shirt at the far end of the boardwalk suddenly stood to his feet and joined in the chorus, followed by a lady at the next table. As people began to join in, the shared thrill of their spontaneous performance reverberated around the space. Diners inside the café crowded by the windows and open door to watch this spectacle and a group of dog walkers gathered to observe the extraordinary sight. Joggers along the promenade stopped and peered over the sea-green railings; a gaggle of teenage girls abandoned their texting and turned their camera phones towards the boardwalk café; older couples enjoying ice cream pointed and laughed. Smiles were everywhere, and as Elsie led her improvised band of singers in the final chorus, she felt more alive than she had in a long time.

When the song ended, an enormous cheer went up from performers and onlookers alike, the shared emotion bringing tears to Elsie's eyes as the café staff wolf-whistled and applauded like maniacs. Then, this being Brighton, the unwitting flashmob performers self-consciously returned to their tables as if nothing had happened.

Elated, Elsie high-fived her grinning sister. 'How was that?'

Daisy gave a low bow. 'You are my official hero, Elsie Maynard! Heck of a way to start something new.'

'I thank you.'

'This calls for cake – no, I'm sorry, you can't protest, sis. You've just attained legendary status. Cake is the only fitting tribute to your genius.' Daisy hurried into the café.

Elsie smiled to herself, a strong feeling of fulfillment rushing through her. The stunt had been daft in the extreme, but it had awakened something deep within her. She had been looking for something new: and, while she wasn't altogether sure that this discovery actually meant anything, she couldn't shake the feeling that something significant had just been achieved. And she wasn't wrong. For unbeknownst to Elsie Maynard, someone had been watching her spontaneous appearance carefully from the promenade railings. Someone who was about to change her life completely . . .