

THE SUNDAY TIMES NO. 1 BESTSELLER

Katie
Forde

The
Perfect
Match

'Deliciously
addictive'
Daily Express



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About the Book

Three years ago, Bella Castle left her home town nursing a broken heart over Dominic Thane, the man she fell in love with, but couldn't have.

Now she's made a life for herself in the country working as an estate agent.

She loves her new home, her new job, and she loves her new boyfriend Nevil who also happens to be her boss.

They seem to be the perfect match for each other.

But although Nevil's just proposed to her, he's been strangely preoccupied recently. And Bella can't understand why.

Then Dominic turns up unexpectedly, throwing all her plans and good intentions into disarray.

And Bella begins to question if her new home really is where her heart is ...

About the Author

I live in the beautiful Cotswold countryside with my family, and I'm a true country girl at heart. I first started writing when my mother gave me a writing kit for Christmas, and once I started I just couldn't stop. *Living Dangerously* was my first novel and since then, I haven't looked back.

Ideas for books are everywhere, and I'm constantly inspired by the people and places around me. From watching TV (yes, it is research) to overhearing conversations, I love how my writing gives me the chance to taste other people's lives and try all the jobs I've never had. Each of my books explores a different profession or background and my research has helped me bring these to life. I've been a porter in an auction house, tried my hand at pottery, refurbished furniture, delved behind the scenes of a dating website, and I've even been on a Ray Mears survival course.

I love being a writer; to me there isn't a more satisfying and pleasing thing to do. I particularly enjoy writing love stories. I believe falling in love is the best thing in the world, and I want all my characters to experience it, and my readers to share their stories.

To find out more visit my website at www.katiefforde.com, Facebook and follow me on Twitter [@KatieFforde](https://twitter.com/KatieFforde).

Also by Katie Fforde

Living Dangerously
The Rose Revived
Wild Designs
Stately Pursuits
Life Skills
Thyme Out
Artistic Licence
Highland Fling
Paradise Fields
Restoring Grace
Flora's Lot
Practically Perfect
Going Dutch
Wedding Season
Love Letters
A Perfect Proposal
Summer of Love
Recipe for Love
A French Affair

The Perfect Match

Katie Fforde



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Also Richenda Todd who controls the fine detail but doesn't touch my jokes.

And of course, Bill Hamilton from A M Heath, always a rock.

There will be many people I should have thanked but please trust that I am not ungrateful, just terminally forgetful.

Thank you all!

Chapter One

BELLA CASTLE TOOK a breath and put on a smile she hoped would hide her frustration. She and her clients were standing in front of a little gem of a house and yet it had just been deemed unsuitable.

‘It might be a good idea to have some sacrificial boxes too, ones that you don’t mind if they don’t get ticked,’ she said gently. ‘While it’s useful to make a checklist, you don’t want to be ruled by it or you’ll never find a house.’

Bella had grown very fond of the Agnews over the eight months she had been trying to find them somewhere that fitted their requirements, but she did sometimes find them exasperating. They had small-stately tastes with semi-detached money. Big rooms, large garden, views, a garage, a restricted search area and a reluctance to compromise made them something of a challenge. This particular garden, filled with roses and other summer flowers, was deemed ‘too small and too much on the flat’ although a level garden was one of their top priorities.

Mrs Agnew raised her eyebrows. She knew she was fussy and could even laugh at herself, but she hadn’t so far managed to compromise. ‘OK, I’ll have “rose-covered arbour” as my sacrificial box. Darling?’ She looked at her husband.

‘What about the “wildlife in the garden essential”?’

Mrs Agnew shook her head. ‘I couldn’t compromise on the wildlife.’

‘No need to,’ said Bella briskly. ‘There’s always wildlife.’ She said this with a certainty she hoped masked her

ignorance, but given they were in one of the less populated parts of the Cotswolds, she was fairly confident.

‘Then I’ll have “model-train room” as mine,’ said Mr Agnew, who was slightly less fixed in his ideas of the perfect home.

Mrs Agnew chuckled gently and then looked wistful. ‘Will that make it easier to find our dream home?’

Bella laughed. ‘I’m sure it will.’

She was aware that she was very lucky; living with her godmother, Alice, who had a house the Agnews would die for, made it possible for her to stay in this desirable area in a way she could afford.

She watched them drive away from the charming house that she’d been convinced would be perfect for them and then got into her own car. She *was* disappointed. There was another family who’d been unlucky on a house that had gone to sealed bids and if she found just one of these clients somewhere to live she’d be content. She was about to set off back to the office when her phone went. It was Nevil, her boyfriend and her boss.

‘Any good?’ he asked, after the briefest greeting. ‘Don’t tell me,’ he went on, ‘it made her “feel hemmed in”.’

Bella felt instantly protective. These were her clients and only she was allowed to consider them fussy. ‘Come on, Nevil, if a house isn’t right, it isn’t right, and that last property I showed them was a bit claustrophobic.’

‘So what was wrong with this one?’ he said. Bella could picture him, one eyebrow raised, pencil poised over his pad, which he mostly used to doodle on.

‘Too flat,’ said Bella.

‘Ye Gods!’

‘I’m going to come back to the office now. There are a few bits I need to see to,’ she said quickly, before he could go on about her favourite clients any more.

‘No! No need to do that, sweetie,’ said Nevil, going from irritating boss to conciliatory boyfriend in an instant. ‘It’s

four o'clock – you push off home. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Nevil wasn't usually one for suggesting she 'pushed off home' and she was a bit taken aback. 'Oh, OK then.' She paused. 'I might call on Mrs Langley.'

'Good plan! See if she's finally decided to put her desirable six-bed on the market. God, she must rattle around in there.' He chuckled. 'Sorry, hon, there I go again – always the estate agent! You go and see your old lady. And pick up some flowers on the way, keep the receipt and take the money out of petty cash.'

Bella wished she hadn't mentioned Mrs Langley. Nevil, though well meaning, didn't understand that garage carnations didn't really set the heart racing. 'To be honest, she's got a garden full of flowers, but it's a sweet thought.'

'Get her some chocolates then – something nice.'

'Nevil, it's OK. I'm sure when she's ready to move she'll let us know.'

'It's good of you to keep up the pressure though, Bells,' said Nevil. 'It shows your dedication to the job. I do appreciate that.'

As she set off in her car Bella thought about Nevil. He did get it wrong sometimes but his heart was in the right place. She found she was smiling. She'd been very lucky to find a new job in an estate agency in a very pretty market town only forty-five minutes away from her hometown, run by a man who, while not exactly pretty, was easy on the eye.

Mrs Langley had been a client who had been very easy to please, basically because, after a long chat, Bella had discovered she didn't really want to move and told her so. It had been a huge relief to Mrs Langley, who wanted to stay with the garden she had spent nearly fifty years creating. Bella had told her how simple it would be to turn the morning room into a pretty bedroom and how, with the utility room next door, she could have an en-suite and that she need never go upstairs again if she didn't want to. They had been firm friends ever since and whenever Bella called

she was guaranteed a cup of tea and a piece of cake. Bella found she often needed cake in her business. Being an estate agent required an awful lot of patience.

Nevil was aware that Bella called relatively often but he didn't know that Bella never brought up the subject of moving unless Mrs Langley did first, and then it was to reassure her that it wasn't a good idea unless she really wanted to, no matter what anybody said.

Bella and Mrs Langley sat in the flower-filled garden at the rickety iron table on rickety iron chairs saved from being desperately uncomfortable by faded cushions that smelt faintly of old shed. A little way away from the house, it was Mrs Langley's favourite spot, close to a creaking arbour and threatened by a huge rambler, which, now it was June, bore hundreds of tiny, very fragrant flowers that scrambled beyond the arbour and up into the nearby tree. Bella couldn't help thinking how much the Agnews would love it, if only they were millionaires and Mrs Langley wanted to move.

Bella was handed a cup and saucer and a plate. 'You must have known I was making lemon drizzle,' she said, indicating the cake.

Bella sighed happily. 'You know I adore everything that comes out of your oven but lemon drizzle is a bit of a favourite.' She took a mouthful.

'My nephew's been in touch,' said Mrs Langley after a few moments' contented silence.

Bella swallowed and paid attention. It had been Mrs Langley's great-nephew - although she missed out the 'great' when she referred to him - who had wanted Mrs Langley to move. Bella had always feared repercussions. It seemed Mrs Langley did too.

'Oh?'

The elderly woman nodded. 'Yes. He's going to stay the night here and wants to take me out for a meal. That's nice,

isn't it?'

She sounded just a bit desperate, as if needing Bella to think well of the stranger who had wanted his great-aunt to move out of her beloved home of fifty years and go somewhere 'more suitable'.

'It is,' she agreed brightly. 'Make sure you go somewhere really good. I suggest you get him to take you to the Dog and Fox. It has a lovely conservatory you can eat in, with wonderful views of the garden.'

Mrs Langley wasn't distracted by the thought of another gardener's herbaceous borders. 'I'm worried he's going to ask me to move again.'

Bella leant forward. 'Did he say anything about it?'

Mrs Langley shook her head. 'No, but - you know - I worry.'

Bella was firm. 'You don't have to move. There's no reason why you should. I'm sure if you tell him you want to stay put he'll say no more about it. After all, when you told him the first time he didn't mind, did he?'

Mrs Langley nodded. 'It's just, you know, my brother - his grandfather - was very forceful. It might be an inherited trait. Last time I wrote a letter. I might not be so brave when I see him face-to-face.'

Bella put her hand on her friend's. 'No one can force you to move. If you did become too frail to live on your own you could have a companion. It's not as if you haven't got plenty of room, after all.'

'That sounds terribly expensive. I may live in a valuable house but I don't have much of an income.'

'You could have the sort of companion who does it in exchange for a room. Some nice woman to be here at night, check you're OK and then go off to work.' Bella patted the soft, age-spotted hand. 'But you're a long way from that. Anyone who can bake as well as you do doesn't need anyone making their Horlicks for them.'

Mrs Langley chuckled, seeming cheered up. 'That's true!'

‘And if there’s any argument, I’ll tell him there’s absolutely no market for lovely old houses with loads of character with gorgeous gardens.’

Mrs Langley smiled. ‘I’m sure he’ll believe you.’ She paused. ‘Have you time for another cup of tea and some more cake?’

Bella looked at her watch. ‘I’m meeting Alice’s train at about half past seven. So yes, that would be lovely. As long as I’m not holding you up?’

‘I’d be very glad of the company and I won’t need to eat later if I have more cake now. One of the joys of growing old is that you don’t feel obliged to eat healthily any more, if you don’t want to.’ She put a slice of cake on Bella’s plate.

‘So when is he coming? Your nephew?’ asked Bella.

‘Next week some time.’ Mrs Langley put out a hand. ‘I don’t suppose you’d like to come out with us? I could suggest . . .’

‘I’d be more than happy to,’ said Bella, ‘but wouldn’t it look a bit odd if you asked if you could bring your estate agent along?’

Mrs Langley laughed. ‘If I put it like that it would look very odd but I’d refer to you as my friend. Which you definitely are.’

‘You could say you needed me to assist you to the bathroom. He’d be bound to say yes then. But I think you should give him a chance first. If he arrives at the house and is instantly measuring rooms and tapping walls you could ring me, and then tell him about needing bathroom assistance.’

Mrs Langley sighed. ‘Then he’d say I definitely need to move.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Bella. ‘You could have grab rails and all sorts. Your home is perfectly suitable for you if it’s where you want to live.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘I should go fairly soon. Is there anything that needs doing while I’m here?’

Bella hadn't actually mentioned it to Nevil, but one of the reasons she called so often on Mrs Langley was so she could do the little bits and pieces her old friend found difficult. He might not have approved, feeling she was keeping a very valuable potential client in her property longer than was right.

'Well, the hose has fallen off the tap again, if you wouldn't mind . . .'

'Of course I don't mind. I'll water the greenhouse and then put the hose back on. I wish you'd let me work out a better watering system for you.'

Mrs Langley looked anxious. 'You know I hate change.'

Bella smiled sympathetically. 'But if it meant you could go on growing tomatoes longer, it would be worth it, wouldn't it?'

'I suppose so. I just wouldn't want my nephew to think I couldn't cope with the watering any more.'

'I'll look into it. Nothing will happen until after your nephew's visit, I promise you.'

'I must say,' said Mrs Langley after a bit of thought, 'if there was a way of keeping my greenhouse going that didn't involve watering cans, I would be interested.'

'Of course there is. I'll ask around and let you know.'

A little later, only slightly damp, Bella got into her car and set off for the station. She knew just whom to ask to sort Mrs Langley out with a watering system that involved nothing more energetic than turning on a tap.

Chapter Two

ALICE SETTLED BACK into her seat on the train with a happy sigh. She had her Kindle, her things about her, and shortly someone would bring her a cup of tea. Or even a glass of wine. First-class travel – at least on the train – was within her budget at last and she loved it. When she turned sixty, Alice had resolved that she would stop suppressing her itchy feet and travel more. She just needed to work out how. Going up to London more often was a start.

As the train had obligingly been ready for boarding early, she was well into this month's book-group choice before people who didn't share her idea of punctuality began to board the train.

Alice had arranged her bags so she wasn't taking up much space and carried on reading. She didn't look up until she became aware of someone plumping down in the seat opposite and a briefcase landing on the table. Then she glanced up and smiled to indicate she didn't feel she owned the entire four seats before returning to her book.

The man took a bit of time to settle and Alice stopped reading in order to look at him properly. She was an inveterate people-watcher and, she soon discovered, he was well worth a glance. He was, she reckoned, younger than her – fifties probably – but had an energy about him that was more youthful. He wore a very nice suit and a tie that challenged the suit with its flamboyant colours and slightly skewed angle.

Alice wondered if, at sixty, one was expected to stop looking at the opposite sex with interest. Probably, she concluded, which was rather a shame. Not that she was

constantly on the lookout for attractive men or anything, but felt that if she did notice one, she should probably leave the looking to younger women.

Yet the man opposite kept drawing her attention away from her Kindle. He was restless, opening his briefcase, taking things out, shutting it again, looking at his watch. He caught her glancing at him and smiled apologetically.

‘I wonder when the trolley will come round,’ he said.

‘We probably have to set off for that to happen,’ said Alice, ‘but that’s due any minute now. Ah, here we go.’ She looked out of the window, enjoying the moment when you couldn’t quite tell if it was the train moving or the platform.

It was a while before the trolley did come, and when it rattled to a halt beside them, Alice’s travelling companion seemed excited. The attendant looked at Alice expectantly but as she wanted time to consider her options, this seat-side service being new to her, she suggested the man went first.

‘What can I have for nothing?’ he asked.

Impressive, thought Alice. She’d have been much more circumspect.

‘Tea or coffee, hot chocolate, cake, biscuits, crisps,’ said the man in charge.

‘Not a sandwich and a bottle of wine?’

‘No, sir,’ the attendant said firmly. ‘You have to pay for those.’

‘But I left my wallet in the office and I haven’t much money.’

Alice retired behind her Kindle. In spite of his insouciance it must have been embarrassing for this man wanting to stock up on free food and drink like this.

‘I’m sorry about that, sir, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do.’

‘And you’re sure I can’t have a sandwich if I don’t have any of this other stuff?’ he asked, gesturing towards the biscuits, cake, fruit and crisps with a disparaging hand. ‘The

value of them put together must come to the same as the cost of a sandwich.'

'I'm sorry, sir. Only the free things are free. The rest has to be paid for.'

'But the sandwiches have a very short shelf life – you probably have to chuck them at the end of the trip. The other stuff lasts ages.'

'I said I'm sorry—'

Alice could bear it no longer. 'Can I buy you a sandwich and a bottle of wine? I've got my wallet.'

The man looked at her with eyes she now saw were blue. 'I couldn't possibly let you do that.'

'Why not? It's not exactly a four-course meal at the Ritz. The bottles of wine are tiny. Let me pay.' Alice tried to sound authoritative. She felt her age should give her a bit of gravitas. Although maybe her newly highlighted hair would detract from that.

The man looked longingly at the sandwiches and then back at Alice. 'No. It would be wrong.'

Alice decided not to argue any more. 'OK.'

Relieved to be no longer dealing with the man who wanted everything for nothing, the trolley attendant turned to Alice.

'Right, I'll have two sandwiches, two bottles of wine' – she glanced up at her companion – 'red, I think. Oh and some crisps and a bottle of water.'

Once she had paid and the trolley had rattled off, she handed a sandwich and bottle of wine to her companion. He sighed.

'I give in,' he said, 'because I'm starving. But I insist on introducing myself. I'm Michael McKay.'

'Alice Aster,' she said and took his hand. He looked at her intensely for a moment and she realised it had been a while since a man had really looked at her. She found she liked it.

'Do you mind if I start?' he said.

‘Not at all.’ She responded to the warmth of his smile and decided this sort of thing was not forbidden for women over sixty. Seventy might be another matter.

Michael McKay ripped open the package and consumed the sandwich in three bites. Alice, who had had lunch, didn’t open hers. She suspected Michael would want that too. She did open her wine though and a packet of crisps.

‘I can’t tell you how grateful I am,’ he said, accepting the second sandwich when she handed it to him. ‘I was so hungry. I realised as soon as I got to the front door of the office I’d left my wallet in my desk drawer, but I’d have missed the train if I’d gone back for it.’ Then he made a face. ‘Actually, I probably wouldn’t have missed it but I’d have worried that I would.’

Alice nodded. ‘I like to be early for trains too. We have that in common.’

‘So, where are you headed? Reading? Or the Far West?’

Alice chuckled. ‘Well, not the really far west but beyond Swindon. Stroud, actually.’

‘I get off at Kemble.’

‘Oh, posh Kemble,’ said Alice laughing. ‘Such a pretty station.’

‘The scenery around Stroud is lovely too,’ he said politely.

‘It is indeed. I’ve lived there on and off for over thirty years.’ She realised this made her sound terribly old but that didn’t matter. Did it? Briefly she wondered if buying French beauty products off the internet in order to look younger – as she did – was a bit pointless if you more or less told everyone you’d reached bus-pass age.

‘So, can I have your address?’ he asked.

Alice was not a fearful woman. She believed in people and felt that most of them were well meaning. But she knew that if she let slip to anyone she knew – particularly her god-daughter Bella, who had a slightly maternal attitude towards her godmother – that she’d given her address to a man on a train she would be in big trouble.

‘Why are you asking?’

He looked at her as if she was mad. ‘So I can send you a cheque.’

‘You’re surely not suggesting you write a cheque and post it to me for the price of a sandwich and travel-sized bottle of wine?’

‘But of course I am.’ He paused significantly. ‘It was two sandwiches.’

Alice couldn’t help laughing. ‘That’s ridiculous. Tell me how you’re going to get back to London tomorrow if you haven’t got your wallet.’

‘You’re changing the subject.’

‘Yup.’ She laughed gently. ‘You must see it’s ridiculous to worry about such a small amount.’

His blue eyes pierced hers. ‘I can’t owe money to people. I’m constitutionally incapable.’

‘Well, that’s just silly!’

She could tell instantly that he was not in the habit of being laughed at much, but felt it was good for him to experience it, all the same.

‘Is it? Most women I know are only too delighted to be paid for.’ He had stopped looking affronted and a small smile was gathering at the corner of his eyes.

‘And some are perfectly happy to pay for themselves and for other people – men even.’

‘So you’re one of these modern women?’

It was rather lovely to be described as being modern. She smiled warmly at him.

Just then the ticket inspector arrived at her side and – being law-abiding and unsure of the rules – she felt obliged to produce her Senior Citizen railcard, which Bella had insisted on referring to as her Old Person’s railcard in a very disrespectful way. This would teach her to flirt with younger men, she told herself.

‘Well, at least you’ll feel better about me buying you a snack,’ she said, ‘now you know I’m old enough to be – well,

your aunt, at least.'

The intense blue gaze was back. 'Oh I could never think of you as an aunt.'

Alice found herself blushing. It had been a while since anyone had chatted her up, and she wasn't even sure he was. As she didn't know how to respond she picked up her Kindle. 'I think I ought to carry on reading now. It's my book group soon.'

'Are you enjoying the book?'

Alice thought for a moment. 'Not awfully.'

'Then don't read it!'

'That would be taking anarchy too far,' she said sternly and turned her attention to the least accessible of last year's Booker Prize long list. Inside, she was smiling.

Bella was there waiting for Alice when the train pulled into Stroud a little later than scheduled.

Bella waved as she caught sight of her godmother amongst the small crowd coming out of the station. Alice was easy to spot in her drapey turquoise silk outfit that managed to be elegant and casual at the same time. With good bone structure and well-cared-for skin, she was someone Bella felt proud to be associated with.

She kissed her godmother on the cheek. 'Good day? Oh, no need to ask. I can see you had a lovely time! I'm afraid I haven't cooked. Fancy fish and chips?'

'Sounds lovely.'

'So how was travelling first class?'

'Brilliant!' Alice said.

Bella frowned slightly. Had Alice done something different with her make-up, or was she actually blushing?

Chapter Three

A FEW DAYS later Nevil and Bella were sitting in Alice's garden. They had a bottle of wine and a takeaway pizza. Alice had disappeared into her sitting room and they were alone.

'So, how's my little Curly Top, then?' said Nevil, filling Bella's glass.

At the same time that Bella wondered if she could tell Nevil she hated his nickname for her she realised he was in a very good mood, so she decided to overlook the reference to her hair, which was indeed on the curly side.

'I'm well - which you do know seeing as we've been working together all day.' She smiled.

'You know I like to keep personal stuff out of the office.' He smiled too.

He was, Bella thought, very good-looking. He had pleasant, even features, nice dark-blond hair, which fell over his forehead when he got excited, and he always looked smart. He was a few inches taller than she was and they made a good pair. Her dark curls complimented his fairer looks.

'You've been in very cheerful lately,' she said. 'You didn't moan when you realised the photocopier was out of paper. You didn't even moan because you had to actually do photocopying!'

Nevil laughed. 'I was a bit annoyed about that, but as I had asked Tina to go out for sandwiches it wasn't her fault she wasn't there.'

Bella was a bit surprised at this mellow attitude. He was very good at his job and, he frequently told her, you didn't get to head your own estate agency - even as part of a

franchise – before you were thirty by being Mr Nice Guy in the office. Mr Nice Guy was for clients only.

‘I think you’re softening up in your old age, Nevil,’ she said with a smile.

‘Not at all,’ said Nevil, not rising to her teasing. He was, after all, only thirty-two. ‘I’m just happy to report that it won’t be long before you and I can get a place together.’

‘Great!’ said Bella, hiding her dismay by picking up the bottle and topping them both up.

‘Doesn’t it drive you mad living here with your godmother? I mean she’s lovely but – well . . .’ Nevil had good manners, it was part of his professional persona, so he left his sentence unfinished.

Bella considered how to explain, even though she felt she shouldn’t have to. ‘It’s fine. There is plenty of space here, and she doesn’t give me a curfew or anything.’ Actually Bella really liked sharing Alice’s house. They fitted in very well with each other and considering how long Alice had lived here on her own, this had surprised them both. She had been a lifeline when Bella had needed one and she was delighted that Alice enjoyed sharing her home with her. Living with Nevil might be a lot harder – given his feelings about small chores in the office, he was unlikely to be willing to push the Hoover round himself.

‘Well, anyway, you won’t have to be doing it too much longer.’

‘How come?’

‘I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.’ Nevil grinned.

Bella suppressed her irritation at this expression and decided not to press him. He would tell her when he was ready. ‘OK. Do you want the last bit of pizza?’

‘Don’t you? It’s yours really.’

‘You go ahead. I’m trying to cut down anyway.’

Nevil picked up the pizza and took a large bite and smiled at her. ‘Good choice.’

Bella watched him eat it and wondered if it was weird to prefer living with an older woman to the thought of living with her boyfriend. And while she was asking herself this she wondered if he was implying she was fat. She wasn't, she knew that, but when she'd first walked into his agency looking for a job she had been skeletally thin – for reasons she tried to forget on a daily basis. Maybe he liked very thin women.

Her brain flicked back to why she had been so thin, why she had suddenly left her hometown to live with her godmother and take a job she was very lucky to get. Heartbreak or a new love was the best diet aid. However, now she was settled. She had a job she loved and colleagues she got on really well with, and – well, Nevil, who was – most of the time – a really good boyfriend.

'Has Alice thought how much this house would fetch if it went on the market?' Nevil asked, chewing away on his pepperoni.

'Don't think so. I don't think she wants to move. In fact, I know she doesn't. It is big for just the two of us, but it was her family home. And she's done so much to the garden over the years.'

'What is it with these women – like your Mrs Langley – insisting on living in enormous houses just on their own? The amount of money they have tied up in those properties is crazy.'

'But there's no real reason they should move if they don't want to. The time has to be right for these things.' Bella laughed. 'Though of course it would be fabulous to have the houses on our books.'

Nevil seemed not to have heard her. 'Will Alice manage on her own when you move out?'

'Of course! She's only sixty.' She was just about to say, 'But I'm not moving out,' when she stopped herself. If Nevil found the right house, it would be natural for them to move in together.

‘I was just thinking what’s best for her.’

‘Of course.’ She smiled, but she knew he wouldn’t be able to help calculating the commission on a house as big as Alice’s. ‘Do you fancy finding something nice to watch on telly? We could go into my sitting room and snuggle up on the sofa.’

Nevil didn’t seem tempted by this cosy suggestion. ‘Not really. I think I should get off. Things to do and all that.’

After they had shared a pepperoni-flavoured kiss goodbye, it occurred to her that he’d become quite busy after hours recently, and briefly wondered if he was seeing someone else. Otherwise why pass up on what could amount to an invitation to stay the night? He had already stayed a few times, so he knew it wouldn’t be awkward. But then she realised that while cheating on her wasn’t an impossibility, it wouldn’t make him so chirpy. Also, if he’d lost interest in her, he’d just dump her; he wouldn’t talk about moving in together. No, it must be something else. She didn’t intend to spend too much time worrying about it.

‘Oh, I am glad you’ve rung, dear,’ said Mrs Langley the following afternoon. ‘My nephew wants to meet you!’

Bella, who had tracked down a man to fix up an irrigation system for her, was ringing to give Mrs Langley the details. She hadn’t been expecting this.

‘Does he? Why?’ Then she thought she knew why. It was because he thought she was persuading his great-aunt to stay in her house and not sell. ‘Does he want to tell me off?’

‘I don’t think so, dear. He just said, “I’d be very interested to meet this young woman you talk about so much.”’

‘Oh.’ She wondered why Mrs Langley kept talking about her, but was rather touched. ‘So how is it going?’

‘Well, we’ve decided he should stay with me whenever he needs to be in the area. He might work here permanently. He’s been here three nights already.’

‘And that’s all right for you?’

‘Do you know, I rather like it! It’s nice to cook for someone other than myself and he’s very handy about the house.’

‘Well, that’s good. So he’s not bossy and overbearing then?’

There was a pause. ‘No, he’s not, though he does have an air of authority, if you know what I mean.’

‘But he’s not trying to bully you into selling?’ Bella persisted.

Another pause. ‘No. He wants to know how well I manage. But in a concerned way, you know?’

Bella didn’t know but she was reassured.

‘And I’d really appreciate it if you’d come and have a drink with us – before dinner. My nephew works very hard and could do with some young company.’

‘Well, I am young,’ Bella agreed. ‘And I’d be delighted to come. Only I’d be coming for *your* company.’

Mrs Langley laughed. ‘You realise there won’t be cake?’

Bella chuckled. ‘In which case, Mrs Langley, I’m afraid I have to refuse—’

‘Please call me Jane! I think we know each other well enough by now.’

‘All right, Jane. I’ll come, even if there isn’t going to be cake.’

The arrangement was made and Bella went to join Alice in her sitting room. Nominally, Bella had the morning room for her own use but she hardly ever went in there, except to clean it or on the rare occasion Nevil stayed over. She and Alice liked to spend their evenings together, if they were both in.

Now, Alice was sitting in front of the television although it wasn’t on. Bella was surprised to find her here. She was more often to be found in the garden at this time of day, especially when the sun was shining.

‘Do you need a cuppa? Glass of wine?’

‘I’ve had an email,’ said Alice.

Bella waited for more detail but none came. 'And? It's not like you've never had one before, is it? Although if it's offering you a trillion US dollars if you send all your bank details, it's probably a scam.'

Alice laughed. 'No! It's a proper email. From a person.'

'So?'

'It's from a man.' Alice swallowed. 'The man I met on the train . . .'

'Which train? When? You've never told me about this!' Bella wasn't so much shocked as slightly taken aback. Why hadn't Alice mentioned it before?

'It was the other day. I didn't mention it because I suppose I felt a bit stupid.'

'Alice! It's OK to meet people on trains you know, even when you're ancient, like you.'

Alice laughed gently. 'Well, that's good because he's emailed me. He wants us to meet up.'

'But that's amazing and lovely! Maybe I'd better get a train somewhere . . .'

'But you've got Nevil!'

'I know I have. I was only joking. Tell me about this man!'

Alice said, 'Maybe I will have that cuppa. You?'

'I'll come with you. We can sit in the kitchen.'

Bella made tea, wondering about Alice's man and, as always, thinking that her kitchen was just about perfect. Bella got to see a lot of kitchens in her job, some of them very grand, but none of them came up to the standard of Alice's. Handmade units that didn't look as if they belonged in a showroom, a huge table for sitting or eating round, a dresser crowded with china and the sorts of ephemera that proper kitchens accumulated over the years, a Rayburn and a jolly good ordinary cooker. The view over the garden and a comfy sofa added to the abundant charm.

'So?' she said, having put a mug of tea and some biscuits in front of her godmother. 'Tell your Aunty Bella everything!'

‘Well,’ Alice began, obviously quite pleased to talk about it. ‘He came and sat opposite me and hadn’t had lunch. He’d left his wallet in his desk drawer and . . . I bought him a couple of sandwiches. He was terribly reluctant to accept them.’

‘Was it because you’re a woman?’

Alice shrugged. ‘He didn’t actually say that specifically, but he did say that the women he knew liked men to pay for things.’

‘Old-fashioned,’ said Bella.

‘Possibly, but not that old. I think I might have flirted with a younger man. He wanted my address, but I knew you’d have told me off, so I eventually gave him one of those lovely cards you did for me for my birthday with my email address on it.’

‘But they also have your postal address on them.’

‘I somehow managed to overlook that.’ Alice bit her lip. ‘And he must have done too, or he’d have just sent a cheque.’

‘Noo! He didn’t send a cheque because he wanted to see you again. He must like you.’

‘Well, I hope he does. I was very nice to him.’

‘I don’t mean “like” in the same way you like the postman. I mean – well – fancy you.’

‘Don’t be silly, darling.’ Alice had no difficulty in dismissing this suggestion. ‘He was years younger – possibly only in his early fifties. Although I am very bad at guessing people’s ages.’

‘So why does he want to meet up then? When he could just send you a cheque? Or just forget about it?’

Alice frowned. ‘Well, obviously he’s barking. Maybe I’d better not meet him.’

Bella laughed. Her godmother never accepted that she was an attractive woman. Personally, she wasn’t at all surprised this man wanted to meet her again.

‘It’s wonderfully *Brief Encounter*! Have you made an arrangement? A where and when?’

‘No. He wants me to suggest all that.’

Bella considered Alice. It was obvious from her added sparkle that she did not want to be talked out of this. ‘Well, I think you should meet him. He sounds lovely! And when did you last go out with a man? Not since I’ve been living with you, that’s for sure.’

‘Not for years – at least, not one who’s not an old friend I’ve known for ever and wouldn’t have if he was on toast and garnished with parsley. But I don’t think I’d know how to behave!’

‘Of course you will! You’ll just have a drink, chat for a bit, go through and eat, chat some more. Really, it’ll come perfectly easily to you.’

‘I was joking, actually. It’s just being with a man I don’t know – it might feel a bit awkward.’

Bella became a bit more sympathetic. It had been a while since she’d been on a date as such herself. ‘I’ll keep texting, so you can tell me if you’re unhappy and I can sweep in and rescue you.’

‘Or I could just walk out and drive myself home?’

Bella nodded. ‘There is that option, but mine is more exciting.’

Alice laughed. ‘You’re not shocked at the thought of someone as old as me having a date?’

‘Of course not! I think it’s fab!’ But privately she was a bit surprised.

Reassured, Alice became more cheerful. ‘So where should we meet? He’s asking me to suggest a venue. He lives in Kemble.’

Bella considered. ‘Lunch or dinner?’

‘Dinner. He works in London.’ Bella’s pause made Alice worry. ‘Maybe I should suggest coffee, at the weekend?’

‘Dinner should be all right, but we must think of the right place.’