

Excerpt from Secrets and Sparks at Croftwood Cinema – released April 2023

Patsy Clements was just about ready to throttle Oliver. He'd said he would be an hour and that was two hours ago. Admittedly, Oliver's, the coffee house which Oliver owned, and Patsy worked in, had been busier than usual for a Thursday lunchtime and neither of them would have expected that but still, she couldn't help being annoyed with him.

'I'm so sorry Pats,' he said, flustered as he came through the door, immediately swapping his coat for an apron.

'That's two ninety-five, please,' she said to her customer before reassuring him. 'It's fine, don't worry.' Because annoyed as she was, he was her best friend and would do anything for her, so she swallowed it down and carried on serving.

They worked through the rest of the lunch queue together before a lull gave them chance to talk properly.

'That was busy for a Thursday. I'm sorry, I would have been back sooner except...'

'What?'

He had a mischievous look on his face which told Patsy that he'd been up to something. Her annoyance disappeared as she got caught up in his excitement, whatever it was.

'I bought the cinema!'

'What, you mean you've hired out the whole cinema?' She had no idea why he would do that. It must have cost a fortune.

'No, not hired it out, I've actually bought the cinema here, in Croftwood!'

'What? Who buys a cinema?'

Oliver took her hands in his, his eyes bright. 'Me, Pats. I do.'

'You mean the one in the park? Hasn't it been closed for years?'

'Yes, it's been closed since 1997. And... it's mine!' He crouched down slightly as if he was about to grab her and swing her around or some other equally over-the-top behaviour.

'You've bought the cinema in the park? Are you mad? It's derelict. What are you going to do with it?' As she said the words, Oliver let her hands fall, along with his face. The tiny pang of guilt that she felt for bursting his bubble was quickly overtaken by common sense because she knew she was right. It was an old Victorian building on the edge of the park and had been neglected for years, long before its doors had closed.

‘Come on Pats, it’s not derelict. It’s completely intact apart from the windows. Once the foliage is cleared, it’ll be fine.’

‘Mmm. So, you’re going to open it as a cinema?’

‘Yes, but more than that.’ His eyes were shining again, and Patsy knew that whatever she thought, he was behind this idea and nothing was going to stop him. ‘Even when we run it as a cinema, we’ll offer food, have a proper bar, really nice seats, you know, make it into a real destination. And it’ll be flexible so we can use it for functions and events.’

‘Well, that does sound cool. So, you and Amy are doing it together?’

He shrugged. ‘She’s helping out with the finances, but she’s not interested beyond that. Actually, Pats, I was hoping you’d agree to help me get it up and running.’

A brief surge of enthusiasm made her want to accept, especially now she’d heard Oliver’s vision for the place, but it was quickly replaced by the reality of her situation. ‘I’d love to say yes, Ollie but you know things are a bit tight.’

‘It’s not about the money, Pats. I haven’t got time to be across all of it myself. I need help and it needs to be someone I know I can get along with and someone who won’t take any messing around from me or anyone else.’

She smiled, loving how Oliver turned her no nonsense frankness into a positive trait, something that he realised might be useful.

But however brilliant it sounded, Patsy wasn’t sure she could accept. For the past three years since she’d returned to Croftwood and started working for Oliver, she’d been careful to keep her life simple. She didn’t earn a fortune working at the coffee house, but it was enough to cover the rent and bills on her tiny flat and to keep her in knitting wool. Having got herself into a position where she was self-sufficient and felt safe, she wasn’t sure she was brave enough to push herself out of that comfort zone, however tempting.

‘Ollie, I don’t think I can. I don’t know anything about renovating derelict buildings, or about running a cinema. How much use can I be?’

‘To be honest, it’s pushing my budget to get someone professional in to help but if you’re willing to mix it up with working here, I can manage to pay you barista wages for the extra hours and to make up for the crap money, I’d make it right for you financially once it’s up and running. I can’t do that with someone I don’t know, it’s too risky.’

That sounded more feasible to Patsy. 'Let me think about it,' she said, pulling him into a hug. 'Congratulations, it's really exciting even if it sounds like I'll be left in the lurch with this place even more often.'

Oliver grinned. 'It'll be fine. I'm going to turn the flat into a project office, so I'll be around all the time.'

'You're giving up your bachelor pad?'

He shrugged. 'Not much point keeping it now I'm never there. I'm at Amy's most of the time anyway and lots of my stuff is there already. It'll force me to finish the job.'

Oliver disappeared upstairs and one of their newest regulars came up to the counter for a refill.

'Same again?' Patsy asked.

'Yes, please.' Toby had spent several hours most days over the past two weeks in the coffee house, sitting at his laptop with a fresh coffee every hour or so and a sandwich for lunch. He treated it like an office, although Patsy wasn't sure what he actually did.

Considering that all he was doing was hanging out at a coffee house, he always looked as if he was at work, wearing a shirt and smart dark jeans with brown leather boots.

'Having a good day?'

'Not bad thanks. You look as if you are?'

Until he'd mentioned it, Patsy hadn't realised that she had a big grin on her face. She was actually pretty excited about Oliver's new project.

'Oliver's bought the cinema, the one in the park.'

'Wow, that's great. I can imagine whatever he does with it will be a real boost for the town.'

Patsy handed over his coffee. 'For sure. It'll be nice not to have to trek to Worcester to see a film at least.'

Toby laughed. 'It's only six miles, but it's easy to forget how close it is when there's no need to leave Croftwood most of the time.'

Patsy watched him return to his table, the laughter gone from his face almost immediately as he went back to whatever he was doing on his laptop.

She smiled. If Oliver's vision for the cinema could match up to what he'd done with the coffee house, Toby was right, it would be brilliant for the town and it'd be nice to have a

new challenge in her own life, after three years of making coffee and keeping herself to herself. It might be just what she needed.

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