



TITLE: **A SUMMER OF SURPRISES and AN UNEXPECTED AFFAIR**

Author: Jan Ellis

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About this book:

An Unexpected Affair

After her divorce, Eleanor Mace decides to begin a new life running a quirky bookshop in a quiet corner of Devon. She adores her seaside home, and her bookshop – The Reading Room – is a hit, and yet Eleanor is still unsettled ... Her grown-up twins don't need her, her recent divorce has left her at a loose end, and her subsequent move from London, in search of something new has led her to... pretty much the same old life but with sea air. So Eleanor goes online and rediscovers an old flame. Impetuous and impulsive, but with her sister for protection, Eleanor sets off to the South of France in search of a man she last saw in her twenties. But will Eleanor find happiness on the Continent or does it lie in rural England?

With a cast of friends and relations ranging from an ex-policeman (now woman), a go-for-it sister, and love interest on both sides of the Channel, this gently humorous story is both entertaining and wry.

A Summer of Surprises

The story continues two years after the end of *An Unexpected Affair*. Eleanor and Daniel have been dating for nearly two years and there are plans afoot to celebrate their unofficial anniversary. Everything is rosy until Freya, Daniel's ex-wife, suddenly gets in touch to announce that she is on her way from London to see him – and to meet a top-secret client who has extravagant plans.

Meanwhile, rumours are circulating of a theme park about to be built in Combemouth that will threaten the beauty of the Devon coast – and business at Eleanor's bookshop. Things take a turn for the worst when Eleanor discovers that architect Freya and the new development are closely connected. Furious when it seems that Daniel has sided with his ex-wife, Eleanor decides to take a stand and rallies the whole town to protest against the plans. The story comes to a happy conclusion, but not before a trip to Spain and a surprising discovery that launches Eleanor into the spotlight.

About the Author:



Jan Ellis began writing fiction by accident in 2013. Until then, she had led a blameless life as a publisher, editor and historian of early modern Spain. She fell into fiction when a digital publisher approached her to write a history book, then made the mistake of mentioning women's fiction, which sounded much more fun.

Jan's stories have small-town settings with realistic characters who range in age from

young teens to eighty-somethings. She is somewhat surprised to find herself a member of the Romantic Novelists' Association.

Available for events.

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a Summer of Surprises

AND

An Unexpected Affair



Jan Ellis

*A Summer of
Surprises
and
An Unexpected Affair*

JAN ELLIS

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An Unexpected Affair

Leading to

A Summer of Surprises

Chapter 1: The Bookshop

She carefully slipped the blade of the knife under the tape and cut. Peeling back the flaps, she lowered her face to the contents and inhaled deeply. Erika, her assistant, smiled conspiratorially.

"You've gone over to the dark side. You're definitely one of us now."

"You're right," said Eleanor as she lifted the pile of paperbacks from the box, sniffed them and set them on the counter. "My name is Eleanor Mace and I am addicted to books."

It was three years since Eleanor had bought the bookshop. Three years since she'd left her boring office job and caused her friends' collective jaws to drop by announcing that she was leaving London and moving to Devon. She might as well have said she'd got a new career as a yak herder for the consternation this had caused. They clearly thought she was deranged, though only her sister Jenna had told her so to her face.

"Just because you're divorced from Alan doesn't mean you have to lock yourself away from the world."

"Jen, I'm moving to the English countryside, not entering a convent."

"I can see it now," said Jenna, ignoring her. "In six months' time you'll have stopped shaving your legs, embraced tweed and discovered jam-making."

"Now you're being silly," said Eleanor, thinking that it had already been some time since her pins had seen a Gillette disposable. "It's not the end of the earth, Jen. There's a train station and you and Keith can come and stay any time you wish."

"I'd rather come on my own," said Jenna, wrinkling her nose as she tipped the last of the Chardonnay into Eleanor's glass. "You finish it. They probably don't run to white wine where you're heading. And what on earth will you *do* down there?"

That had been easy to answer: with the money from her divorce Eleanor could afford to buy a slightly crumbly bookshop with an adjoining cottage in a small, unfashionable seaside town. It had been a huge leap and scary at times, but running the shop made her happy and her enthusiasm for what she sold and her knowledge about the books and their authors was undoubtedly behind the small success she had managed to build for herself. She'd made sure the shop was a welcoming place with comfy sofas to sit on and coffee and homemade biscuits on offer. With help from her son Joe, she had built a kind of den at the back of the shop where children could read, and there was always an eclectic selection of new and second-hand books to browse through.

"Don't forget you've got that house clearance to go to this afternoon," said Erika, bearing coffee and biscuits.

"Nope, it's in the diary," said Eleanor, eyeing up a chocolate cookie. "Do you think you can control the rampaging hordes for an hour or two while I'm over there?" she asked, looking at her watch.

"Oh, I think we'll cope, won't we Bella?" said Erika,

addressing the spaniel who was stretched out in a patch of sunshine, wagging her tail. The dog was one of the draws of the shop and local school children would often drag their parents in off the street on their way home just to see her.

"I'll be back in time to lock up," said Eleanor, as she patted the dog, grabbed her bag and walked up the road to her van. It looked rather gaudy in the afternoon sun and she smiled at the recollection of that supper with her sister when she had laid out her plans for what would become The Reading Room.

It hadn't been until they were midway through the second bottle that Eleanor had admitted to swapping her sensible black Volvo for a lime-green campervan, or "hippy wagon" as Jenna had described it. Okay, it wasn't the easiest vehicle to manoeuvre around the vertiginous roads and narrow lanes of her new home, but the Combi had lots of room for boxes and she could also use it when she went to book fairs and local events, as she told herself. Aside from the practical considerations, it was fun and she loved driving it. She found the throaty rumble of the engine strangely comforting and every time she started it up she had the feeling that an adventure could be just around the corner. Driving the van gave her a sense of freedom, although she suspected people thought it was an inappropriate vehicle for a woman who was rapidly hurtling towards fifty. She might still have been a few years away from the big "Five O", but she was technically middle-aged.

As she drove along the town's narrow high street for her meeting, she took a peek at her neighbours to see who was busy and who was not. Passing some

charity shops, the baker's and the fishmonger, she noticed that the hardware shop had already put out piles of brightly coloured buckets and spades and flimsy plastic windmills that whirred and spun in the brisk spring air.

The high street sloped down to the sea and Eleanor soon reached the road that scooped around the bay and gradually climbed up out of town, twisting and turning up onto the moorland that surrounded them. After twenty minutes, she had arrived at her destination – an Edwardian pile with extensive views of the coastline. It was a wonderful spot, but the big old family house was expensive to run so its owner, Malcolm Pearce, was downsizing: selling up and moving to a bungalow lower down the hill.

He had a lifetime's worth of books in the house and his children had told him firmly that he couldn't keep them all. Now, after several weeks of hard work, Mr Pearce had some bare shelves and Eleanor was about to acquire a motley selection of titles that she was moderately sure she could sell. One of the things people liked about her shop was the serendipitous nature of it: old and new books hugger-mugger on the shelves and in enticing heaps on a table in the back room.

As Eleanor pulled into the wide driveway, Malcolm came out of the house to greet her.

"Good afternoon, my dear. How kind of you to pop by."

"It's always a pleasure to come up here, Mr Pearce." She looked up at the big old stone house and the garden full of camellias and hoped the people who bought the place would love it as much as its current owner plainly did.

“Good, good,” he said, smiling and leading her into a sunny sitting room where the boxes of books were stacked in neat piles. “I shall be very glad to wave farewell to this lot.”

Eleanor had already helped him to take a load of books to the charity shop. What was left was for her to take away and – hopefully – sell. She looked at the boxes and hoped she could fit them all in the van. “Right. Let’s get started!”

Malcolm insisted on helping and together they soon shifted everything out of the room. Eleanor brought the last box into the hallway and stepped outside into the spring sunshine. Later on, she would sort through the boxes again properly to see if there were any unexpected treasures among them. In the past, she had come across quite rare editions at similar house clearances, which she’d managed to sell to collectors over the internet.

She knew there were some early editions of local histories that would find ready buyers. Other boxes contained children’s albums from the 1950s and 1960s: bumper storybooks for boys and girls, adventure stories and tales of derring-do with wonderfully evocative illustrations of swarthy foreigners in far-off lands.

“I’ll go through everything back at the shop and let you have a cheque as soon as I’ve worked out the value.”

“Splendid! Now let me see if my son’s around to give you a hand loading these heavy boxes into your, er, vehicle. I think he’s toiling in the garden somewhere.” Malcolm opened the side gate and a small brown shape dashed towards them, closely followed

by a tall dark-haired man in worn corduroys and a faded green sweater.

"Hello Crumpet," said Eleanor, bending down to greet the furry bundle at her feet. "Er, sorry, I don't know your name. I'm Eleanor Mace – Bella, Welsh spaniel."

"Daniel Pearce. Border terrier," he said, frowning as he removed a gardening glove to shake her hand. Eleanor recognised him as a peripheral member of the local dog-walking gang.

"Thanks for taking this lot away," he said, nodding at the heaps of cartons. "I can't imagine what you're going to do with Dad's junk."

Eleanor could feel herself prickle. "I wouldn't call it 'junk'. Your father has a very interesting library. Anyway, it's my idea of heaven to rummage among old books."

"You've come to the right place then. Is this your van?" He gave the Combi a pained look that she'd seen before in people who didn't get it. Probably drives a Saab, thought Eleanor, as she scratched Crumpet behind the ears. Shame your owner doesn't have your engaging personality, she said to herself.

"Be a good lad and help Mrs Mace to load up while I make us some tea."

Daniel Pearce gave his father a look that suggested he had much better things to do with his time, but he walked over to the boxes nonetheless. Eleanor got in the van and backed it right up to the porch so they wouldn't need to carry everything too far from the hallway. Opening the side door, she arranged the boxes on the floor as Daniel silently passed them up to her. Working together, it didn't take long to get the

books moved and they had almost finished by the time Malcolm came out of the house with three mugs on a battered tea tray. "Really Father," said Daniel, taking his cup, "the rubbish you hang on to."

"This was a wedding present, I'll have you know. Your mother would never forgive me if I threw it away."

"I think it's charming," said Eleanor, helping herself crossly to a custard cream. This man really is an oaf. "They call it shabby chic, you know. In London it's all the rage."

"Hmm, no doubt. Well, I'd better get back to the garden." Daniel drained his mug and handed it back to his father. "Nice to meet you properly, Eleanor."

"Thanks for your help." She couldn't bring herself to say it had been nice to meet such a rude man.

"I apologise for my son," said Malcolm, sighing as Daniel left them. "He's a super chap normally, but he has been a grumpy so-and-so since Freya left him."

Freya! So that was the name of the rather glamorous woman she'd often seen striding over the hill with Crumpet. Looking down at her own ancient jeans and baggy jumper she suddenly felt a twinge of sympathy for young Mr P: what must it be like being married to a woman who wears full make-up to walk a small shaggy dog in the middle of nowhere at eight o'clock in the morning? No wonder he looked miserable.

"Oh dear. That must be difficult for him. For you all. Do you have grandchildren?"

He nodded sadly, "Yes, we have a granddaughter – I mean, I have a granddaughter. My wife passed away some years ago. Ah well," he said, brightening, "everything will sort itself out eventually, I'm sure. More tea?"

"Thanks Malcolm, but I'd better be off. We've got a big event happening tomorrow evening and I'm nowhere near ready." She brushed the last biscuit crumbs off her chest and climbed into the van. "We've got Lavinia Threlfall booked to do a signing session."

Malcolm Pearce frowned. "Lavinia ... ?"

"Oh, you may not have heard of her. She's a local author who writes rather sensational romantic fiction." Eleanor could see that Malcolm was not entirely won over. "Do come if you can – there'll be a reading, drinks and snacks."

"Thank you my dear. I may well join you."

"Great. I look forward to seeing you there." Eleanor started the engine and pulled out of the long drive-way. The road took her back across the moor and down into town. Getting the boxes into the shop was going to be a team effort, so she decided to leave them in the van and sort everything out after the launch party.

Back at the shop, Erika had had a busy afternoon and was looking quite pleased with herself. "We've had a group of walkers in who bought maps and guidebooks, the primary school has placed a big order for next term, and Mrs Elliott came by and bought a stack of paperbacks for her grandchildren."

"Excellent," said Eleanor. "I can see I should leave you alone more often." Squinting at her watch, she saw it was home time. "Let's close the shop then Bella and I will go for a stroll."

Getting herself a dog had been one of Eleanor's major indulgences on leaving London. "You can't go for walks on your own," her new neighbours had told her. "People will think you're peculiar." To begin

with, Eleanor had thought that was ridiculous but now, when she was out with Bella and saw a solitary walker on the moors in the rain, she too found herself wondering what they were doing there. When she'd mentioned this to Jenna, her sister had raised an eyebrow in a way that conveyed her increasing belief that all her predictions had been spot on and Eleanor was getting more eccentric by the day.

Collecting Bella and heading up onto the cliff top, she wondered which of them enjoyed these outings more. She especially loved their walks along the rocky paths that snaked around the headland. The view wasn't beautiful: on this side of the country the sea was generally the colour of weak cocoa, except when the sun shone on the water and turned it green or slate grey. Nonetheless, the area had a wildness that Eleanor found exhilarating. Some days she'd be entirely alone, but more often than not she'd encounter other dog-walkers, all bundled up against the wind that swirled in off the sea, summer and winter.

Striding along, hands stuffed in her pockets against the cool evening air, she nodded a greeting to an elderly gent with a whippet. Alfie, she thought it was called. One of the unexpected facts of dog ownership was that everyone knew the names of the dogs but not necessarily those of the owners. Eleanor smiled when she thought of some of the interesting conversations she'd overheard along the lines of, "You know who I mean – Mitzi (long-haired dachshund, yappy), she's split up from her husband and has taken up with Jaffa (golden retriever, dribbles a bit, but sweet natured)."

"I don't think much of Mr Crumpet, that's for sure,"

she murmured to herself, her feet crunching on the dry sand as she strode back down the path and along the beach. Bella rushed back and forth, nose and tail in feverish activity as she dashed from seaweed to driftwood to seagull. Eleanor smiled at the dog's evident joy and thought how lucky she was in her new life.

Chapter 2: The Launch Party

The next day, Eleanor tried to go about her work as normal, but she was excited by the prospect of that evening's launch. Persuading This Book Press to hold the party at her shop rather than the big chain store in the next town had been a real coup. She had worked hard at it mind, with promotions, window displays, a guess-the-author's weight competition – okay, she didn't actually do the last one, but she had managed to entice Lavinia Threlfall to The Reading Room for the launch of her latest novel. The books were a potent mix of historical fiction, romance and the occult set on their stretch of the Devon coast and they had a fervent local and national following.

All afternoon Eleanor and Erika had been busy decorating the room where the event was to be held. The publishers had stumped up some cash for drinks and Eleanor had done a deal with the bakery next door to get some special cheese straws. It was the sort of extravagance her accountant disapproved of, but Eleanor believed that people would be more inclined to buy something if they'd had a good time.

She brought an old-fashioned standard lamp from the cottage and arranged velvet shawls and paisley throws over the sofa which lived by the back wall. With the lights dimmed, the space looked suitably Gothic and romantic.

"It looks like we're planning a séance," said Erika, as they stood back to admire their work.

Eleanor laughed. "So long as we only conjure up good spirits, I don't mind."

Right on cue, the door opened to reveal their author. Lavinia Threlfall turned out to be a rather dumpy woman, not in the first flush of youth, with bright copper hair and emerald nail polish. She was accompanied by her publicist, Georgie, a striking young woman with perfect teeth. Elegantly dressed in a black suit and wearing impossible heels, everything about her screamed "London". "Hello ladies. Where do you want us?"

Erika led them over to the area they had prepared for their visitor and Georgie set to work putting up posters and rearranging the piles of books that Eleanor had already put out. Later, Georgie shepherded customers over to the table where Lavinia sat in state and kept her charge supplied with wine and snacks throughout the evening.

They opened the doors to customers at 6pm and by 8pm the shop was packed with people wanting to meet Lavinia and to buy signed copies of her rather torrid fiction. Among them was Malcolm Pearce who seemed fascinated by her and even bought a copy of the book. He took it over to the cash desk, looking rather shift.

"Don't tell my son – I'm supposed to be shedding books, not buying more!"

"Your secret's safe with me," said Erika, as she wrapped up his purchase.

Eleanor was circulating, chatting to regular customers and offering wine to those clutching books

when she glimpsed Daniel Pearce across the room, scanning the gardening shelves. He caught her eye and nodded.

She weaved her way over to where he stood, a bottle of wine in her hand. "Hi! I didn't have you down as a fan of romantic fiction."

"I'm not."

"Oh. Well, is there anything else that catches your eye?" she indicated the shelves packed with glossy books.

"Not really," said Daniel, looking about the crowded room. "I've just come to give my father a lift home."

Right, she thought. I'm not going to make a sale here, but never mind.

"Can I top you up?"

"Better not, as I'm driving," he said, handing Eleanor his empty glass. "Thanks anyway." He wandered off to collect his father who gave Eleanor a cheery wave as they left the shop.

She waved back, then carried on where she'd left off, topping up glasses and smiling encouragingly at the people who were waiting to get their books signed by Lavinia. After a little while, she felt a tap on her arm.

"Hi, I'm Jim Rowe from the *Chronicle*."

Eleanor turned around and smiled. "Gosh, you've turned up. I didn't think you'd come." Their paths had crossed before at other events and it had been Jim who had interviewed Eleanor three years before when she took over the shop from a Mr Williams, who had run it for nearly thirty years. She had been slightly embarrassed at Jim's treatment of her as a heroine, come to save the town's oldest bookshop

from the clutches of wicked developers who hoped to open yet another coffee shop. However, apart from the hyperbole, he had done a good job – and taken quite a flattering photograph of her – and the interview was now framed and had pride of place on the wall behind the counter.

“Slow news day,” he said, between mouthfuls of cheese straw. “A coachful of French tourists got jammed in a lane in North Yarnton, and we had an escaped sheep on the beach. Apart from that not much was happening, so I decided to swing by and see what our local celeb was up to.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. Publicity is always welcome. I’ll introduce you to our star.”

“No need. ‘Lavinia’ and I went to secondary school together. She was plain Susan Green then.”

At that moment, Georgie sprang into action and hurried over to where they stood chatting. “You must be Mr Rowe? We spoke earlier. Have you had the press pack? Lavinia can’t wait to meet you,” she said, turning towards her author. Lavinia, resplendent in ankle-length green velvet, swooped over to them wearing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Sue, love,” said Jim, shaking her hand, “how are things? Haven’t seen you for ages.”

“It’s Lavinia to you. Still working for the local rag, I see.”

“I certainly am, Sue, er, Lavinia. And you’re still knocking out the old bodice rippers?”

Lavinia looked deeply unimpressed by this description of her work. “I prefer the term ‘Gothic fiction’.”

"Ouch," said Erika under her breath, "we'd better split these two up fast."

"I think this corner here would be perfect for your photograph," said Georgie, smoothly taking control and escorting Jim and Lavinia away.

Eleanor went back to topping up glasses and chatting to old and new customers. At the end of the evening when the few remaining books had been packed up and the promotional flyers all tidied away, Eleanor stepped outside to find Georgie and Erika sitting on a wall across from the shop each with a large glass of white wine.

"We're having a sneaky fag," said Erika. "Come and join us."

"When you write your memoirs, sweetie," said Georgie, patting Erika on the knee, "I insist on being your publicist. What a story!"

"Cheers to that!" said Erika, clinking glasses. Her slim figure and smart haircut made it hard to believe that Erika had actually started life as Eric. After twenty years in the Manchester Police Force, Eric had retired on a handsome pension and left the city to begin a new life as the person he had had to subdue for so long. Now Erika was officially female and Eleanor's one full-time member of staff and right-hand woman.

She had got the job at The Reading Room because she was very experienced, immensely thorough and good with the administrative tasks that Eleanor loathed. She was also well read and had an easy manner that customers soon warmed to. Another of her talents was an unerring ability to spot and deter potential shoplifters before they made away with the goods. It didn't happen often, but sometimes there

would be a coachload of French school children in town bent on acquiring a few “free” souvenirs. Word would go from shop to shop that they were on their way and Erika would always be ready for them.

Now she shifted along to make room for her boss. “Eleanor, why don’t you sit down and join us?”

“That is a very tempting offer, but it’s freezing cold out here and I have to finish tidying up.”

“Darling, let me help you,” offered Georgie, slithering down from the wall.

“No, you stay there. You’ve both been brilliant and it won’t take a minute.”

“Oh well, if you insist.”

“Actually, shouldn’t you be looking after our author?”

“No need. Lavinia has gone to have dinner with an old flame, so I’m off the hook.” Georgie rummaged around in her bag. “Okay, one last ciggy then I’m off to my B&B. This sea air is really quite exhausting.”

“Don’t leave tomorrow without coming in to say goodbye, will you?” said Erika.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Eleanor couldn’t help smiling as she went back into the shop. The launch party had been a great success: lots of books sold, new customers in the shop and nothing broken. She had made sure that highlights of the evening were pinged off into cyberspace and there would be photos in the local paper thanks to Jim Rowe.

“Need any help down there?”

Eleanor looked up from beneath the drinks table where she was putting empty glasses back into boxes to see Jim grinning down at her.

"No, everything's under control, thanks."

"Any chance of a drink? You're my final celebrity exclusive of the day."

"Fraid not. Georgie and Erika have finished off the last bottle of Chardonnay." Eleanor frowned.

"Never mind – I'd actually prefer a pint anyway. Would you like to join me in the pub for a snifter?"

Eleanor hesitated for a moment then thought, why not? She didn't know Jim Rowe terribly well, but he seemed like a nice enough guy. "Okay. But only if you promise to spill the beans on 'Lavinia'."

"Deal. Now let me help you with those."

Together they carried the wineglasses and empty bottles into the office, then Eleanor turned off the lights and locked the shop door.

"Where to?" she asked.

"It has to be the King's Head," said Jim, leading the way down the high street to the harbour side.

The town had several pubs, but this was the one with the most character. The heavy oak door opened onto a narrow corridor then another door, beyond which was a stone-flagged room with a log fire in the inglenook. There was a group of locals at the bar and what looked like tourists at another table. As Jim went to the bar to get the drinks, Eleanor looked around the room. On the walls were photographs of the fishing boats that had once worked the seas along this coast, and the lifeboat crews who had pulled so many men out of the water. Weather-beaten men in heavy oilskins stared out from across the centuries. Another photograph showed the high street and the bookshop that was now hers. One of the things she loved about the town was its sense of history.

The pub was deliberately old-fashioned and completely unreconstructed – thank goodness. In a prominent spot behind the bar was a collection of mobile phones nailed to a board – Gerald, the landlord, insisted that customers should only speak to people in the same room, not somewhere else in the country. Quite right too, thought Eleanor as Jim joined her at the table bearing a pint, a large red wine and two packets of crisps. “Dinner,” he said smiling.

Eleanor suddenly remembered that she’d not eaten since about 1pm and realised she was ravenous.

“Thanks and cheers!” The red wine on an empty stomach combined with the success of the evening made Eleanor feel giddy and bold. She couldn’t help herself checking out Jim as he stood at the bar: stocky, and older than her with greying hair. What her mother Connie would refer to as a “silver fox”. Oh, and quite a nice bum. The wine had gone straight to her head. She took a sip to cover her smile. “So tell me about Lavinia Threlfall.”

Jim thought for a moment. “She was quite a looker when she was younger and determined to do well for herself. We worked alongside each other on the local paper for a few years, but she was always very ambitious and determined to go on to bigger and better things as a writer. Her father ran an abattoir, but you won’t find that detail in any autobiography, I bet.”

“Did you not want ‘bigger and better things’?”

Jim shrugged. “Not really. I enjoy the job and I love this part of the world.”

He sipped his beer and smiled across at Eleanor.

"So what's your story? I know about the shop, but not much else."

She took another gulp from her wine. "Oh, there's not much to tell really." Not until I know you better, she said to herself. "Got married, had kids, got unmarried, bought a bookshop. What about you?"

"Pretty similar, really – without the bit at the end. I was married to Margaret for twenty-odd years, and we have a son and a daughter. We split up a couple of years ago, but we're still good pals."

"That's nice," said Eleanor, peering into her wine-glass. "I'm afraid Alan and I are not quite at the 'good pals' stage yet."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll get there. More crisps?"

Eleanor looked at the pile of crumbs on the table. "Sorry! I seem to have demolished most of those."

"That's okay. I think the fish-and-chip place is still open if you fancy something more substantial."

"Sounds great," she said, licking salt off her fingertips. "But I should probably go home. It has been a long day."

"Oh, that's a shame," said Jim, draining his glass. "I guess it's a microwave lasagne for me then."

As soon as she'd turned down the invitation, Eleanor felt a pang of regret. Why shouldn't she have a night out with Jim? She was a free woman, after all.

"Perhaps we could do it on Saturday?" she said at last. "If you like. I'll be ready for a night out by then."

Jim perked up immediately. "Okay. It's a date."

Chapter 3: A Hint of Romance

“A date?”

“That’s what he said,” said Eleanor, pouring water into the cafetiere, “but it’s just a turn of phrase. There’s no need to get excited.”

Erika and Connie exchanged meaningful glances. “Love, this is the closest you’ve got to romance in two years, so we have every right to get excited.” It was actually much longer than that, but Eleanor was not about to put her mother right on the details. The women were sitting in the office-cum-storeroom in the basement of the shop the morning after the launch party. Connie smiled at her daughter and held out her mug for coffee.

Eleanor’s mother had been persuaded to move to a village five miles away on being widowed. She and Eleanor’s father had had a long and happy marriage until Jack fell ill and died after a short illness. Afterwards, Connie had begun to shrink and fade as though grief was stretching her out, dragging her back to her deceased husband. She had moved to a new house but remained lost in herself, no longer willing to attend choir or enjoy her old pastimes. The girls had feared that they might lose their mother, too, when a minor miracle happened: Connie discovered internet dating. To be more precise, her neighbour had talked her into “having a look” during a “Getting

to Know Your Computer" course at the village hall. She had had a couple of false starts but eight months and several dates later, Connie had recently returned from a Mediterranean cruise with Harold Greaves, a rather dapper eighty-something widower with a twinkle in his eye and love in his heart.

"I didn't think I would have to kiss quite so many frogs, not at my age," Connie had confessed to her startled daughters, "but my Harold was worth it."

Despite being all grown up, Eleanor's children had been shocked at their granny's behaviour, Phoebe rushing into the kitchen at Christmas to announce that she had seen Connie kissing Harold under the mistletoe, "Like properly – on the lips!"

"That is just gross," Joe had said, shaking his head in disbelief.

However, everyone had eventually grown used to the idea that Connie had a man in her life and Harold was now a much-loved addition to the family.

The only downside to Connie's new relationship was that she, like most converts, was bordering on the fanatical and had been urging her newly single daughter to go online and find true love. To keep her mother happy, Eleanor had succumbed and suffered a handful of excruciatingly bad dates with an assortment of oddballs. Now, the hint of a potential beau in the guise of Jim Rowe had set Connie off again.

"You aren't getting any younger, sweetheart, and you won't meet anyone stuck behind a bookcase."

"Thank you, Mother. I'm not quite ready for the knacker's yard yet."

"I want you to be happy, love."

"I am perfectly happy." And so she was, most of the

time. But sometimes she did think it might be nice to have someone to share things with again. Then she'd remember the last, dismal years of her marriage to Alan and shudder. Far better to be on her own and happy than be with someone simply because it had become a habit. And, anyway, it was not as if she was fighting them off with a stick.

Just then there was a knock at the door and Georgie walked in, looking relaxed and pretty in jeans and a white T-shirt, an overnight bag in her hands. She greeted them all warmly then plonked herself down on a pile of boxes.

"So, gals, what's happening?"

"We were discussing my daughter's love life," explained Connie, leaning over to introduce herself to Georgie.

"Ah, romance! My favourite topic," she said, helping herself to coffee. "I thought the journalist guy seemed really nice."

Eleanor gave her a sharp look. "Please don't encourage them," she sighed.

"He does seem keen on you, Eleanor," added Erika.

"He's a business associate. Now I think we all have work to do."

"Not me," said Georgie, grinning happily. "I've got the weekend off and my train back to London doesn't leave until mid-afternoon. Lunch anyone?"

Erika raised a hand. "Yup, count me in – as long as it's a quick one."

"If you don't mind spending your free time with a granny," said Connie, "I'd love to join you both for a bit of a gossip." Connie enjoyed her trips out with Erika, which were occasionally enlivened by a

little inside information about local members of the transgender community. ("Her, I mean him? The dentist? No, never!")

"Of course, Connie," said Erika. "It wouldn't be the same without you."

"Well, it's all right for some," said Eleanor, collecting the empty coffee things. "I've got books to sell."

Connie caught Erika's arm as Eleanor turned and walked back into the shop. "She definitely likes Jim," she whispered, with a smile.

"I heard that!"

Eleanor knew that her mother and friends meant well, but they really were infuriating sometimes. Feeling the need for a breath of air, she grabbed her bag and headed out. "Before you ladies disappear for lunch, I'm going to bring the van round and unload it."

"Shall I come?" asked Erika.

"No, you stay here. I've got a few other things to do along the high street and I could do with the exercise."

Stepping onto the sunny street, the wind whipped across her face, ruffling her hair as she stomped up the road. By the time she had been to the bank and the post office, and walked the short distance to the vehicle, she was completely dishevelled. She peered at her reflection in the wing mirror, unsuccessfully trying to dislodge strands of hair from her sunglasses as she dug in her bag for the keys. "Damn and blast it," she said to no one in particular. It was, she decided, one of the perils of approaching middle age that you spent a great deal of time talking to yourself.

She was crouched on the pavement, unpacking

the usual flotsam and jetsam that managed to accumulate in her handbag, when she saw a pair of slightly scruffy deck shoes appear at her side. Above them two tanned knees descended from a pair of khaki shorts.

"Are these what you're looking for?" Daniel Pearce stood there with the keys to her van in one hand and an old-fashioned string bag in the other. "You must have dropped them as you left the shop."

"Gosh, yes, thanks," said Eleanor, hastily stuffing the used tissues, old lipsticks, broken biro's and dog chews back into the dark recesses of her bag where they belonged and rising to her feet. Daniel was standing between her and the sun, causing her to squint, despite the sunglasses.

"I've come down to get some fish for my father," he explained, waving the string bag in the air. "It's Friday. Fish day," he added with a frown.

Coming from London, Eleanor had initially found it odd that you could only buy certain products on certain days. Sure, the supermarkets stocked the usual range of prepackaged goods, but if you wanted the best local produce, you went to the weekly market behind the library.

"Mackerel," he added.

Eleanor smiled encouragingly. "How lovely."

They stood in uncomfortable silence for a moment or two as Eleanor unlocked the van door and climbed up into the driver's seat.

"My father enjoyed himself at your party last night."

"Glad to hear it."

"It seemed to go well."

"It did, yes," she said, pointedly closing the door.

"Well, it's nice to see you again, but I really must get back to the shop and unpack this lot," she said, nodding towards the boxes she had brought from his father's house. "I've not had time to do it because of the party."

"I can give you a hand, if you like."

"Oh, there's no need," she began to protest, before peering over her shoulder and realising how many cartons of books she had acquired. "Actually, that would be great. If you have the time."

"I have," he said, looking at his watch. "I'll meet you at the shop." With that Daniel strode off back up the high street, the string bag swinging rather incongruously by his side.

Back at The Reading Room, Erika came out to join them and, together with Georgie, they formed a chain gang and had the boxes unloaded in no time. Connie had offered to help, but was persuaded to wait on the sofa from where she called out encouraging remarks as the others trooped through the shop.

When all the boxes were in, Daniel wiped dust from his hands on his shorts and stood back to admire their work.

"Sorting out this lot should keep you busy for a while. When shall I come by for my father's cheque?"

He's keen to get his hands on Mr Pearce's money, thought Eleanor. "There's really no need to call in," she said with a smile. "I'll post it or drop it off myself once I've checked all the prices on the internet."

Daniel shrugged. "As you wish. Well, bye then," he said, retrieving his mackerel and leaving the shop.

"What a shame that such a handsome man has got

such knobbly knees," said Connie, rising from her spot on the sofa. "May we go for lunch now?"

Eleanor nodded, "Yes, you may, but don't keep my staff out too long."

Connie took Erika's arm and pulled a face. "Take no notice of my daughter. She's only miffed at being left out."

Eleanor ignored her, turning instead to Georgie.

"Thanks for all your efforts with Lavinia last night."

"No worries – it was fun."

"I'm glad to hear it," she said, giving the young woman a peck on the cheek. "Give my love to London."

She opened the door and ushered Georgie and the others out of the shop.

"Don't worry," said Erika, as she went past. "I won't let Connie lead us astray."

Eleanor couldn't help laughing. "Enjoy your lunch and I hope to see at least one of you back here later."