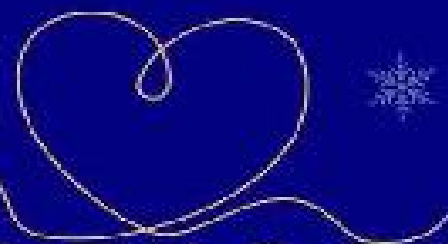


Love is a work of art and they're about to
create a masterpiece

Christmas
in
Coolshay



BELLE HENDERSON

Christmas
in
Coolsbay

BELLE HENDERSON

Copyright: ©Belle Henderson 2023

Tamarillas Press



All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the author.

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, locations, businesses, organisations and situations in this publication are either a product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, or circumstances, is purely coincidental.

Cover image: ©Canva

Cover design: ©Belle Henderson

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[You Grow Girl – Chapter 1](#)

[**Other books by Belle**](#)

[From the author](#)

[Belle Henderson](#)

Chapter One

Ten hours and twenty-four minutes.

That's how long it takes to travel down on the train from Edinburgh to Coolsbay. Mum booked and paid for the train ticket as a gift, or rather a bribe, to make sure I came home this Christmas.

Bored and with a numb bum, I shift in my seat, casually trying to rearrange my knickers that have disappeared up my arse crack. As my eyes drift to the window, the gentle hum and chugging motion of the train makes me sleepy again. I force my eyes to stay open as the coast comes into view. A flight would have been preferred, it would have been way quicker for starters and probably cheaper on Mum's purse strings too, but she seems to forget how far away Edinburgh actually is.

Despite my anxieties about coming home, I smile at the glistening water in the winter sun and a wave of what feels like nostalgia comes over me until my phone vibrates violently on the table, causing me to swear a little too loudly to myself. A stern looking woman in a brightly coloured Christmas jumper shushes me. Where's the festive cheer? We aren't in the city now. I reach for my phone whilst mouthing sorry at the not so Christmassy woman.

Phillipa: Hey Demi, have a wonderful Christmas. Roo said he's taken the bins out for you. Even though it was your turn he'll let you off, and he'll take you off the cleaning rota for the next 2 weeks. Special festive treat. Haha. Xx

Demi: Thanks love, you too. Tell Roo I am very grateful for the break and his strong initiative skills with the bins. Merry Christmas. xx

Perhaps I'll be grateful of the break more than I thought I would be. Phillipa and Roo are lovely housemates but since they've evolved into a couple it's been a tad awkward. They've tried to include me as best they can, but I can't help feeling like the grown adult woman child that they never actually agreed to adopt. Plus, they are at the stage in their

relationship where they need to impress each other with things done around the house. Is that a stage? Well, it appears to be in our house. Hence why Roo invented the ingenious cleaning rota which I normally forget to consult and then return from work to find some passive-aggressive yellow sticky note stuck to an unwashed coffee cup. I mean, there's being clean and tidy and then there's being completely neurotic about it.

Come to think of it, it all seemed to snowball when Phillipa confessed what her love language was to Roo, which is, yes you've guessed it, acts of service. I must tell him he can service her in ways other than bossing me around. Surely, he can be more imaginative than that. Whilst I ponder what my love language is, swaying between receiving gifts and physical touch, I frown and check my watch. Only another two hours to go, I don't have to change trains again. Perhaps I can allow myself that little sleep, I deserve it, after all I have been travelling like a mad woman since eleven pm last night. No sooner have I shut my eyes when I feel a soft pat on my shoulder followed by a woman's voice in a north-east accent.

'Sorry love, you okay if I sit here, pet? The man in the next carriage is snoring louder than an aeroplane engine, never mind a bloody train engine.' I open my eyes to see an older lady, probably in her seventies with blue mosaic eyes and brown rolled hair. She's clutching at her oversized handbag and has a beige raincoat draped over her arm. I smile and her face relaxes.

'Yes sure,' I say, frantically gathering up empty crisp packets and water bottles, whilst simultaneously stuffing them into my handbag. 'So sorry about the mess, take a seat,' I offer, clearing off the last of my rubbish including embarrassing snot rags stained with shameful man-induced tears.

'Thanks, pet.' She smiles warmly before sitting down and making a series of oohs and ahhs as she reaches her seat. 'Eeeee, I need me joints oiling, starting to seize up like the tin man.' She laughs and I chuckle lightly with her. She smells of a mixture of talcum powder and lavender and it reminds me of my late nan.

‘I’m, Joyce, by the way.’

‘Demi.’

My phone vibrates loudly again, this time inside my pocket. I dig it out, surprised to see that it isn’t a reply from Phillipa.

My stomach flip flops.

It’s from him.

Alastair.

The man who, in the last few months has managed to turn my world completely upside down. The man I can’t stop thinking about and the reason why I no longer have a job. It isn’t his fault I don’t have a job. It was my decision; *you* would hand your notice in too if the man you had been shagging turns up one day as the new head of the Drama Department. It wouldn’t be so bad if I were a Maths teacher or even an English teacher but I teach Drama, so he was in charge of me and it was all too much. I can’t have him in charge of me at work and in the bedroom, so I handed in my notice the very next day, always one to go with my instincts, flight or fight and it’s usually flight. Working that notice was torture but it’s done now.

Alastair understands, he’s been very supportive in fact and has even put in a good word with headteachers he knows in other schools. I haven’t had an interview offer yet, but it is Christmas and people don’t do much in terms of recruitment in the weeks leading up to the festive period. But my head’s all over the place with him. We had six weeks of passionate casual sex (normally in his fancy dark green Tesla, well it is a sexy car) coupled with a few romantic dinners and I was hooked. Plus seeing him with the kids at school leaves me feeling all warm and fuzzy inside, he’s so good with them, knows how to have fun and really brings out the best of their abilities. He’s been in three episodes of *casualty* too, as the same character. That’s a bloody achievement in itself! I’m in awe of him really, but we didn’t leave things on a positive note.

When he started at the school, we would sneak off for a sly grope in the staff room when nobody was looking but then things started to slow down, the stolen kisses and cuddles becoming less frequent. He reassured me that he wanted to keep things professional at work. We still saw each other after work but only once a week, twice a week maximum. I wanted more and now I've left that job, so I won't even get to see him in the day. So, my own insecurities made us argue and probably made him question why he's with me. My thoughts turn to his deep, Scottish voice and his thick dark hair between my fingers. He's so sexy but he makes me feel on edge, it's exciting but also infuriating because I feel so out of control, not exactly sure where I stand, hence the tears.

Alastair: Seeing as we're going to be within an hour's drive of each other, I thought I could come and pick you up for the day? What do you think? It can be our little Christmas adventure. Miss you Demi, baby. Xx.

I stare at the text and blink at it in disbelief. Why didn't he tell me this before? This is perfect!

Me: No way! You didn't say?! That's amazing. Yes of course, let me just see what plans the family has and I'll get back to you asap. Xx

I seriously have no game.

Alastair: I'm in Cornwall, a little town called Polzeath. I could come and pick you up for the day and maybe even grab a luxury hotel by the sea for a night. You could do that thing you know I like, Demi baby. Over and over again. Xx.

I blush then glance at my new neighbour Joyce who's now comfortably snoozing next to me. I could invite him to mine to meet the family. Too soon? I open the gallery on my phone and begin flicking through photos of the two of us. Our most recent rendezvous last week at the Italian restaurant in Grassmarket. His smile makes me weak at the knees, I could literally gaze at him for days, but I won't reply just yet. I'll try and redeem my game.

'Eeeeeee he's canny, nice big teeth but I wouldn't want to get bitten by those.' Joyce's eyes crinkle as I jump at her voice,

lost in my own Alastair thoughts.

‘Oh yes, he’s canny alright,’ I say as I frantically blink away an unsolicited sex flashback from last week.

‘Married?’

‘Sorry?’ Why are old people so nosey!

‘Is he your husband?’ Joyce asks with an amused look on her face.

‘No no, it’s quite a new thing,’ I say, suddenly feeling foolish. ‘He’s just a friend from work, casual dating sort of thing.’

‘Oh right, I don’t envy you young people these days, it all sounds so complicated now, too much choice with all these dating apps.’

‘Yep, and you have to sift through a lot of rubbish too,’ I agree.

Joyce nods then reaches into her handbag and pulls out her knitting whilst I continue to scroll on my phone. We sit in comfortable silence for the next fifteen minutes until Joyce reaches into her handbag again.

‘Mint?’ She offers.

‘Yes please.’ I take one, suddenly feeling very grubby after a long stint of travelling. The three packets of Worcester sauce flavoured crisps I devoured definitely won’t be helping with the grubbiness.

‘You know,’ she begins in her north-east accent. ‘There’s a lot to be said for a nice warm bath and clean sheets. It’s what I’m craving now. Stuff the family, they’ll have to wait until I’ve had my wash and nanna nap.’ Her eyes twinkle and it makes me miss my family. I’m looking forward to seeing Mum, Tony and Cousin Amber and not forgetting Frosty the lovable, albeit vocal, cockerpoo. It will be strange without aunty Pat though, she’s my mum’s sister (Cousin Amber’s mum) or was until she passed away a few months ago. It was unexpected and quite sudden. She had cancer but chose not to

go to a doctor until it was too late, spending her last few weeks in the local hospice and then her final few days at home.

‘Oh yes, fresh clean sheets, a nice hot water bottle and a fat box of chocolates,’ I say.

‘A girl after my own heart. Where are you travelling to?’

‘Second from last stop, Coolsbay, have you heard of it?’ Not many people have.

‘Me too,’ she brightens. ‘I’m visiting the family, it doesn’t happen very often, normally they come to me but since my husband died, I wanted to make the effort, plus it’s easier for me to travel than for them to pack themselves up and come to me. My daughter likes to bring everything but the kitchen sink.’

‘Long way for you though.’

‘Not too bad pet, I’m only in Devon and I used to live in Coolsbay many years ago,’

‘Sorry, I assumed you were from up north somewhere.’

‘Newcastle. The northeast accent never goes, although when I visit Newcastle, they say I sound like a southerner. Forty-five years and I still can’t shift it. Wouldn’t have it any other way though. Us northerners were built to last.’ She returns to her knitting.

I turn my eyes to the winding track, the gentle chugging of the train slowly lulling me into a doze. For the next hour I dream of Alastair feeding me an enormous Christmas pudding as his green Tesla self-drives us. Three pigs sing Christmas carols accompanied by an orchestra of turkeys playing violins and cellos, all squeezed onto the back seats. It reaches the next level as the car unfolds its wings and takes off like a small plane into the sky. We fly around the sky feeling like we’re in Santa’s posh fancy twenty-first century sleigh.

It’s trippy but enjoyable.



‘Pet, pet, wake up, we’re here, you’re home in Coolsbay.’

I wake with a start to find Joyce shaking me, she's gathered her things and is standing up clutching her oversized bag again. This time, she wears her beige mac. It's dark outside already, I check my watch. It's almost five pm and we've been plunged into pitch darkness. It feels like the middle of the night.

'Oh God, okay, thanks,' I croak, prodding my eyes with my fingers. I grab my handbag whilst trying to navigate in my mind which carriage I dumped my suitcase in. My mouth feels dry as I follow Joyce down the carriages in a tired haze until she finds hers, then remember that I left mine in carriage E so I'm going the wrong way. Typical.

'Nice to meet you, Joyce. I've got to grab my suitcase. Have a lovely Christmas yeah, enjoy that hot bath and nap.'

'You too, Pet. Merry Christmas.'

I stumble against the crowd and breathe a sigh of relief as I clap eyes on my big red suitcase. Dragging it off the train, I hail a taxi but just as I'm getting in, I spot Joyce sitting on a bench, suitcase and bag on the floor, staring out onto the empty platform.

'Joyce, are you okay? Do you want to share a taxi?' Coolsbay isn't very big, even if she's going to the opposite side of town, it won't take long. She looks up at me, a glimmer of a frown followed by a smile.

'Oh yes, yes please.' She plods over to the taxi and climbs into the back with me. 'Thank you, love.'

'It's okay. You looked a little lost,' I say gently.

'I couldn't find my phone,' she says. 'Stupid thing, I must have left it at home. I was going to call my daughter to come and get me, but I don't know mobile numbers off by heart and God knows why they've got rid of the house phone. I told her it would be good to keep it for emergencies, just like this,' she says, sounding distressed as the driver taps his fingers on the dashboard whilst looking at me through his rear-view mirror. I nod at him.

‘It’s okay.’ I pat her on the hand. ‘Do you know their address?’

‘Yes!’ she brightens. ‘It’s Ivy Cottage.’

‘Ivy Cottage on the north side or the south?’

‘Ummm, oooh.’ Her face contorts into confusion, and she looks down at her bag.

‘I tell you what, I’m on the north side and would you know it, there’s an Ivy Cottage just two doors down from me.’

‘Well, I never?’ She perks up.

‘Yep, so why don’t we try that house first and if it’s not the right one, I’ll escort you back to the south.’

‘That okay, driver?’

The driver tuts and clears his throat but says nothing.

‘Eeee pet, that’s very kind.’

‘It’s no problem, it’s Christmas.’ Sod’s law it’ll probably be the south side as I’m sure the house by me has been derelict for years, but the truth is, I’m dying for a wee and I can tell the rude taxi man to *do one* then drive Joyce over to the south using Mum’s car. This taxi is costing a fortune already. Absolute rip off. I forgot there are only two taxi companies here so they charge what they like, and I can’t afford to pay their rates. I have no bloody job!

Ten minutes later, we arrive at Ivy Cottage, northside.

I’m surprised by the look of it. The ivy on the front of the cottage has been trimmed right back to make it look like one big swooping side curtain. It’s had a lot of work done on it, a brand-new navy-blue door and freshly thatched roof for starters. White twinkly lights sparkle in amongst the Ivy and there’s a freshly potted Christmas tree on the front lawn with matching twinkly lights. It’s definitely lived in, well and truly.

‘This is it,’ Joyce says excitedly. ‘I recognise it from the photos. Oh my, it looks marvellous, even better in real life, he’s done such a good job, my grandson.’

I leave Joyce to marvel at the cottage while I grab our bags and suitcases but not before paying the driver the ridiculous fair. I give him an extra fiver and tell him to go and buy himself a festive beer to cheer himself up. He's miserable for a reason, I guess.

I follow Joyce up the path and place her bags down as she taps on the door. I'll get her in safely and then I'm running home, I'm desperate for that wee. Really desperate.

'Mum!! Where have you been? Nick has been driving around the whole of Coolsbay looking for you. He came to meet you at the station at five o'clock. Let me just call him and tell him to come back.' We both stand and listen to Dawn as she instructs this Nick to come back. I watch Dawn, thinking she looks familiar before the penny drops and I groan inwardly. Dawn is Nick Liddington's mum. My bladder isn't the only one that wants to do a runner. I need to get out of here quick before Nick gets back, I'm not in the mood for seeing old school friends now, especially oddballs like him.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, Dawn, I lost my phone. I didn't think you'd come until I phoned you, but this lovely young lady escorted this old fool home and kept me company on the train. Thank you, Demi.'

'Demi Holly? How are you love? Wow, it's been ages! Years. Nick will be pleased to see you, stay for a cuppa, won't you?' she asks, as panic rises within me.

'Yep, actually I'm dying for a wee so I might just pop home but then I'll come over tomorrow maybe. Let you guys catch up first,' I say, having no intention whatsoever of coming back tomorrow.

'Just use our loo, silly.' Dawn laughs.

'Umm, I couldn't, it will be a huge wee, might overflow your toilet and flood your lovely new cottage so I'd rather do it at home,' I say, feeling very ashamed of my sad excuse. My elephant bladder. I cross my legs at the thought. At this point, it's possible it could overflow the loo. I've never needed the toilet so much in my life. Why did I have to be so lazy and not

go on the train? Because you didn't want to disturb Joyce and then you fell asleep, my logical conscience says.

'Do what at home?' A gruff male voice comments. Oh shit. Too late. He's here. I paste on a smile and try to turn with my legs crossed.

'Hey, Nick.'

'Hello, Demi.'

Chapter Two

My knees twist and, in an attempt not to wet myself and keep my legs crossed whilst trying to turn, I lose my balance and fall headfirst onto Nick Liddington's chest.

Plonk.

'Urm, sorry.'

'It's okay,' he murmurs as I stand up, re-crossing my legs. My bladder pulsating with each blink I take.

Nick is wearing thick, black glasses, a small navy driver's cap and a tired looking navy suit. He looks like he's rummaged around in a child's dressing up box, deciding to go for a policeman from the 1950s. He grimaces at me, and I grimace back, mainly because I fear I'll wee my knickers if I smile properly. He looks ridiculous. His eyes meet mine before he looks to the side and presses his lips together. His head bows so that I can't quite see his eyes now, but I imagine they're closed and his cheeks have gone pink. He's embarrassed and so am I for face planting his chest and almost weeing on him. Nick Liddington, I haven't seen him since secondary school. We used to be quite good friends until he turned weird and started dressing and acting like an old person. Looks like not much has changed.

'Nick, you look so handsome, and you're in John's old suit!' Joyce clasps a hand over her mouth as tears well up in her eyes and she pulls Nick in for a hug. 'You're gorgeous, come here my handsome grandson.' Nick hugs his nan back and I watch as they simultaneously pat each other on the back at the same time, a perfect rehearsed motion. It's kind of odd yet soothing to watch.

'I thought it would be a nice surprise, but Grandad was a bit shorter than me,' he says, as my eyes fall to the trousers dancing around his ankles.

'Yes, he was much shorter and fatter,' Joyce chuckles. 'But it's a nice gesture and greatly appreciated. You have his eyes.' She pulls him down to her level and pinches his cheeks like

he's a little boy of five. He lets her, despite looking very awkward with big bent knees and trousers now almost around his knees.

'The plan was to pick you up at the station, he was going to be your surprise, your special chauffeur, like dad was,' Dawn says, sounding slightly agitated before taking the tea towel off her shoulder and wringing it between both hands.

'Not just my chauffeur,' Joyce says, looking at me. 'He was a special kind of chauffeur, well sought after and only those who have money and status, if you know what I mean.' Joyce taps her nose and my eyes move to Nick who just shrugs. 'Hence the special attire, he wore this for his best clients.' Joyce smiles and Nick beams back at her.

'Aren't you going to ask where she is?' Nick's mum asks, still wringing her tea towel.

'Who?'

'Neve.'

'Eeee pet, how could I forget that sweet girl, where is she?'

'She's at her dad's.'

Joyce makes an 'O' shape with her mouth before her hand flies up to it as Nick's mum begins to explain.

Taking that as my cue to leave and not my business I say, 'I better go guys.' I pull up my suitcase handle and toss my handbag over my shoulder. 'Let you all catch up properly, but it's been lovely seeing you all and meeting you, Joyce.'

With a wave of my hand and not a moment's hesitation, I run off down the path away from Ivy cottage, sprinting all the way home and straight to the toilet.



'You alright now?' Mum chuckles as I breathe a sigh of relief, kick off my shoes and flop down onto the sofa.

Frosty, our curly grey and white furry, family dog bounds over and jumps onto the sofa before snuggling his head into my lap. I begin to stroke him, and surprise myself when a

lump forms in my throat. It's so cosy here, maybe I've been away so long that I have been a little homesick but didn't know it until I set foot in the house. Mum's Christmas tree is the same one she gets out every year with the same decorations. Except for a couple of new ones which are large snow globe looking things, the decorations are all white and silver with an angel on the top of the tree. When I was little, I always thought the angel was my guardian angel, watching down on me.

'I will be in a minute.' I lick my lips and pick up my mince pie and cup of tea. 'This is pure heaven after the journey I've had. Hey, did you know that Nick weirdo Liddington lives at Ivy Cottage down the road with his mum?'

'Oh, you meany,' Mum admonishes. 'You know he's a teacher like you? Teaches Music, I think. Does his mum live at the Cottage? I knew he moved in a while ago, with a girl, they did such a decent job of doing it up but then she doesn't appear to be there anymore.'

'Oh right, he went a bit strange, wears all those old clothes.' I shrug and take a big bite of my mince pie. 'Got any cream?'

'Some would ask why you wear all those bright, gawdy clothes,' Mum says, poking at my multicoloured jumper which I basically live in all winter. I feign a shocked expression and stroke my beloved jumper. Bright clothes cheer me up and they go with my somewhat outgoing personality. So I'm told anyway. 'Yes, I'll fetch you some cream. How come you're asking about Ivy Cottage anyway?' she calls from the kitchen.

'I met Nick's nan on the train, and we ended up sharing a taxi.' I don't go into detail. I'm too tired, grubby and hungry. 'Where's Tony?'

'He's just out grabbing a paper and some bits for tonight, he'll be back soon,' Mum says with a strange smile.

'At this time?' It's gone five already, nothing is open after four o'clock in Coolsbay, especially at this time of year and that's if it's even open at all. Most places tend to close for two

weeks over the Christmas holiday. It's such an old-fashioned town, that's one of the reasons why I left in the first place.

It's yawn boring.

Even the name sends me to sleep. Coolsbay.

'Yes, new off licence down the high street.' Mum shifts in her seat with a slightly guilty looking expression on her face.

'Okay, well I might just go and dump my bags in my bedroom and have a shower. I'm dying to get in my comfies. I feel gross from that journey, I've basically lived on a train for a whole day. And there were so many ungainly characters I had to speak to, I need to wash them all off.' Not Joyce, she was the saving grace. Before that, I endured a man go on a rant about how the youth of today have gone bonkers and if he sees one more man dressed as a woman, he's going to whack them in the privates with his walking stick. And a woman, about my age, showing me video after video of her heavy metal band, it was basically just screaming. Is that really music? My ears hurt by the end of it. I usually love chatting to all types of people, but long journeys make me irritable and want to retreat into my own head.

'Have another mince pie, Demi, you can do all that nonsense later.' Mum shoves the plate towards me and I salivate despite myself.

'Hmmm, maybe I could have one more, but then I really do have to have a shower. It's not nonsense to not want to smell.' I chuckle and Mum laughs along with me.

Three seconds later and the mince pie has gone. I lick my fingers and Mum frowns. It's always annoyed her. Me and the sister used to do it after every meal just to wind her up. Children are such shits but funny, wonderful shits, which is why I teach them, or rather *did* teach them. Groan.

'Right, I'm going to have a shower, be back in a bit.' I get up and begin to walk towards my old bedroom. I'm looking forward to seeing it, I bet everything is as it always was. I can climb into that bed later and pretend I'm a little girl again.

Bliss. I'm going to get so fat being waited on by Mum and Tony these next two weeks and I can't wait. Maybe I'll ignore Alastair over Christmas, try the old playing hard to get part, like he does with me.

'No Demi, wait, there's something I have to tell you first.' Mum's voice sounds strained, and her Yorkshire lilt has come to the surface. She grabs my arm. As we stand outside my bedroom door, I turn to face her and there's worry etched all over her face.

'Mum, what's going on? Is Tony alright?' I ask as my tone and accent matches hers. I'm highly suggestable so whenever anyone talks, if I'm not careful, I tend to match their accent. It can be incredibly annoying for me and for them, so I try to keep it in but in times of panic that all goes out the window.

'Yes, yes, Tony's fine, it's just that, well, it's just that...'

'It's just that Mum wanted to let you know about an unexpected guest's arrival first.' Evie, my tiny, big sister, steps out from behind the corridor wall beaming like a true villain with Tony by her side. Tony, my long-suffering stepdad offers a feeble wave as he stands next to her, holding her bags. She's saddled him up like Mary's donkey.

'What is *she* doing here? How long is *she* staying?' I blurt, fighting the urge to fling myself on the floor and have a full-on toddler tantrum. Instead, I fold my arms, feeling very much like the little albeit big in comparison sister. I don't deal well with change.

'Demi!' Mum cries, exasperated.

'No, it's just that I thought. Well, you didn't say that Evie would be home too.' I compose myself and try to control the rage that's bubbling within me. There's nothing that winds me up more than my tiny big sister. I have to mentally prepare for her arrival. This is unfair.

Evie waltzes over to hug Mum and for a second, I think that she considers hugging me before she slinks back over to her pack horse.

‘You two will have to learn to get along for once, it’s Christmas,’ Mum says eyeing the pair of us. ‘And I think a little bit of sister bonding over the Christmas period is just what the doctor ordered.’

Mum leans across me and opens the door to what was my old bedroom. It isn’t exactly as I left it at all, instead it’s decked out like an office. Not a trace of a Dolly Parton poster in sight. My eyes fall to the black leather comfy office chair next to a large oak desk. Behind the desk is a navy-blue feature wall and a slightly crap painting of a deer.

‘My new study,’ Tony mumbles, looking sheepish as Evie and I glare at each other and then Tony. He’s bloody retired, what on earth does he need a study for?

‘What have you done, Mum?’ Evie whines. Despite feeling nervous about what’s to come, Tony and I smirk at each other. I walk over to him and give him a quick hug with my free, bagless hand. It’s awkward as he can’t hug me back so we just sort of exchange arm touches and laugh through it.

‘Come this way...’ We follow Mum down the corridor to Evie’s bedroom as Tony lumbers behind us with the bags. Mum opens the door and we both step inside then gasp as Mum and Tony let out a hysterical laugh like a couple of kids. They double over, leaving Evie and I agog.

‘You’re sharing a room,’ Mum says pointedly after she’s composed herself. ‘I’ve decorated it like this partly for nostalgic reasons because you were both so sweet then and partly because well, if you behave like children then you’ll get treated like children. Learn to get along. A sister should be cherished. Enjoy.’ Mum slams the door behind us but not before Tony quickly throws the bags into our room. Our little girls’ bedroom.

‘Hey, my laptop’s in there!!’ Evie wails.

Our looks of disgust for each other quickly transfer to the bedroom. The white bunk beds, complete with cartoon dog bedding remind me of happier times. Times when we used to get along, before she turned into an utter bitch.

‘I’m taking the bottom bunk,’ I say defiantly.

‘No, I’m the eldest so I will be taking the bottom bunk, Demi Holly.’

She’s using my full name, like I’m a child and she’s an adult.

‘How old are you? Almost forty and you’re trying to argue over a bunk bed? Fine, have it, I’ll take the top bunk but don’t cry if I fall through it and squash you.’ My little big sister is literally half my size.

‘I’m thirty-two, you rude cow and you know it.’

‘Oh yeah, sorry. Forgot.’ I open my suitcase and dig around for my comfies, trying to ignore the little annoyance that is Evie.

‘Still an absolute mess I see,’ Evie comments as she begins to retrieve clothes from her perfectly packed case.

‘Many hours of life are wasted perfectly packing clothes like that.’ I point to her tiny rolled, pristine clothes all in varying shades of beige.

‘It’s called being organised; you should try it.’

‘No thanks, it’s sad. Really sad. Why are you here anyway? You never visit Mum and Tony. Where’s Olly?’ I look around as if I half expect him to pop out from underneath the bunk bed or jump out of the wardrobe.

‘How would you know? He’s away in LA on business but he’ll catch up with us towards the end of the holidays.’

‘Oh, and where’s he going to stay?! Not in here!’

‘We’ll get a hotel obviously.’ She checks her beige nails and sighs.

‘Oh yes, obviously,’ I mimic. I’d forgotten that money buys everything and even if hotels weren’t open in Coolsbay at this time of year, Olly would offer them way over the odds so that they couldn’t refuse. Olly, Evie’s equally obnoxious husband, is in real estate and makes a fortune selling houses so fancy that a normal person couldn’t even dream them up.

‘Right, I’m going for a shower, need to wash that journey off. I’m exhausted,’ Evie says as she scampers off towards the shower with her prim, little flowery wash bag and giant loofah in hand. I fight, with every fibre of my being not to chase after her, pull her hair and shove that giant loofah up her arse. Sisters. Why do they bring out such rage? I’ve never needed a shower so much in my life and she’s acting like she’s had such a tiresome journey when she literally lives thirty minutes up the road. I want to go back to Edinburgh, anything is better than sharing a room with my sister, even Roo and Phillipa’s incessant cleaning rotas can’t be worse than this. Perhaps I *will* message Alastair back sooner than planned, he can take me away from all this shit.

Yes, that’s what I’ll do.

Chapter Three

‘Sleep well girls?’ Mum asks as her and Tony sit at the table with their papers and coffees. I love that they still get papers, they’re probably the last generation that’s going to bother with them like this, it’s all on our phones now so there’s no need. My stomach rumbles as the fresh smell of coffee mixed with baked pastries hits my nostrils.

‘Not bad, apart from Demi’s awful yamming and fidgeting, I might have to migrate to the sofa tonight.’ Evie makes a face and I mimic her.

I don’t mention that I heard Evie crying in *her* sleep, even I wouldn’t stoop that low. Instead, I side eye her then mouth the word *bitch* whilst Mum and Tony aren’t looking.

‘I can’t help how I sound when I’m asleep and yes please do *migrate* to the sofa.’ You, tiny useless bird brain of a sister.

‘They’ll be no moving to the sofa, my sofas are for sitting on, not sleeping. You two are sharing a room. It’s nice.’ Mum purses her lips together then takes a sip of her coffee to hide the smirk that’s spreading across her face.

I want to go back to Edinburgh. I’ll stay another day then book a flight. This is torture. I sneaked out into the kitchen last night and called Alastair. We talked dirty for a bit until he hung up abruptly, leaving me hanging. He messaged hours later to say that he had a sudden bad stomach and had to go. What a way to ruin the mood.

Still would kill for another sexy phone call though.

‘What are your plans for today?’ Mum asks as Tony stays focused on his paper. My stepdad is a fairly quiet man, but he’s always there when we need him and luckily for him never gets involved in our drama, apart from once when he shouted at us all for arguing, said it was enough to make a man go insane. Everyone went silent for a second before the arguing recommenced and Tony gave up and marched down to his shed for three hours; the shed used to be his office. Maybe

that's why mum gave him an office in the house, somewhere to escape when we come to stay.

'I've got a bit of work to do and then I might go and do a bit of last-minute shopping, there's some things I want to get from Aloe Lovely.' Evie scoops her glossy dark hair behind her ears with her freshly manicured nails. She looks very small; I mean she's always been small but she's also much skinnier than usual.

'Everywhere is shut, it's Coolsbay at Christmas.' And why are you working you absolute saddo? My sister, ever the workaholic, has been glued to her laptop for the last ten years since she got her fancy job in finance and met her fancy husband, Olly. I'm not jealous, well perhaps a little bit jealous of the money but who wouldn't be? They jet off to Dubai like it's a trip to their local caravan park and they shop in designer stores then wear the clothes once before giving them away to their local charity, who must be bloody laughing by the way. Mum used to say people like that were loons with more money than sense, that was until her eldest daughter became one of them loons.

'No, there are a few shops that have crept out of the dark ages, your sister is right, Aloe Lovely, is one of them.' Mum shrugs.

'I am right, as always,' Evie sings in that irritating know-it-all tiny, big sister way.

'Okay, you're actually twelve,' I say with a sneer, feeling very much like a five-year-old.

'Okay, well whatever you both end up doing today, make sure you're back here for six o'clock. I'm hosting a little festive shindig with a few neighbours and family and there's going to be a surprise guest,' Mum sings, and I groan inwardly whilst pasting on my best smile. Evie groans out loud subsequently receiving Mum's death stare. I really hope it's not Tony's older brother from London, he's a bit too touchy feely and smells of burnt hair and salami. No more surprises please. I don't think I could take any more this Christmas.



I spend the rest of the morning slobbering about in my PJ's on the sofa, wearing big fluffy socks, watching (so bad they're good) channel Five Christmas movies and eating copious amounts of chocolate spread and fresh strawberry stuffed croissants until Mum ropes me into getting things ready for the shindig. I forgot that Mum is a baking and shindig preparing machine, so she also has me working like a maniac, rolling out pastry, putting up more Christmas decorations and cleaning the downstairs toilet that really doesn't need cleaning. I don't mind though; Mum and I catch up whilst we work and we have a laugh singing loudly to Christmas songs, then Dolly Parton songs. This starts us reminiscing about the old days when me and Evie used to get along as kids and were obsessed with the legend that is Dolly. In all honesty, I'm still obsessed but Evie, as uptight as she is, refuses to let herself go and sing like she used to. As we chat and bring up old memories I try to recall exactly when Evie and I began to hate each other so much. Most friends I know have siblings that fought like cat and dog as teenagers but by the time they grew up they got along just fine. We seem to have never got past the teenage phase. Although there's six years between us, I was always so desperate to be with Evie and hang out with her but as the years went by, she grew more and more irritated by me. I resented her for being so mean and always pushing me away. So now, here we are, two grown women who behave like children around one and other. I wish it were different, but she's a very difficult person to be around and so smug. She'd win an award for smugness.

'Demi, can you fetch me in the cookery book with the cakes on the front? I think it's a Delia Smith one.'

'Yep, but haven't you made enough cakes? You could open a bloody bakery at this rate.' I peel myself off the sofa after declaring a thirty-minute Christmas movie break, but Mum is on a mission to carry on baking. Running my fingers along the cookery shelf on the bookcase, I smile at her impressive collection of *Mills and Boon* before I come to a smallish book with a cupcake on the front. I pull it out and flick through it only to find that it isn't a cookery book, but a diary filled with Mum's social appointments. I stop flicking and am just about

to close it and put it back when the page lands open on Wednesday, with the words *3 way with A* written in red pen. I slam the diary shut and continue to search for the cookery book.

‘Mum, we’re home,’ Evie calls as her and Tony arrive back.

I almost jump out of my skin at the thought of being caught snooping in Mum’s sordid sex diary. Are they swingers? I’m pretty sure the sex club closed ages ago so how would they meet them? Online? Or is that what they were looking at in the papers this morning, searching for their next three way? I swallow down a small amount of vomit and try to forget what my eyes have just seen.

‘Nice fun shopping trip.’ Tony lifts up his arms, with numerous bags hanging off both. Yes, she dragged my long-suffering stepdad to the shops just so she could saddle him up like Mary’s donkey again with her shopping bags. Unbelievable. He looks so innocent, he couldn’t be doing pre-planned three ways, surely?

‘Here you go,’ Demi says, thrusting a brown paper bag into my hands. ‘Bought you something from Emmanuel’s so you can look classy tonight instead of a smelly hippy in your weird rainbow clothes.’

‘I like my weird rainbow clothes, I’m a drama teacher, that’s what we wear,’ I say thrusting the brown paper bag back into her hands and gulping down my lie. I was a drama teacher, I’m currently jobless. Fuck.

‘Demiii, she’s just trying to be nice,’ Tony soothes. I glance at Evie, and she looks hurt. Heat rises in my cheeks.

‘Oh well, she’ll need to try harder, I’m not a charity.’

‘How is work darling? You haven’t said?’ Mum asks, ever the deflector.

‘Ah yeah good, you know, the usual, kids are mental, mental but hilarious and way too much marking to do.’ I cross my fingers behind my back. I hate lying to my loved ones, but they don’t need to know everything.

‘I’m so proud of my girls, a drama teacher and a financial adviser. So headstrong, so smart.’ Mum titters, throwing an arm around Evie and I, pulling us close together as I notice the sherry sloshing about in her glass. No wonder she’s being all gooey and sentimental, she’s smashed on the bloody cake ingredients.

‘I hate to interrupt ladies but it’s five o’clock. Aren’t the guests arriving in an hour?’ Tony pipes up which sends the Holly women into a festive fashion frenzy. Everything gets thrown up into the air and deserted; shopping bags, recipe books, tea towels and spatulas are all left for poor Tony to clear up. In the rush of getting ready, I forget all about the sordid diary entry and concentrate on getting dressed in my weird, wacky and wonderful rainbow clothes.



‘Oh well don’t you all look stunning,’ Tony beams as the Holly women emerge from their bedrooms. Evie is wearing a skin-tight sequin dress and looks like she’s lost a good two stone, her collar bones look angular and pointy. I’m not sure if it looks healthy or not. What’s odder is that Mum hasn’t commented. If anyone is going to comment on their daughter’s appearance/weight, it’s Mum. Not in a mean way, but in a concerned, are you eating enough kind of way.

‘Thanks Tone, you don’t look so bad yourself,’ I say as I plant a kiss on his cheek before ruffling Frosty’s head who’s sat obediently beside him. Frosty is matching with Tony and wearing a bow tie and he looks extra cute as does Tony in his red dicky bow and tux. I’m starting to feel a little underdressed now. Mum and Evie have sequins on, and I have on well, my wacky rainbow clothes. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a nice wacky rainbow outfit but it isn’t quite on a par with the rest of the family. I fluff out my skirt and rearrange my top, thinking I should apply a redder lipstick to festive myself up. Come to think of it, I do have a lipstick with red glitter in it, perhaps I should put that on.

‘Back in a sec,’ I shout as I sprint off to the bedroom to slather on some sparkly red lip gloss, I, too, can be glittery and Christmassy.

Minutes later I glide back into the room and the surprise guest is here. Oh no, Mum isn't setting me up with him, is she? But I don't even live here. I stop my eyes from rolling to the sky and paste on my best actress smile.

'Hello again, Nick.'

Chapter Four

‘Mummy told me you were sun babeing with brother Nick’s willy.’ There’s an audible gasp around the room as my eyes drop to the little girl standing by Nick’s side. Neve, Nick’s little sister, who must be about five now, is giggling into her hands as her mischievous chestnut brown eyes peer up at me. She’s wearing a red and green elf dress and has copious amounts of silver tinsel wrapped around her perfectly plaited buns.

‘Eeee pet.’ Joyce winces and puts a hand on Neve’s shoulder before bending down to speak to her. ‘It’s sunbathing remember, and Mummy showed you a photo of them in the paddling pool together when they were about two,’ Joyce says, which I assume is more for the benefit of the adults in the room. She stands up and makes an amused face at Nick’s mum.

‘Knew I shouldn’t have shown her that flipping photo, I should have known what she’s like,’ Dawn mutters as Joyce tuts and shakes her head with a grin on her face. The doorbell dings and out of the corner of my eye I see Mum scurry off to answer it. Saved by the bell, Tony follows after her like a dutiful butler and my eyes quickly scan the room for Evie. I’m thankful that she’s nowhere to be seen and grateful that she wasn’t here to witness this. Even though I find it amusing, Nick looks a bit embarrassed, well it is his willy everyone’s talking about, I suppose.

‘It’s fine, a penis is just a body part, isn’t it. It’s no big deal. All boys have them.’ I throw my hands up in the air trying to make light of it as Nick makes a non-committal ‘hmmm’ noise then rearranges his glasses before he stares off into the distance.

‘Penis penis penis penis.’ Neve repeats.

I can’t help but bend down to her eye level, giggling with her. Dawn puffs air out of her cheeks, exasperated, and Joyce gives me a little cheeky grin. It’s obvious who this little girl

takes after, and it isn't her mum and uptight brother Nick willy.

'Poo poo poo poo,' I sing.

'Stinky bum stinky bum,' Neve sings in between giggles.

'Mince pie mince pie.' I sing in a silly Kermit the frogesque voice in an attempt to change direction away from the body parts and things that come out of said body parts.

'Bum pie bum pie,' Neve screeches, her eyes filled up with glee.

Whoops that wasn't the way I was steering it to go, nevertheless I persevere.

'Santa's hat, Santa's hat,' I say, attempting to sound like Santa, adding in a 'ho ho ho at the end.

'Rudolph's nose Rudolph's nose,' Neve squawks. Ah we've deflected away from the body parts. Result. 'Christmas fairy, Christmas fairy.' She moves her arms up and down to show a fairy flying. She's really very cute and now we're getting somewhere.

'Little Angel little Angel.' I smile then take her hand and twirl her around. What a sweetie.

'Tinsel tits, Tinsel tits.' Nicks blurts out, I think in an attempt to join in, but it has massively backfired.

Dawn and Joyce both shoot daggers at him. Oh, if looks could kill.

'Brother Nick, what's tits?' Neve tilts her head, her eyes wide with innocence.

'It was *tips*, Neve. Tinsel tips. You know, the bits at the end of the tinsel,' Nick says.

'Oh, yeah.'

'Good save.' I chuckle as Nick winces and shakes his head, a hint of dimples forming in his cheeks.

He isn't exactly how I remember him, looks-wise, he's quite attractive, if you like that *Peaky Blinder* meets Clark Kent sort

of vibe. I steal a sly second look at him while Joyce starts asking Neve what she's asked Santa for Christmas. He's tall, has thick hair swooped over to the side like he's out of the fifties, his eyes are dark like Neve's, but I'd say they're more serious than mischievous. I guess he has a nice smile, especially when those dimples appear but he's awkward, a little shifty looking even, and his feet are far too big for his body.

Mum glides back into the room towing a few more neighbours behind her and we begin the necessary introductions and reintroductions which seem to go on for an age. The music gets turned up and the buffet gets uncovered. After working the room for a little bit, hearing about many an elderly ailment including Margaret's knee and John's gastric bypass, I notice that Evie still isn't back from wherever she sneaked off to. I grab a mince pie for company and trot off to look for her. I'm not doing the festive shindig on my own, she has to share some of the sibling entertainment and embarrassment load.

After checking the rooms downstairs and being given a glass of very fizzy champagne by my rather tiddly mum in the kitchen, I creep upstairs. Standing outside our bedroom door, I listen before knocking and can make out the faint mumblings of Evie talking to someone on the phone. I'm just about to open the door when she raises her voice.

'Nope, no, that's not what was agreed. We need to be clear on this.' She goes quiet again and the mumblings commence before it turns to complete silence. I've had enough of this. I could be up here too, skiving off the social arrangements but it's our duty to join in and it's only polite as daughters of the hosts.

'Hey, there you are, Mum wants you downstairs now,' I lie, because Mum is too busy drinking champagne and gossiping with the neighbours to realise Evie has skulked off.

'Oh, yes, I'll be down in a bit, just some urgent work stuff, it couldn't wait,' Evie says as she stares furiously at her laptop without looking up. 'Really important client,' she continues. 'So could you just let me concentrate, I'll be five minutes.'

‘Sure,’ I half close the door, hesitating when I see the used screwed up tissues strewn all over the bed. She’s either been crying or she’s developed an aggressive cold in the last couple of hours. ‘Are you alright?’ I ask through the crack of the door.

‘Yes, fine,’ she says, waving me away, still not looking at me as she begins to type violently on her keyboard. ‘Just carry on being the class Christmas clown downstairs and I’ll be down in a minute.’

‘Fine.’ I wish I’d never asked.

Cousin Amber and her family have arrived, and I can see from the look on little Neve’s face that she is ecstatic. Even though Amber’s little girl is slightly older, she now has a playmate and someone else to be cheeky with. I glance at Dawn and can’t help but think that she’s got her work cut out in the years to come, that’s if she hasn’t already.

Slinking over to the buffet table, thankful that I’m not wearing anything too tight, I begin to fill my plate up with an array of Christmas buffet goodies. Baked Camembert with warm crusty bread, breadsticks and homemade dip as well as homemade sausage rolls, are just a few of the items I pile on my plate. I haven’t missed Coolsbay all that much, but I’ve missed Mum’s cooking. I can cook okay, but Mum has this flare for it, I guess she really enjoys it, is passionate about it and that’s what makes everything taste so much better.

‘Hey, you, I wondered where you were hiding!’ Amber flings her arms around me, and I get a face full of red wavy hair. ‘It’s been way too long,’ she continues. ‘Well apart from the last time but I don’t know if we should count that. It’s not like it was much fun either.’ She looks at me pointedly, meaning her mum (my aunty) Pat’s funeral as I watch Neve with Sophia, Amber’s daughter, sneak off under the buffet table. They giggle as they lure Frosty in with the promise of a sausage roll. I catch Nick’s eye and he scurries over to check on them.

‘Oohh I dunno,’ I say in a sing-songy voice. ‘It kind of lightened the mood when the vicar farted, tried to blame it on

the holy spirit and we all gagged as it echoed around the church.'

'It did yes, Mum would have found that funny.'

'She would.'

'Where's Evie?' Amber swishes her head from side to side.

'She's in the bedroom, working,' I say deadpan.

'No! Well, I'm going to go right up there and tell the silly moo to get down here and get a life. It's Christmas.'

'Hmmm maybe leave it, think it was a pretty important work call and she should be down soon.' It's got to be serious if she was crying about it. I'll try and broach it with her later, perhaps I can try and help. Who am I kidding? She'll just tell me to do one. The annoying big little sister.

'How's things? How's work?' If Evie's work thing is that serious, perhaps she'll end up jobless like me and we can finally bond over something. A sad and sobering thought.

'Yeah, not bad,' I lie. 'Thankful for the break, it's always so tiring towards the end of term and getting them to do anything on the last few days before Christmas is near impossible,' I say as I watch Joyce and Nick chattering away. I wonder what they're talking about.

'I bet!' Amber says.

Why am I lying? *Because you haven't lined a new job up and your reasons for leaving are quite frankly pathetic, Demi baby,* a voice chants in my ear that happens to sound very much like Alastair. An image of Alastair waltzing into the staff room after we'd just had a night of passionate sex blasts into my thoughts. The horror of realising that I was going to work with my shag and the terror that he would be my boss was almost too much to bear. I panicked. I ran away, even though I had to stay until the end of term and Alastair practically begged me to stay. I'd probably got the worst part over and done with anyway, but I still ran away.

'Yeah, plus I'm in the drama department, we don't do much apart from lark about and pretend to be trees anyway.' I laugh

then berate myself for talking my profession down. I work bloody hard, and people should know it. Drama isn't a silly subject; it helps kids see their potential in many ways. It gives kids confidence, teaches them how to conduct themselves, it isn't all about being a performing tart, as some would put it.

'Must be fun.' Amber looks off into the distance, keeping a watchful eye over Sophia.

'How's things with you?' I ask, as Amber sighs. My cousin looks tired but that's to be expected.

'Not bad, but since the baby I'm just exhausted, work is mental too.'

'Where's baby tonight?'

'Dylan's mum and dad are looking after him, they're fab, can't fault them but I still miss Mum. I thought she'd be here for years after Dad died and now, she's gone too. I wish they'd got to meet him. I'm feeling a lot of mixed emotions, you know.'

'I know, it must be so hard.' I rub Amber's back to try and soothe her. 'It's all so raw still.'

'EVERYONE EVERYONE,' Mum screeches as she waves the TV remote in the air. Tony stands next to her, looking uncomfortable in his Santa hat and ringing a tiny white bell. I can't work out if he's trying to help get everyone's attention or if he's adding in a Christmas jingle bell, accompanying Mum's screaming, almost like some sort of obscure festive performance. Said bell is the size of a thimble and it looks ridiculous in Tony's spade-shaped hands.

'Thank you everyone,' Mum says with a smile as people begin to turn around, curious as to what is going on. 'As you all know, I have something special to show you all this evening,' she talks into the TV remote like it's a microphone before pointing it at the TV and switching it on. 'So now the time has come. I'm a little nervous at what your reactions will be.' She nods to Tony, and he begins to fiddle around on his phone. 'But here we go.' On Mum's cue, Tony casts a video to the TV. It's a little blurry at first but then we hear something. It

sounds like Mum laughing and Tony making suggestive moaning noises.

What the actual?

This is the stuff of nightmares.

Chapter Five

‘You little minx, Karen,’ TV Tony teases as Mum’s mouth drops to the floor and the camera comes into focus to show TV Mum twizzling around in a long red silky nighty. She points at TV Tony who’s behind the camera with a fluffy, pink feather duster while dancing suggestively to Lady in Red by Chris de Burgh.

There’s a rumble of sniggers around the room and someone, probably Tony’s pervy brother shouts ‘Go on, Karen.’

I look around to see that Joyce has put her hands over Neve’s eyes. Nick and his mum seem to have left already. Charming. He was always a bit odd. At school he’d often stay in during break and play the piano, didn’t mix much with the other kids.

Oh. My God.

A horrifying thought crosses my mind. Is this where we get to meet the mysterious ‘A’? On a video streamed to all of the neighbours and family. I mean, I know we’re in the age of acceptance and diversity, but this is just a step too far!

‘No, no, wrong video,’ Mum says in a strangled voice as she jumps in front of the TV to hide whatever is going on. I look away when TV Mum appears to start to shimmy her nighty off.

‘Shit, bugger, bloody stupid thing,’ Tony complains. He frantically points his phone at the TV, his Santa hat jiggling about on his head like a bowl full of jelly, before, much to everyone’s relief, the video finally changes. Mum’s modesty protected just in time by a very boring video of some chickens toddling about at a farm followed by a video of Tony wading about in the sea at the beach until it finally gets changed to a still of my late Aunty Pat. She’s wearing a brightly coloured Christmas jumper with a robin on the front and her silver hair is styled wild and spikey with purple tips – as it always was. The atmosphere in the room changes from amusement to warm curiosity. There’s quiet chatter as people make ahh

noises and comments like *bless her* and *God rest her soul*. Mum nods at Tony to press play and figuratively speaking, Aunty Pat comes to life.

‘Hey everyone, how’s it going?’ Pat bellows in her Yorkshire accent as there are mumbled replies of ‘Good Pat’ and ‘Nice to see you Pat’, around the room.

I look at Amber who has tears in her eyes and is mouthing ‘Mum’ at the TV screen.

Pat continues. ‘I hope the old buggers managed to get me on the screen alright, I know what those two half-wits are like with technology, especially our Karen.’

The room erupts into laughter, and someone shouts out, ‘You have no idea, Pat, God rest your soul.’

‘So, I wanted to do this video after my death but not straightaway after because you’ll all be too sad, crying and bawling over me so I believe I’m being played two weeks before Christmas if those two clowns have got it right.’

There’s laughter around the room again as Mum and Tony exchange surreptitious looks with each other. ‘Also, I’m having a good hair day and don’t look like death warmed up today so I had to take this opportunity while I could.’ Pat poses for the camera briefly, pouting her lips and shaking her hair. ‘I know Christmas is a time when people really miss their departed loved ones the most,’ Pat continues. ‘So, with that in mind, I thought what better time than to keep all you miserable lot busy with something that reminds you of me.’ Pat’s eyes twinkle with mischief and I glance at Amber who now has her arm around a stressed looking Evie. Amber shrugs and shakes her head, as bemused by her mum’s video message as the rest of us. Pat continues. ‘As you know, every year without fail I organised the annual knitting event, knitting as many blankets, hats, gloves and scarfs as we can with all proceeds going to our local hospice, which I expect is where I’ll die too.’ She didn’t, she died at home in the end, with all her loved ones around her but she did spend a couple of weeks there before that. ‘This year, I want you guys to do something a little different, something I’ve had my eye on for quite some time

but haven't got round to executing yet.' Pat pauses as we all wait with bated breath. 'This year, I want you guys to organise a yarn bombing event.'

'What's yarn bombing?' I whisper to Tony.

'I don't know, maybe telling each other stories via the medium of wool?' I frown and envisage my story in wool, a big multi-coloured mess, with lots of red for passion. My mind wanders off to Alastair again and I take a sneaky look at my phone, my fingers hovering over the keyboard ready to type my reply. We didn't discuss plans on the phone last night, that call was purely for the purpose of fun. *Demi, baby*, I hear Alastair say in his Scottish lilt. I bite my lip and try to focus on Pat as she goes on to explain about yarn bombing the town this Christmas. The local knitters are to make hats for the pillar boxes and jackets for the trees as well as covering people's gates, fences and lampposts. She already has a list of people that signed up to help with this year's event before she died and she's pleased that there's so many skilled knitters and crocheters in the community.

'This year, I want this town to be vibrant, full of love, festivity and colour and also, selfishly, I want you all to be reminded of me. Let's give Coolsbay a big, warm woolly jumper, a hug at Christmas, filled with creativity.'

'Here, here!' someone calls out and claps as others join in.

'Stop!' Pat looks at the camera, it's as if she can hear us. 'I've not finished yet. Of course, such an important project will need eyes to oversee and manage it, raise the funds and most importantly provide comradery. As I'll be dead and unaware of people's circumstances at the time, I will be leaving that decision to my capable sister, though not with technology, Karen. She may decide to do it or she may delegate, that is up to her and I ask you to respect her final decision, after all, it's all in good fun.'

'Thank God, I thought she was going to say me for a second,' I whisper to Tony as he half smiles/half grimaces back at me. We look back at Pat who points a wagging finger at the camera.

‘Goodbye and remember, you know I love you but... don’t be a martyr.’ The screen goes blank as she signs off with her famous catchphrase and Amber blows air out of her cheeks, her emotions getting the better of her.

I check my phone again and my loins do a dance to see a fresh text from Alastair.

Alastair: So, Demi baby, what do you say about our little get away? Xx

He’s definitely acting keener. Maybe absence does make the heart grow fonder.

‘Right.’ Mum claps her hands together. ‘Wasn’t it lovely to see Pat?’ she says, addressing the room. ‘I’ve obviously known about this for quite some time and I’ve thought long and hard about it and my decision is... drum roll, Tony.’ Mum looks purposely at Tony who panics then picks up the TV remote and a silver serving spoon using them to tap on the buffet table to create a drum roll effect, gently at first and then louder and harder until food begins to shake on the table and Mum grabs his arms to stop anything falling into Frosty’s mouth; he’s now sitting panting and eagerly waiting for crumbs next to Tony.

‘My wonderful daughters, Evie and Demi.’ The room erupts into a round of applause and cheers before it quietens down to an expectant hush. There’s a pause as Evie and I lock eyes and I desperately root through my brain to find an excuse not to do it. I can’t share a bedroom with her and work on the event, I’ll murder her. It will be death by yarn, I think as I mentally poke her in the eyes with two huge knitting needles.

‘It would be such an honour,’ Evie pipes up. ‘But, well it’s just that, I’m so busy with work and...’

‘I’d love to, Mum,’ I add. ‘You know I would, but does it matter that I can’t knit? I don’t think I’m the right person for the job but of course I’ll try my best if there is no one better,’ I say feebly. I came here for a break not to manage a bloody project. Sorry, Aunty Pat, you know I love you but in your own words, I’m not a bloody martyr.

‘You don’t have to be able to bloody knit,’ Mum says, almost exasperated as she pats her forehead then chin with a napkin which has constipated looking snowmen all over it. ‘You just have to help manage and look after the group, make them cups of tea and get the wool, collect sponsors, that sort of thing. Pat just wants them looking after, they’ll think of the ideas for the yarn bombing so you won’t have to, but I think it would be nice if you *both* did it,’ Mum continues as Tony and Amber start offering out plates from the buffet table, distracting people from our tense family debate.

Eventually people begin to chat amongst themselves, reminiscing about Pat and asking each other if they’re ready for Christmas yet. Mum’s eyes turn to Evie.

‘And I think work will manage if you slack off a little with all those emails you keep sending, Evie. I have both my girls home for Christmas for the first time in years and this is family time. It’s important that you both do this.’ Mum takes my hand and Evie’s and looks at us both pointedly. ‘If you can’t do it for your dead Aunty Pat, and my dear sister, then do it for me, your mother, the one who gave *you* life. Have you both forgotten that?’

Chapter Six

Me: Sounds good, just let me see what's going on here and I'll let you know. xx

Alastair: Perfect, let me know when and where and I'll be there. xx

I allow a slow smile to spread across my face as I decide to wait until later to text him. Make him sweat for a little longer. I'm enjoying being in control. It feels good. It feels right. This is how I am meant to navigate our relationship. Woman in charge.

'You know, you look really creepy when you do that face,' Evie comments as she pulls on an oversized beige brown jumper and stares at herself like a maniac in the mirror whilst whacking her hair up into a tight little bun. Tight, like her face and personality.

Today we're going to meet the dream team as Mum calls them; the team, who'll be doing the yarn bombing. Now I know that I don't have to do much, the fact that the team meet in the local pub is a bonus. It certainly beats meeting in the library, which is where I envisioned they'd do their knitting and nattering. Evie, on the other hand, has been huffing and puffing all morning, even if most of that was directed at her laptop.

'You know it's called smiling; you should try it occasionally, it's good for you. That said, you haven't done it for so long, it might break your face.' I smile again but this time I treat her to a big toothy grin before spinning around and turning on the radio. I don't want to listen to her snipes, I need to get into the Christmas spirit. It's depressing enough as it is not having a job to go back to and being forced into managing a bloody knitting club. What on earth was Pat thinking? I can think of better ways to embrace her memory such as having a huge party but this is what she wanted and it's for a good cause. We should just try and do it with a smile on our faces or in Evie's case, less of a snarl.

Instead of the usual Christmas songs playing, Dolly Parton's *Joleen*, blasts out of the speakers and for just a moment my sister and I forget that we hate each other and sing along to it, even harmonising the parts perfectly like we used to. Some things cannot be unlearned, and Dolly Parton harmonies is one of them.

'Can't beat a bit of Dolly at Christmas,' Evie says as she slaps on some moisturiser, and I nod in silent agreement. Dolly Parton was our go-to album when we were kids at Christmas, well anytime of the year really. We were obsessed and I still am. I have all of her albums and I just love everything that she stands for. She came from nothing, a real rags to riches story and look what she's created, a whole Dolly Parton empire. She also comes across as incredibly kind, witty, smart and sincere which is a credit to her and her upbringing. If I were that famous and loaded, it would be hard not to be a diva, demanding champagne in every dressing room just because I could and having butlers in the buff serve breakfast. Now, there's a thought for mine and Alastair's rendezvous.

'Did you see her Christmas film a few years back? She just gets better with age,' I say in an attempt to start a conversation and reminisce with my sister. Well, I'm stuck with her for Christmas, we may as well try and get along and not make this a completely miserable experience.

'No, I don't really watch much TV anymore. Olly isn't a fan, we read and go to the theatre,' she says in her posh voice, the one she started using when she met Olly the Wally.

'Cool.' Ouch. But you never came to the theatre when I was performing at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival for two summers running. Bloody hypocrite. That's when I started to really hate her, she became so selfish and uninterested in my life, so I did the same back to her and we haven't really spoken much since, only when it's necessary, which hasn't been much over the last few years. Until now.



Evie and I slink up to the Mermaid's Lair, not saying anything to each other as she frantically types what I assume is a work

email, into her phone. I know she's loaded and everything, but money isn't the be all and end all. I'd much rather do what I do for a career than have to be at the constant beck and call of some big corporation. I mean, who do they think they are making people work like this over Christmas? It's inhumane.

It's a crisp winter day and the sky is a bright powder blue without a cloud in sight. There's a faint waft of clementine and cinnamon in the air which I assume is the smell of people's homemade wreaths, of which there are plenty. If you live in Coolsbay and you haven't made a wreath then really, who are you? We approach the pub and I get a sudden craving for mulled spiced wine; is it too early for alcohol? It *is* almost Christmas.

'It doesn't look open,' Evie states as we hover by the door, both of us rubbing our hands together to keep warm. It didn't look that cold when we looked out of the window so neither of us have dressed appropriately. Even after Mum warned us, we didn't listen and still haven't learnt at the ages of twenty-six and thirty-two that mother always knows best, especially when it comes to dressing appropriately for the weather.

'No, it doesn't, does it? And where are the knitters?' I say as I begin to walk round to the windows, cupping my hands on the glass to peer in and hopefully get someone's attention.

'We're on time, in fact it's five past eleven now.'

'Perhaps they had a lock-in last night and got carried away into the early hours of this morning.'

'A lock-in, in the Mermaid's Lair with the average age of the Coolsbay community being sixty-five? I don't think so.' Evie smirks.

'Well, you never know what these old people get up to, in their second spring and all that, they might have more of a zest for life than we do,' I say, thinking of Mum and Tony's video and their impending three-way with 'A'. I shudder at the thought of it. 'I can see a cleaner but no knitting club,' I say as I bang on the window. 'Do you think they'll give us free alcohol for looking after the knitting biddies? I might help

myself to a little Coolsbay cider on tap, perks of the job and all that.’ I laugh, this might not be so bad after all.

‘I wouldn’t if I were you,’ a familiar male voice booms. I freeze as he continues. ‘The owner is meticulous in his stock taking, plus the Coolsbay cider is pretty rank. If you’re going to pilfer something then I’d go with the ale, it’s much tastier and smoother.’

I close my eyes mouthing the word ‘shit’ to myself as Evie squawk laughs at my expense. I paste a smile on before turning around to face him.

Him, being Nick.

‘She wouldn’t really steal anything, she’s all talk,’ Evie says as Nick smirks. I notice those dimples again when he does that which triggers a vague memory of us playing as kids in his bedroom. I remember him being such a sweet kid, good at sharing, that kind of thing. His house smelled of oats and pine.

‘I am. All mouth and no trousers,’ I joke, pointing to my reindeer patterned leggings.

‘I know.’ Nick presses his lips together then winks at Evie. He doesn’t know I’m all talk, he doesn’t even know me anymore, but something in the way he says it makes me feel very exposed.

‘What are you doing here? Are you the new owner?’ I ask. He’s wearing what I would call a grandad cap, grey trousers, black shoes and a buttoned-up long, black trench coat. His cheeks are pink and he nestles into his maroon scarf to protect his clean-shaven face from the cold. I think he thinks he’s out of *Peaky Blinders*. If only he *were* Cillian Murphy.

‘No, no, I just work here. If you’re looking for the knitting club then I’ll take you round to the shed, come on.’ Nick begins to rummage around in his pocket for the keys as Evie and I wait for him. A robin flies down and lands briefly on the wreath hanging on the pub door. We all stand still and watch with delight as it tilts its head, sings at us in a slightly aggressive manner, then flies off.

‘That was Aunty Pat,’ I say out loud to no one in particular.

‘That was actually a feisty little bird, but I guess that would describe her rather accurately,’ Evie says, and I laugh despite it being Evie that made the comment. She’s right, Pat was feisty. Feisty but brilliant.

After Nick finally locates the keys from his deep pockets, we follow him inside and through the pub to the shed. Nick walks in big strides, so tall that Evie has to take a couple of strides to his one and it makes me snort. She notices me laughing and pokes her tongue out at me. My sister, the little-shuffle goblin.

‘I didn’t know this pub had another space,’ I say.

‘Yeah, the landlord’s daughter used to live in it but when she moved out, they changed it into a cosy living room arrangement. To be honest I think it’s just the knitting club that has used it so far, it’s a bit out the way. The drinkers like to stay close to the bar.’

Nick leads us outside and around the back of the pub until we approach what I assume is the shed.

‘It looks more like a Santa’s grotto,’ I say raising an eyebrow at him.

‘Yeah, we do the Santa’s grotto here too. We could do with a couple of extra elves actually. Are you two free over the next couple of weeks?’

‘No,’ Evie and I squawk in unison.

‘Don’t worry.’ Nick laughs. ‘I was joking.’ He knocks lightly on the door and after a bit of shuffling and muttering, several faces appear at the windows before the door finally opens.

‘Eeee, Nick, I thought you were going out to get us some bacon baps.’ Joyce mockingly puts her hands on her hips which raises a series of mock tuts and grumbles.

‘No, thought the girls could do that,’ he says as he side eyes me with a smirk.

‘Joyce!’ I exclaim, pleased to see a familiar friendly face.

‘Hello pet!’

‘Nan wanted to join in over Christmas,’ Nick says by way of explanation.

‘Gives me a break from your mam, I can’t watch the way she makes Yorkshire puddings, does the batter all wrong.’ She winks and chuckles as several faces peer over at Evie and me curiously. ‘Also, I just love crocheting and knitting. I’m keen to do this yarn bombing thing. Sounds fun.’ Joyce steps back to let us all in as we follow Nick into the room.

It seems bigger on the inside and cosy, with patchwork quilts in festive colours lining the walls, big bins of yarn are dotted around the outside with a beanbag in each corner. In the middle of the room, there’s a mixture of odd chairs and armchairs arranged in a circle.

‘Demi, Evie,’ Nick says pointedly, looking down his glasses. Meet Harmony, Indigo, Margaret and Joan.’

‘Hi everyone,’ I say before nudging an ignorant Evie to say hello.

Harmony and Indigo look vaguely familiar, I think they were in a few years below me at school. They were always winning awards for this that and the other. Their faces are unforgettable as they are albino twins, the only albinos ever to have lived in the town. The only ones I’ve ever seen in fact, anywhere. Mum said it caused quite a stir when they were born. People visited to rub their heads for good luck and bought gifts. Coolsbayarians are very strange and superstitious people. Both sisters wear very thick glasses and have big, full lips. They both wave in perfect synchronicity, their alabaster skin twinkling like shiny Christmas paper. I know Margaret, she was at Mum’s shindig, I think she used to work with Mum years ago but Joan is a new face.

‘Hey,’ Evie finally manages.

‘I think Amber plus one more is coming and then you guys can get started on your exciting project,’ Nick says with a grin as Evie and I narrow our eyes at him. There is nothing exciting about yarn bombing, I can guarantee. ‘Anyway, good luck ladies, I need to go and set up, see you soon.’

We all wave Nick off as he trundles off back to the pub and I wonder why he chose this as his career. He was always such a brain box at school, not really one for drinking either so I'm surprised to see him in a pub but then I remember mum saying he was a music teacher, maybe he does both. A bit of a workaholic perhaps. Does he work so much to escape something? Probably his mum as he appears to be still living with her. Me, however, I know where I'd rather be, and it doesn't involve wool, old people or a couple of oddball twins. It involves a green Tesla and a tasty Scotsman.

'Hey guys, sorry I'm late, got caught up with work but hubby's holding the fort with work and kids.' Amber comes bustling into the shed and a man of around my age with dark features and a pleasant looking face follows in after her.

'Hello there, Amber, is this the waiter? I'll have a white wine spritzer please love and a packet of nuts,' Joan says as Amber frowns, shaking her head.

'What? No, Joan. This isn't the waiter, this is Marco, hubby's foreign exchange student from Italy.'

'Oooh, very nice,' Margaret says, running her eyes over Marco. 'You look too old to be a student.'

Poor man. There isn't much in the way of attractive men in Coolsbay so when one unexpectedly arrives, it always causes a bit of a frenzy.

'I'm older student. When Amber said you do the knitting. I like the knitting, so I come,' Marco says slowly in a strong Italian accent as he looks to Amber for encouragement. Amber gives him the thumbs up and he grins again.

'Well, another pair of hands is always welcome,' says Evie as the twins stare at Marco with their mouths open like they've never seen a man before. He's good looking, in a thick eyebrows and olive complexion, Joe Jonas kind of a way.

'Thank you. Your name?' Marco says as he reaches his hand out to my sister. Is he going to kiss her on the hand?

'Oh me?' Evie screeches as she bats his hand away then waves him off. 'Oh, I'm not knitting, don't worry about me.'

I'm no-one.' There's a pause before I dig her in the ribs in an attempt to jolt her back from loony land. 'Evie, I'm Evie,' my sister mumbles then looks down at her feet, before Marco gently takes her hand again. This time, she doesn't resist.

'Nice to meet you, Evie, and you?' he drops Evie's hand and reaches for mine. I shake his hand firmly, definitely don't want him to kiss it. He grins a silly and beautiful grin. Hmm maybe this will be more fun than I thought.

Chapter Seven

After the necessary introductions and taking it upon myself to be the appointed waiter and take everyone's drinks orders, I exit the shed and make my way across to the bar.

You can cut the sexual tension in that shed with a knife, and I think most of it is oozing out of Marco with his Italian charm. I need to get away from it, he has every woman in that room flustered.

I approach the bar and notice it's completely dead apart from Nick having a rather heated discussion with a man in his mid to late fifties, wearing a brown cowboy hat. The man is tapping one of his fingers rather aggressively on the counter as he speaks. Nick nods then puts his hand up to stop him right there so he can get his point across. I can't hear what they're saying but as I get nearer the man mutters something about going for a walk in the hills before he stomps off, curtly nodding at me and tilting his hat as he goes past. Nick blows air out of his cheeks and looks to the ceiling.

'What was that all about?' I ask, as the man stomps out of the room waddling like a skittle.

'Oh, he's complaining about the room again. He's staying here, apparently the towels are too crispy, and the bed is too hard. I've told management but they aren't very forthcoming at the moment.'

'Perhaps give him some softer towels, no-one likes a crispy one?' I giggle but Nick just blinks back at me like a startled reindeer. 'I didn't know this place had bedrooms too?' I continue to fill the awkward silence that's now suddenly appeared. 'It's full of surprises.'

'A lot has changed since you left, and we weren't meant to have guests over Christmas, but management made an exception for this guest,' Nick says as he picks up a glass to clean it.

His hand is too big to get inside the glass completely. I'm so tempted to take it from him and help but instead I watch him

place each finger into the glass and swirl it around like he's performing an obscene kind of surgical procedure. It's strangely hypnotic.

'Yeah, yeah, so I see,' I say as I drag my eyes away from his fingers. I'm tempted to be nosey about the unwanted guest but then decide that I don't really care that much.

'What can I get you?' he asks. I pull out my phone and reel off my list before Nick goes off to make everything. While I wait, I send a quick text to Alastair.

Me: The Mermaid's Lair, Coolsbay, meet me here on boxing day at 2pm, you dirty dog. Can't wait to lick you all over. I smirk to myself but don't get as far as dropping my phone into my handbag when he replies.

Alastair: I'll be there. Can't wait. I've missed you so much Demi, baby. You best be prepared to scream like a banshee. This dog is hankering for a humping. Xx

Butterflies form in my stomach and begin to rave like they're high on opium. He's missed me so much. Alastair has missed me so much. He's hankering for me; although I'm not sure about humping like a dog. That makes me cringe a bit but he is hankering after me and that makes me very happy. I'm busy daydreaming about Alastair and counting down the days until I see him, by the way it will be eleven, when Nick comes over with a tray of drinks, each one with a little festive Santa or reindeer decoration.

His mouth is moving and I'm nodding. I then respond with a 'Yeah that's cool, of course.' Because that's what you do when you aren't listening, but you should be, and chances are he was probably only asking about whether I wanted ice and lemon with my coke, when he responds with this.

'Okay oh umm, just come over tonight for seven then. I guess it will be good to catch up.' He grins nervously and his dimples form again. I don't have the heart to say I wasn't listening. Actually, I was planning on spending this evening surprising Alastair with some phone sex when Evie has one of her long-ass baths; he *is* hankering after all. I'll have to give

that a miss now. Ah well, it will make him miss me more if I'm not available all the time.

'Yeah, yeah okay,' I squeak. Oh no. I've agreed to go to Nick's house.

Socially awkward Nick, who works in this bar in his spare time; maybe he works here to practice socialising. Either way, I'm not looking forward to it, but I'll have to go as it's only polite and Mum won't be happy if I piss off the neighbour's son by saying no. It also feels icky, what if he thinks this is a date? It's not a date. I'm not a cheater. Stop catastrophising Demi. I take the tray from Nick then we do a little back and forth totally awkward tray dance as he offers to take it for me because I can't carry a tray of drinks and two extra drinks with just one pair of hands. Plus, he's Joyce's grandson and she's great. What could go wrong?

'It isn't that much of a big deal.' Uh Oh. Did I just say that out loud? I did just say that out loud. His awkwardness is like a disease and now I've caught it.

'I'm just trying to help.' Nick frowns as he takes the tray from me again. 'You'd have to do two trips otherwise.'

'I know, sorry. Bad night's sleep last night, sharing with the sister like we're kids again, and she snores like an old woman.'

'Sorry to hear that. If it's any consolation, I'm sharing with my nan and she really does snore like an old woman because she is one. A really loud old woman who also talks in her sleep.'

'She said she didn't snore.' A smile spreads across my face remembering our encounter on the train. I follow Nick out of the bar and he stops to wait for me.

'Yeah well, the house literally vibrates when she stays. Don't tell her I told you though, she likes to think she sleeps like a lady.' He grins a toothy smile. He's friendly enough, it might be okay on our non-date of which I have no idea what the purpose is because I wasn't listening. And even better, it will be a great escape from my sister.

‘We come bearing festive drinks,’ Nick says cheerfully as we enter the room but by the looks on everyone’s faces, they haven’t been having a good time at all.

‘Everything alright?’ I ask in a rhetorical question kind of a way.

‘Yes,’ the twins say together.

‘Except that we were having a debate,’ says Harmony.

‘About whether it should be crochet, sewing or knitting for the yarn bombing,’ continues Indigo.

‘Traditionally they are knitted,’ Joan says curtly, she folds her arms, her feathers ruffled by the discussion. Oh dear, I am suddenly feeling very out of my depth. Improvise Demi, improvise.

‘Well, it isn’t really a tradition as I believe it’s a fairly new phenomenon, isn’t it?’ Nick comments as he begins to serve the drinks. I feel grateful to him as Joyce and a few others agree with him whilst Margaret and Joan scowl at each other.

‘We knit. Knit is best,’ says Marco as he pulls a pair of oak knitting needles out of his bag. ‘My great, great-grandmother’s.’ He grins at Evie who nods and smiles coyly and the others oooh and ahhh at his shiny thick needles. He rubs them up and down with his finger and thumb. I can’t help thinking that they’re a phallic symbol, an extension of his manhood. Nick notices me looking and smirks before making his excuse to leave and get back to the Christmas punters.

‘We think they should be crocheted,’ the twins say as they nod several times in perfect unison.

‘Well, I think sewing is best and it’s what Pat would have wanted,’ Margaret says, gulping down her white wine spritzer as she eyeballs Joan.

‘No, it is not what Pat would have wanted. She would have wanted it knitted and you know it. You’re just being awkward, Margaret, because knitting isn’t your strong skill.’ Joan stands up to her full four-feet-eleven- inches as her hands fly up to her hips and she glares at Margaret.

‘Oi, I am most certainly not the awkward one and you know what, Joan, you really get on my tits.’ Margaret stands up to her full height of four-feet-eight-inches and mimics Joan’s stance before raising a tiny fist to show her frustration.

I press my lips together to suppress a smile. Pat would be smiling too. Two little old ladies so passionate about the yarn bombing that they’re ready to draw blood over it.

‘Well, why can’t you do a bit of everything? Sewing, knitting and crochet,’ I say, as a room full of eyes swivel to look at the one who has spoken. The one who can’t do any of those things. Oops.

‘Impossible,’ Margaret scoffs.

‘Preposterous,’ Joan spits.

‘That isn’t a bad idea,’ says Harmony.

‘Not bad at all,’ continues Indigo.

‘I like the knit,’ says Marco looking at his needles with a mawkish melancholy.

‘Well yeah, that’s cool, you do what you’re good at and what you prefer. We’ll make it work, won’t we?’ I look at Evie for a bit of moral support. I really have no idea what I’m talking about but I’m sure it can work. It can’t be that hard, can it?

‘Of course, this is meant to be enjoyable too, Pat would want everyone to enjoy it.’ Evie strokes her hair and sneaks a look at Marco whose eyes light up, causing him to stroke his knitting needles a little faster.

‘There,’ I say feeling pleased with myself as I dust my hands off. ‘That settles that then.’

‘Eeee pet,’ chuckles Joyce. ‘We’ve got our work cut out.’ She chuckles amongst chatter and a couple of groans, one of the louder groans belongs to Margaret. ‘We’ll have to get you girls involved.’

Evie and I shake our heads like rabbits caught in headlights.

‘I couldn’t sew a hole up in my sock, let alone knit a tree a jumper,’ I say.

‘You couldn’t darn a sock? Margaret tuts. ‘Oh, the youth of today.’ Harmony and Melody frown at Margaret as they are very much the youth of today and they are amazing crocheters.

‘Well, I used to crochet, before I got so busy with my career that is,’ Evie pipes up. This is news to me. I’ve never known her to crochet but she’s six years older than me and moved out before I finished secondary school so there’s probably a whole life that I don’t know about. I watch her face, wondering what else she’s been up to.

‘Crochet is good for the soul, pet,’ says Joyce, patting Evie on the knee. ‘It’s like therapy, when life gets too much, I get my hooks out.’

‘I like that.’ Evie smiles, a big smile. The first time I’ve seen her smile properly since we’ve been back in Coolsbay. For a second, I wonder if life has become too much for her then Joan starts talking.

‘Are we okay to get started? I have Bridge in an hour followed by bowls so I’m conscious of time.’ Margaret looks at her watch.

‘It’s the bowls championship final,’ Joan states before she looks pointedly at Margaret and folds her arms. ‘I’ll see you there Margaret. I’m wearing my lucky socks and we all know I always win when I wear them.’ She pulls up her trousers and wiggles one leg mockingly to reveal long white socks with navy rims around the top of them. She gives Margaret a wink as Margaret visibly bristles.

‘Well, if the faded fabric is anything to go by, I think they’ve just about run out of luck.’ Margaret’s jaw juts out. This woman is ready for war. Really, what have I signed up for? It’s like *mean girls* but sixty years later and they’ve swapped the short skirts and long hair for the bowls socks and a blue rinse.

Seriously, these old people have a busier schedule and more drama in their lives than I do. I’ve never been one for clubs. I

did netball club for a bit, but I was rubbish at it, then sprained my ankle trying to pivot and never went back after that. Perhaps I'll take up all the clubs when I'm old, like these ladies have.

Once Evie and I, with the gentle persuasion and guidance of Joyce, have smoothed things over between Margaret and Joan, we begin to discuss ideas for the yarn bombing. A conversation about the four pillar box toppers (little hats for the pillar box), a cover for the Mermaid's Lair door, and Pat's favourite bench along the promenade are agreed. However, there are arguments over whether they'll be time to make a jacket for the big tree and for the last standing telephone box in Coolsbay, which Joan thinks is way more important than the bloody pub door. Then we go round the houses again about whether we can include all three: knitting, sewing and crochet, and whether it will make it too complicated. By the time we leave I have a headache and a feeling that things might get in more than a bit of a tangle over the next few weeks. I'm feeling like a martyr, saddled with all this yarn which is exactly what Pat wouldn't want.

Chapter Eight

‘Where are you going?’ Evie asks as I brush my hair then wipe off my red lip gloss. It’s too much. This isn’t a date. But it is Christmas, the season for red lip gloss, I tell myself as I reapply it.

‘Just out.’

‘Well, I gathered that.’

‘Just catching up with some old friends,’ I say to myself in the mirror.

‘Oh, okay.’ If I didn’t know my sister better, I’d say that she was hungering after an invite. No bloody way. I can only deal with one awkward person at a time.

‘Yeah, shouldn’t you be doing the same?’ I say, watching her in the mirror.

Evie’s hands are hovering over her laptop keyboard again. Come to think of it, she’s never off that bloody thing.

‘Oh, I don’t know people here anymore, it would be too uncomfortable.’

The truth is neither do I. All of my mates did exactly what I did and got out of here as fast as they could. Uni, then most stayed where they were, desperate to get away from the small-town community that is Coolsbay. But I’m not about to tell her that. She has dark circles underneath her eyes and for a moment I feel a pang of something warm for my sister. I’m not sure if it’s love or sympathy but it causes me to want to cheer her up or tease her or just wipe that miserable look off her face at least. It’s also something I could only tell my sister.

‘Hey, you know I found something really funny slash unusual slash gross in Mum’s diary the other day,’ I say as I sit on the bed with Evie. Sister to sister. I put my hand on her laptop and close it. I expect her to shout at me. She doesn’t.

‘Oh, what did you find?’ She perks up, the dark circles under her eyes more prominent up close.

‘Well... hold that thought.’ I run to the living room and grab the diary with the cupcake on the front then sprint back to my sister. Mum and Tony are out shopping and will be at least another hour. I find the page and hand the diary to her. Her mouth drops open.

‘Oh my God.’

‘Yeah.’ I wince. She flicks through the entire diary, pausing and gasping every so often.

‘What do you think?’ I ask, as my sister squints her eyes, scrunches her nose and purses her lips. I mimic her expression before we fall about laughing.

‘This thing with ‘A’ is most Wednesdays and it’s been going on for a few months,’ Evie states, still flicking. ‘Even Olly and I don’t do it that much.’

‘Let’s call it what it is, shall we? Mum and Tony are having a three-way every week with a man called ‘A’.

‘What makes you think it’s a man?’ Evie looks horrified.

‘I don’t know, just a hunch. Why, do you think it could be a woman?’ My eyes widen as I try to focus on the doggy bedspread. For some reason, I’m even more freaked out by the thought of it being a woman.

‘Shit. I can’t cope with the OAPs of Coolsbay anymore, something’s got into the water; they’re behaving like the young ones, reckless and carefree.’

‘Well, either way. It’s none of our business,’ Evie says, asserting the big sister role as I throw my head back and groan. ‘They are grown ass adults, if they want to frolic and spice up their sex life with an extra person, then who are we to judge,’ she continues, with a little shrug.

‘True, but it’s just grim it’s them and Mum’s so blasé about it, leaving it there for all the world to see.’ Well, not exactly for all the world to see as I did stumble across it by accident, but I’ve always been one for dramatics. I do it as a job for God’s sake. Did. I did it as a job. Now, I don’t have one. I groan again and put my head in my hands.

‘No shame,’ Evie says. ‘Funny though.’ She laughs then does that peculiar noise that sounds like a guinea pig that she used to do when we were kids when she found something really funny. It always used to set me off and it triggers a reflex that does the very same now. We giggle like naughty children for a good few minutes then hysterically discuss who ‘A’ could be. We have no idea apart from some very unlikely candidates such as the local baker’s wife who we aren’t sure even lives here anymore, until I almost crap my pants and decide I must go and put the diary back before they get home and catch me red-handed, clutching their sordid sex diary.



Ivy Cottage is beautifully lit up with white lights across the top of the cottage. My eyes move down to the Ivy, also twinkling with lights, like a big sparkling blanket covering half of the front of the house. On the bay tree outside, new wooden painted decorations have been hung on the branches. They look home-made and some look like they’ve been painted by children, maybe even little Neve. I smile. I didn’t appreciate just how pretty it was when I arrived with Joyce. Too occupied by thoughts. It’s so picturesque and Christmassy and for a moment I wonder if it feels this special in the daylight as so far, I’ve only ever seen it in the dark. I’m about to knock on the door when it opens, and a small, long-haired ball of energy comes bowling towards me.

‘Oouff, oh hey,’ I laugh, as Neve grins up at me and Nick appears behind her.

‘She wanted to stay up and say night to you, is that okay?’ He shuffles from side to side in his green, bulky grandad cardigan, his floppy hair falling into his eyes. My eyes fall to his trousers. He’s wearing grey cords, which somehow, he manages to pull it off but I do wonder, does he always wear his dead Grandad’s clothes?

‘I’ve been watching out the window for you and for Santa,’ Neve says, whispering the Santa part as her big brown eyes twinkle in the Christmas lights.

‘Aww that’s sweet,’ I say, not sure what else to say to a small child. Children normally gravitate towards me for some reason, and this one seems to have formed a bond quickly, perhaps it’s the toilet humour bonding that did it. Yeah, that’ll be it. I have the same mentality as a five-year-old.

‘Don’t let her stand outside all night then, it’s cold,’ Nick says as he gently takes Neve’s hand and leads her back into the house. ‘Come in.’

Neve looks snug in her fluffy Christmas reindeer onesie as I follow them both inside. The smell of freshly baked mince pies infiltrates my nostrils and I try my best not to drool. I didn’t have any dinner and I’m starting to regret it now.

Neve leads us both into the living room then on through to the dining room where Joyce and Nick’s mum are sitting around a huge oak table next to a roaring fire. To the left is an impressive looking bookcase with larger shelves along the bottom. Those shelves are full up with board games, including Mr and Mrs, Pie face, Scrabble, Coolsbay monopoly and a couple of others that I don’t recognise, one is curiously named Porky Pies. Instantly, I feel cosy, and starving.

‘Hey Demi,’ they both chorus as I enter the room.

‘Hey ladies.’ I wave as my eyes automatically hone in on the mince pies.

‘Eeee, help yourself pet, freshly baked this afternoon.’ Joyce chuckles.

‘Can I have one more? Pleaaaaase? Neve pleads.

‘Absolutely not, it’s off to bed for you,’ Nick’s mum says as she scoops her up and begins to tickle her on either side of her neck to which Neve collapses into a fit of squawks and giggles.

We all say goodnight to Neve which takes a good fifteen minutes and consists of Nick’s mum batting her hands away from the mince pies several times. At one point she manages to grab one whilst saying goodnight to Joyce before proceeding to run under the table to hide and scoff it down. We all try our hardest not to laugh as Nick’s mum scolds her

then whisks her off to bed. She's a cheeky ball of energy, who clearly has quite an educated pallet for a five-year-old, and I think she's hilarious.

'Can I get you a drink?' Nick asks.

'Oh yes please, just a squash or something will be fine.'

'Really? We have mulled wine on the stove,' Joyce comments, raising an eyebrow.

'Well, in that case, mulled wine please,' I say, as Joyce nods and presses her lips together. Moments later Nick comes back from the kitchen with two exceptionally large wine glasses of steaming mulled wine. I feel much more comfortable knowing that his whole family are going to be here for the night. In fact, now I come to think of it, I think he mentioned his mum wanting a catch up. This could be quite pleasant.

'So, Joyce, how did you find the first yarn bombing meeting earlier?'

'Yarn bombing?' She looks momentarily confused.

'Yes nan, the knitting club, remember?' Nick says resting his hand on her back. He pats her gently and I have to stop myself from saying aww out loud again.

'Oh yes yes, eeeeeee pet, wasn't it fun? I can't wait to get stuck in and show those grannies who's boss.'

Nick and I make eye contact and share a smile.

'Something tells me it might be a tad challenging but it will be fun too and it will all be worth it when we bomb the town on New Year's Day,' I say, envisioning the colour and cosiness of the whole thing.

'We shall do nothing of the sort,' Joyce bristles, backing away from me.

'No nan, the knitting, when they cover the trees and stuff with knitted blankets.' Nick pats her back again as Joyce's worried face flickers with recognition once more.

'Ahhh yes, yes, of course,' Joyce says. 'Too much of this, it's strong stuff, Nick's own home brew.' She laughs as I take a

sip. It's delicious and Joyce is right, it's very strong.

'All ready, then Mum?' Nick's mum says. 'Come on, let's leave these two to catch up.'

Oh shit. There's really nothing to catch up on. Joyce's eyes dart between us as Nick gets up and shifts on his feet from side to side. It looks like he doesn't want this anymore than I do.

'Well, we'll come with you?' he says, his eyes like a rabbit's caught in headlights.

'No, no, mother-daughter bonding. Plus, I need someone to mind Neve.' Nick's mum winks and before we can protest again, Joyce is up on her feet, getting her coat on and Nick's mum is dragging her out of the door. The door slams and we both wince. I take a big gulp of my wine, silently formulating an excuse to leave.

'Sorry,' Nick says. 'It appears we've been set up.'

'Set up?'

'Yeah, my mum's a nightmare. She's obsessed with trying to play matchmaker. She asked me to invite you over, to say thank you for looking after Nan at the train station. Said it would be nice to catch up with you too, but I see that what she meant was for me and you to catch up.' He looks at the floor and my eyes fall to his feet too. He's even wearing old style slippers; all he needs is a pipe to complete the look.

'It's fine, my 'rents can be equally embarrassing.' More like horrifying, in a completely different three-way kind of a way.

'That's good to know.' He smiles a shy smile then takes a gulp of his mulled wine.

'Your mum's got a lovely house, really cosy, I love a proper fire.'

'Oh, it's not my mum's house, it's mine. The family are just staying with me as mum's house is too small and we wanted everyone to be together at Christmas. It's nice but I'll be glad to get my own space back. They do my head in sometimes.'

'That's family for you.' I smile.

‘Hey, what’s this game?’ I ask, as the mulled wine begins to warm my heart as well as my face, and my eyes are drawn to the red and black box named ‘Porky Pies.’ *Baby it’s Cold Outside* is playing quietly in the background and I’m feeling that I may as well enjoy myself tonight. It is almost Christmas after all.

‘It’s basically two truths one lie but it helps you with the lies bit. I was told I had no imagination, so I needed the help.’ That sort of makes sense when you look at his clothes.

‘Or maybe just too honest?’ I offer, thinking that although he may think he has no imagination, he seems like he’s turned out to be a sweet guy and if he teaches music, he must have an imagination for that.

‘We can play it if you like?’ he says, taking me by surprise.

‘Yeah? Okay, why not?’ Beats making small talk with someone I barely know anymore.

‘Cool.’ He strides over to the bookcase, and I watch him shuffle the games about before he carefully pulls out *Porky Pies*. ‘Another drink?’ he asks, as I realise, I’ve already drunk a whole glass of rocket-fuel mulled wine.

‘Yeah, go on then.’ I shrug. ‘Where’s your bathroom?’

‘Through the living room, first door on the left.’

I nod and make my way to the toilet as Nick heads to the kitchen. On my way back, I pass a red vintage looking record player and stop briefly to check out his records. It looks like he not only wears his grandad’s clothes but also potentially owns all of his old records. I spot Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra, Dionne Warwick and Aretha Franklin. Then I spot Dolly Parton.

‘You have great taste, I’m a big Dolly fan.’ I grin, watching him walk into the dining room with our drinks as I flick through the records.

‘Oh yeah, she’s good. Put on a record if you want.’ He gestures to the record player, and I don’t have to be asked twice. Within seconds Dolly is singing about Jolene not taking her man, it makes me think of my sing along with Evie the other day. I wonder if we can be friends again? She’ll probably

go back to Olly after Christmas and I'll not hear from her for another four years, that's the more likely outcome.

Quietly, I hum along admiring the living room décor, watching Nick tidying up a stack of cards before placing a little egg timer on the table as he sets up the game. He picks up the egg timer and jiggles it at me.

'There's a time limit,' he says with a deadpan expression.

'Of course, can't be looking like you're thinking about it for too long, that will make the lies more obvious,' I say as I remember my own lie of pretending to my family that I still have a job. Taking a big gulp of mulled wine, I turn the egg timer over and slam it down. 'Right, let's do this.'

Chapter Nine

Two lies, one truth; it's two lies one truth.

Not two truths, one lie, I remind myself as I take a deep breath then pick up my next card. We've been playing this game for the past half an hour and so far, I've found out that Nick once rode on a horse bareback into the sea and almost drowned, doesn't actually wear his grandad's clothes, and has a secret celebrity crush on Miley Cyrus. The crush, in my eyes, is nothing to be ashamed of because *a*. Miley does a fantastic cover of *Jolene* and *b*. Dolly Parton is also her godmother.

'Oh, these ones are ridiculous.' I chuckle as Nick laughs with me. 'I don't know if my truths match the wackiness of these lies but I'll try.'

'I'm all ears,' Nick says as the dimples appear on either side of his cheeks. A vague memory of laughing children pops into my mind. Did I used to laugh a lot with Nick? The dimples seem to activate a memory, albeit a vague one of us eating jelly then deciding to stuff it up our noses.

'Okay, so here goes.' I take a sip of my mulled wine and decide that next I'll be having a water. I'm not sure how good I am at lying with this much alcohol in me.

'One.' I look at Nick pointedly and try to show my poker face, this is where all those years of drama training come in useful. I must admit, I do have a slight advantage here and so far, Nick hasn't guessed any of mine correctly. 'I used to own a pony who hated me and wouldn't let me ride him. Two, Mum had me at fifteen and nearly gave me up for adoption to a rich family in Buckinghamshire. Three, I wore a nappy until I was eight.'

'Oh Christ.' Nick's eyes crinkle. 'All three are quite unfortunate.'

'They are,' I say, immediately regretting my embarrassing truth. I could always lie about the lie so one of the other lies

becomes my truth. Now there's a thought. Too confusing. I'll stick with the truth, I decide as I turn over the egg timer.

'Okay,' Nick says, looking pensive. 'So, I'm going to rule out number two, your mum having you at fifteen as I know you have an older sister so I'm guessing that's highly unlikely.'

'Good maths.' I smirk then bite my lip. Uh oh, the alcohol is ruining my game.

'I'm going to go with three,' Nick announces. Oh God, of course, he may have even known about it, we were friends then. How embarrassing.

'Correct, I had issues down below which were quickly solved after I had one little operation.' I nod curtly, it's nothing to be ashamed of actually, I was a child and couldn't help it.

'Awww,' Nick tilts his head and smiles kindly, but he doesn't give anything away about whether he knew or not. He's clearly too polite. A gentleman.

'Yup.'

'Well, I'm glad it wasn't the horse one, you should always be wary of people when animals don't like them.'

'Very true,' I say, feeling a little less vulnerable and taking another large gulp of my mulled wine to drown out the cringe fest confession.

'Okay, my turn.' Nick picks up the next card. He frowns then bites his lip and takes a deep breath. 'One, I'm afraid of the dark and have to have a nightlight still.' I laugh and Nick looks at me deadpan. Shit. 'Two, I'm allergic to tomatoes, they give me hives and I can even hallucinate. Three, I was once married before she ran off with my best friend.'

'Oh lord, now there's a list!' I giggle as Nick turns over the egg timer and looks at me poker faced. 'I'm not sure about the nightlight,' I continue. 'I doubt scary monsters in the night would be something that bothered you if you don't have a vivid imagination, which you say you're guilty of not having, hence these cards to help this game.' I pick the cards up and shuffle them slowly, looking him in the eyes for a sign of

deceit. His eyes don't flicker. Instead, he licks his lips slightly then purses them together, his dimples appearing again for a brief moment. That one's definitely a lie.

'Now, number two ...

'Brother Niiiiickkk,' a little voice squeaks as I almost choke on my words. I move my head to see Neve, standing cuddling a pink, fluffy bunny and sucking her thumb. She looks at me then back at Nick.

'Yes, sweetheart, what it is? Why are you up?' Nick switches out of his game face and swaps it for a much softer expression. He holds out his arms for her and she comes hurtling into his embrace as he scoops her up onto his lap.

'I had a bad dream,' Neve says, as her big brown eyes fill up with tears and she begins to wail uncontrollably into his neck. Nick soothes her with oohs and ahhs whilst rubbing her back. He tells her to take a deep breath which she does and does again until she's gone from uncontrollable wails to light sniffles.

'Would you like a glass of water?' I ask in an attempt to be helpful.

'Y y y...yes please, Demsi,' Neve manages as I sprint to the kitchen and fill her up a little plastic cup of water. It takes a little longer than anticipated sourcing the suitable cup before I race back and give it to her, eager to help ease the poor baby's distress.

'Thank you,' Neve replies after downing half the glass then putting it back on the table.

'Are you okay now?' I ask as Nick strokes her hair and she snuggles further into him.

'Yeah, but I still feel sad about the bad dream.' She looks up at Nick and he drops a kiss on her forehead.

'Aww I'm sorry, what was it about? I may be able to help,' I say, having no idea how I'd actually help with a small child's nightmares but the thought is there at least. I brace myself.

‘I can’t remember now,’ she says as she rubs her eyes then puts her thumb back into her mouth. She looks at the floor, still looking a little forlorn but much better than earlier.

‘Aww, well that’s probably a good thing, come on let’s get you back off to bed,’ Nick says as he attempts to get up and Neve vigorously shakes her head. She eventually jumps down off his lap and her eyes land on the plate on the table, full of crumbs from earlier.

‘Mince pie?’ she asks with thumbs up, her brown eyes now glistening with cheekiness.

‘No way, come on.’

‘Me stay up!’ Neve states as she runs over to me and clings to my leg. ‘With you.’ She looks up at me hopeful.

‘I’d love to but I’m going to bed now too,’ I say gently, glancing at the clock and seeing the time is almost midnight already, come to think of it, Joyce and Nick’s mum still haven’t come back, have they gone out raving? ‘It’s way past my bedtime, even.’

‘Oooh but it’s not fair, you two are staying up having fun without me and I’m all sad having bad dreams in my yucky bed by myself. Where’s mummy?’ Oh, she’s good, I think as I press my lips together and suppress an amused smile.

‘Mummy’s already in bed,’ Nick says quick off the mark as I shrug on my coat and scan the room for my handbag. ‘Say goodnight to Demi and let’s go,’ he says in a slightly sterner voice. This time, Neve does as she’s told. She gives me a quick hug then reaches up to Nick who scoops her up and pads to the bedroom. As I wait for Nick to get back, still in my coat, I place my handbag on the table and quickly reach inside it to check my phone. Two missed calls from Alastair flash up on the screen. He’s only just called. My fingers begin to type a text message but give up after struggling to make sense. I’ll call him back tomorrow.

Instead, I stare into space pondering over Nick’s two lies and one truth as I take multiple sips from my mulled wine. It’s not the nightlight. Sip. But it could be the tomatoes. Sip, sip. I

remember him having an allergy at school and having to be taken to the nurse's room but I'm pretty sure that was milk? Sip. And marriage? Sip, sip, sip. He can't have had that terrible tragedy happen to him, surely? Sip, sip, sip, sip, sip. I search my brain to try and remember his best friend, Martin. Martin McNulty, that was it. Martin always had bogies stuck around his nostrils, he never wiped his nose. Perhaps he got a new best friend when he went to senior school, he went to the senior school on the other side of Coolsbay so it's possible I don't know him, by name anyway, it's likely I'll know his face though. There was a time I knew most people's faces in Coolsbay.

Woah now I'm feeling rather woozy, too much thinking. Too much drinking.

Hic!

'Hey, sorry about that,' Nick says interrupting my thoughts and my hiccups as he sits back down opposite me. He glances at my drink then pushes a glass of water towards me. I notice he's got two from the kitchen, very sensible.

'It's fine, I was deep in thought trying to work out your lie.' I push the water back to him.

'Sounds ominous,' he says, looking a tad uncomfortable but then he always looks a bit uncomfortable. I think that's just his demeanour.

'I'm going to go with the tomatoes, I think you're allergic to them.' I slam my fist down on the table a little too heavily causing the whole table to shake including the drinks which spill a little onto the table, crumbs from the mince pies bounce merrily into the puddles. Luckily my glass of mulled wine is now empty so it doesn't spill and stain. Woops, maybe I do need a few sips of water.

'You're right,' he says as he reaches for kitchen roll and wipes up the mess.

'Fab.' I take a sip of water.

'Now your turn.'

‘Okay.’ I don’t bother taking a card this time. Perfectly capable of making up my own lies, I clear my throat and arrange my face into my best poker face. ‘One, I have a fear of cotton wool so bad that I scream every time I see it, two, I once broke my coccyx jumping on a horse, three, I’m jobless and nobody knows apart from me.’ I hiccup rather loudly after number three, promptly giving myself away. Nick grins showing his dimples again and I wonder for a brief moment if my little finger would fit neatly inside his left one.

‘Well, we can check one of those statements now.’ Nick jumps up, the most animated I’ve seen him all night. He runs to the dresser drawer, whips out a bag of cotton wool pads and frantically waves it at me. I burst into fits of giggles, and he falls about laughing with me. The mulled wine has clearly gone to my head and his for that matter.

‘No screaming.’ He grins.

‘You got me.’ I beam back. Nick sits down opposite me again and lets his chin rest in his hands.

‘How did you break your coccyx by jumping on a horse?’ Ah, he’s testing my story.

‘Just did, I jumped on to ride him and landed on the saddle funny.’ Nick squints his eyes at me. ‘It was a saddle made of steel,’ I add, regretting my silly remark immediately.

‘Don’t buy it. What was the recovery time?’ he asks, a smirk spreading across his face. He bites his top lip and narrows his eyes.

Shit.

It’s not a complete lie, it happened - to my housemate, Phillipa before we met, and I can’t remember if she told me the recovery information. We just laughed for ages about it because she had to take a doughnut shaped cushion everywhere with her.

‘About eight weeks, I couldn’t sit down the entire time, had to buy a *She-wee* to pee standing up like a man.’

‘For the whole eight weeks? A whatwee?’

‘Never mind.’ I press my lips together again; I can’t hold it in. I pick up the glass of water to hide my smile. A weird noise escapes my mouth and nostrils at the same time causing me to swiftly put my glass down and hide behind my hands. I think I felt a bit of snot come out. ‘I need a tissue.’

Nick nods, gets up and pads into the living room, moments later he returns with a wooden box, which appears to be a cover for his tissue box.

‘Wow, you really do think of everything, thanks,’ I say as I pull out a couple of tissues and dap my nose.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your fancy box for the tissues.’

‘Oh, it isn’t fancy, I just like it. The ugly tissue boxes don’t go with my décor.’ He grins and I take a moment to gaze at his décor. It is very well put together, vintage looking and shabby chic with a touch of country. The dark green living room walls make it feel cosy yet grand. He’s certainly got style, apart from his clothes but the more I’ve got to know him again this evening, the more they sort of suit him.

‘Well, you certainly have an eye for design.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Where did you get the record player from?’ I ask, eyeing it up. I haven’t listened to records for years, not since Mum and Tony got rid of theirs, but we kept the best records, all the Dolly Parton ones.

‘We’ve gone a bit off subject.’ Nick laughs as I wince inwardly. ‘But it was a gift, it’s also portable.’

‘Nice, but yeah, we have gone off-piste.’

‘I’m going to go with the fractured coccyx, I don’t think you can fabricate something like that.’ He folds his arms and leans back in his chair. I open and close my mouth and he chews the inside of *his* mouth, a faint frown appearing on his brow. I snort, trying to hold my laugh in.

‘Well, I am a drama teacher. I mean, *was* a drama teacher.’

Chapter Ten

‘Urrgh, why did you have to tell him?’ I spit at my reflection, careful not to raise my voice as I aggressively clean my teeth. I’ve been doing this for the past five minutes, desperately trying to remove all mulled wine stains and all traces of last night. Specks of toothpaste spray the mirror as I shake my head, annoyed at myself. Why did I have to tell him? What was I thinking getting drunk with the local oddball and telling him all my secrets? Two porky pie lies and one truth, it was never going to end well, was it? Now I really do have severe anxiety. I’m worried my family are going to find out that I have no job and I could really do without staring into their disappointed faces at the moment. I need to have a conversation with him. I need to keep Nick on side, so he doesn’t spill my secret. He may have already told Dawn and Joyce and, if he has, then that’s my secret out.

Bang, bang, bang.

‘Are you going to be much longer? We’re going to be late, Demi.’ I give my teeth one more vigorous scrub before gurning in the mirror to check for any remaining mulled wine stains.

‘Coming...’



‘We’re early,’ I say, side-eyeing my sister as we wait outside the woolshed. Evie looks every inch the winter goddess today. She’s dressed in tight black dungarees and a bright, mint green fluffy jumper which shows off her petite frame. Underneath a white fluffy bobble hat, her hair is shiny, and blow dried to perfection. Her makeup is on point too with dewy cheeks, flawless skin and glossy lips. A far cry from all the beige I saw packed in her suitcase. I’m in my dark grey jogging suit and whilst it’s a nice one, well I think so, I look very bland in comparison to my sister with my scraped-up hair and zero makeup. Just as I’m wondering why she’s got so dolled up, the potential answer to my question appears.

‘Hey.’ Marco waves before hoisting his man bag, that keeps sliding down due to the weight of it, up onto his shoulder. The bag is bulging with wool, and knitting needles are poking out of the top. His duffle coat is unzipped, showing a flash of a multi-coloured knitted jumper; I wonder if he made it, if so, it’s very impressive and I want one for myself.

‘Hey.’ Evie waves shyly back and Marco’s grin widens.

‘Amber not come she busy dogging grooming. You are beautiful,’ he blurts out without an ounce of embarrassment for both faux pas. ‘You are also,’ he says to me as an afterthought as his eyes glance at me before lingering back on Evie.

‘Oh, thanks,’ Evie simpers as she begins to twirl a strand of hair around her finger and flutter her eyelashes at him. Olly is a wally but I’m pretty sure he’d be upset about the way she’s behaving around Marco.

‘Hi Marco, how’s it going? Ready to get stuck into some serious knitting?’ I jog on the spot, partly to keep myself warm as I’ve not worn a coat and partly to burn off some nervous energy. I act out an exaggerated knitting motion with my elbows and hands whilst continuing to jog, feeling very much like a court jester performing for my king and queen.

‘Yes, yes of course.’ He laughs, miming some knitting back as Evie scoffs and shakes her head at me.

‘Don’t mind her, she’s mental, loopy. Always has been,’ Evie says as she rolls her eyes. The cow.

‘Loopy? Lopee?’ Marco tilts his head in confusion, trying to make sense of this new sounding word.

‘Crazy.’ Evie makes circles with her fingers by her temples to help further explain her insult. She widens her eyes and laughs.

‘Oh crazy, yes, yes she is funny girl, and you?’ His eyes bore into her as she visibly melts on the spot. Oh please.

‘Don’t worry about her, she’s nothing, no-one.’ Ha. Take that. I’m not a fan of Olly but he doesn’t deserve what I’m witnessing here and it’s leaving a very bad taste in my mouth,

much worse than a mix of mulled wine and toothpaste. Plus, I'm only quoting what she said to him the other day. I glance at Evie expecting to see a scowl, ready to hear her quip back something offensive but she says nothing. She looks deflated, lost. For once, I will her to insult me back. This isn't the Evie I know and dislike.

After a couple of moments of awkward silence, Joyce, Margaret, Joan, Harmony and Destiny turn up and finally Nick, who lets us into the woolshed. I think the woolshed is a fitting name but I don't think it's an original, I'm pretty sure there's a sticky bar somewhere with the same name, where people do a lot more than get their knitting needles out.

Everyone settles down into their chairs and pulls out their patterns. I'm feeling a mixture of excitement and nerves, but I think the nerves are down to seeing Nick and the fact he didn't even so much as look at me just now. Is he ashamed I'm jobless? Christ, what else did I tell him? Did I black out and over share way too much?

Out of nowhere, an encounter with Alastair in the school staff room pops into my head. We thought we were alone, but Mr Parsons was sitting quietly in the corner, frozen to the spot like a little mouse. He always did wear furniture-coloured clothes and he just blended in. Luckily it was just a quick snog and a grope until Mr Parsons coughed when my hand was about to sneak down Alastair's trousers. It could have been a lot worse. Shit.

He phoned me last night, Alastair. Must call back later.

We go around the room taking in everyone's ideas and patterns, there's a collection of oohs and ahhs and also a couple of '*Oh I don't think that's going to work,*' which mainly come from Margaret. There're a few squabbles between Margaret and Joan again which turns into a full-blown argument about the bowls club and the fact that Joan thinks that one of Margaret's team was guilty of foul play. I'm just thinking we need to get a move on with this and make a decision, when Joyce taps her knitting needles on one of the coffee tables and clears her throat.

‘Okay everyone, I think we need to leave Evie and Demi alone to make an executive decision on what patterns we’re going to use and how many etcetera, otherwise we’ll be here all day going around the houses and that’s another day wasted. Time is of the essence. This is the girls’ project remember, we’re merely here to enable it.’ Joyce waves her knitting needles around in the air, daring anyone to argue with her. Of course, someone does.

‘But the girls don’t know our strengths and weaknesses, it needs to be a joint decision,’ Joan pipes up.

‘It’s fine, we can work it out, any experienced knitter could.’ Margaret eyeballs Joan as Joan juts her jaw out and looks the other way.

‘I think Joyce is right,’ Harmony says.

‘Yes, let’s let the girls decide on the patterns and we can decide on who is doing what,’ Destiny finishes as Harmony joins in on the last part of the sentence like some bizarre talking harmony. It’s seriously freaky how these two talk in unison. I wonder if they knit together too, like a two headed spider weaving an intricate web?

We take drinks orders from the dream team before Evie, and I take ourselves off to the bar inside the Mermaid’s Lair to have our important yarn bombing meeting. We choose a table by the window as I scan the room for Nick. There’s no one behind the bar, no sign of any bar staff at all in fact.

‘What do you think then? Any preferences?’ Evie asks as I swivel my head around one more time. ‘Oi, we’ll get drinks in a minute.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ I say rubbing my head, really not in the mood to be spinning any kind of yarn. ‘I thought we decided everything in the last meeting.’ I wave my hand dismissively, feeling a sudden wave of tiredness and hangover headache.

‘No.’ Evie shakes her head quickly. ‘We didn’t, and I think you need to remember why we’re doing this. For Mum, for Aunty Pat and the hospice.’ Evie nods towards the charity box on the counter that probably has a grand total of about three

pounds in it. ‘We need to do her proud and not be bloody martyrs, like she says.’

‘Well, you’ve changed your tune. I wonder why? Could it start with M and end in O O Oooooo.’ I laugh, fully aware that I’m behaving like an immature brat but enjoying it all the same.

‘What?’

‘Never mind,’ I say, spying Nick walking towards the bar. ‘I’ll go and get the drinks, what do you want?’

‘I’ll have a double Pernod and lemonade,’ Evie says through gritted teeth. I can tell that she wants to punch me.

‘Ha, it’s not even midday yet.’

‘And? It’s almost Christmas.’

‘Okay.’ I decide not to argue with that one, she looks like she could do with a drink. I take a deep breath and make my way over to the bar. Operation, keep your mouth shut Nick, here we come.

‘Nick.’

‘Oh, hey.’ He pushes his glasses up onto his nose, quickly blinking a couple of times.

‘How are you feeling?’ he asks through a smile.

‘Not bad, not good either,’ I reply, waiting for him to ask me another question. He doesn’t. ‘Hey, about last night, can we, you know, keep the truth between us?’ I glance back at Evie, who’s frantically typing into her phone, probably some work thing again. Her job sounds relentless, and I thought being a teacher was rough. Leaning forward, I lower my voice. ‘My family don’t know about my job or lack thereof and whilst I’m planning to tell them at some point, I don’t know when that will be. It could even be when I’m back in Edinburgh or it might be never.’ I bite my lip, aware that I sound a bit of a dick.

‘Your secret’s safe with me.’ Nick chuckles. Normally someone laughing at this would piss me off but his laugh makes me feel like it isn’t that much of a big deal and maybe

everything is going to be alright. It's comforting. He's comforting.

'Thanks, I appreciate that.' I smile back at him.

'It's really none of their business anyway, is it?' He shrugs and I can't tell if he's joking or not. A hint of a smirk gives him away.

'Yeah, you're right, it's not.' I glance back at Evie, who's still typing. Her face contorts into a painful expression, she either really needs a good fart or she's struggling to find the right words to explain something.

'Your secret's safe with me, Demi, on one condition.' Oh shit. I knew it. I knew this was too good to be true. I gulp and say nothing, silently awaiting my fate.

'Neve has been harassing me to go and visit Santa and she's asked that you come too. She's quite taken with you.'

'Oh right, well of course, I'd do it anyway even without the bribe.' She's a sweet kid and she makes me laugh. We share the same humour.

'That's a date then,' he says before looking horrified at his own choice of words. 'I mean, it's not a date, it's a...'

'A date with Santa,' I say, saving his embarrassment.

'Yep.'

Nick and I exchange numbers so we can arrange the Santa date before I order the drinks for Evie and I and the knitting crew. Whilst he shuffles about behind the bar, mixing and pouring drinks, I pick up the charity box and notice it isn't chained to the bar. If it were anywhere else, I'd be worried someone would take it, but this is Coolsbay and we basically have a zero percent crime rate. The lackadaisical approach to the charity money doesn't bother me but it does spark an idea on how to raise more.

'Could we organise a little games night or something over Christmas? Something to draw the punters in so that we can tell them about the yarn bombing and ask for donations?' I shake the charity box as Nick sets down the drinks and turn it

over in my hand. *'Hospice donations for sponsored yarn bombing. In memory of Pat,'* is written in large letters in purple felt tip pen. The pub must have cobbled this together when they first found out about the event.

'Sure, let's chat about that tomorrow.' He continues to make the drinks as a figure appears next to me and taps impatiently on the bar.

'Young chap,' he commands as he turns towards me and tips his big cowboy hat at me. I nod back unsure of what else to do. It's the bloke from the other day, the one that seemingly likes to complain.

'Hi there, won't be a moment, Atticus,' Nick says as Atticus nods then picks up the charity box.

'Yarn bombing, what is that?' Atticus asks to no one in particular.

'It's where you make decorations for things like trees, and pillar box toppers out of wool. They can be quite striking. In fact, I'm Pat's niece and we're doing it...'

'Comical,' Atticus blurts out but he's now flicking through the local newspaper that he's picked up off a nearby bar stool. I can't tell if the comment was directed at me, the newspaper or the yarn bombing. 'I wanted to let you know that the bed is much better, thank you, but I do think I found mouse droppings this morning by the sink,' he says to Nick who has a very patient look on his face.

'Oh dear, I'll get it checked out as soon as possible. So sorry about that.'

'My man,' Atticus says, tipping his hat at Nick. 'I'm going for a walk in the hills now, will it be sorted before my return?'

'I'll certainly aim for it, sir.'

'Good man.' He tips his hat at Nick and then me before chucking a load of pound coins into the charity box.

'Thank you so much,' I say as we both watch Atticus waddle off, still holding onto his hat.

Chapter Eleven

It's Wednesday and true to the note in the cupcake diary, Mum and Tony sidle off at 12pm for their shameless threesome. Mum has on a smart navy dress and Tony is wearing a navy suit with a spotty navy and white tie. If we didn't know any better, they could be dressed for a wedding. They're the kind of smart/casual outfits that would lend themselves to that. But no, my parents are dressed for sex. Shameless, uninhibited, and taboo sex.

'Quite a posh threesome they're having in all their finery.' Evie giggles as we watch them trot down the driveway from the front door spyhole. Tony slaps Mum's bottom and Evie and I recoil.

'Yuck,' we say in unison as they get into the car and drive away.

'If only we had a car, we could follow them,' I say, half disgusted, half excited.

'Oh, let them get on with it, do you really want to know the details?' Evie asks, arching her eyebrows. 'We have work to do anyway, come on.'

After we chose the designs for the yarn bombing yesterday, the dream team were pretty much in agreement that it was going to work and they've made great headway already. Cousin Amber kindly offered to go and check on them later this afternoon. In the meantime, Nick said he would top their drinks up and separate any squabbles whilst Evie and I parade the village tapping up people for sponsors. Our aim is to generate excitement around the yarn bombing and raise as much money as we can for the hospice.

'I can't believe you made me wear this,' Evie says, hands on hips, checking herself out in the hallway mirror. 'What makes you think this is going to help raise funds?' She looks down at her feet, all long and pointy and curled up at the ends.

A snort escapes me as I look down at my matching elf feet. We do look ridiculous, but I enjoy dressing up, pretending to

be someone else. That's why I do what I do. Or did, what I did, for that matter. I briefly wonder if I should apply to go on *Casualty* as an extra and pursue my old dream of becoming an actress.

'It's going to be fun with a capital F, and it will give people a bit of a laugh if nothing else. You never know, it might compel them to sponsor us double the amount than they normally would. A bit of elfin sister cheer.'

'If you say so. I'm surprised Mum kept these, but they fit well.' Evie twirls around. She's wearing the age 11-12 and I have on the adult size small. Let's just say I'm grateful that it's stretchy.

'Yes, except I'm wearing the child's size.' Evie laughs and I feel a pang of nostalgia mixed with sadness. We last wore the elf outfits the year before she went to university and found herself a new life, and I got left behind. It was the last Christmas we were normal sisters and life as I knew it changed forever. I lost my mentor, my best friend. I lost her to the big wide world and she never came back, physically she did but we never connected again after that. Just a few messages of *I miss yous* and *I'll come and see you soon, I promise* petering out until there was nothing.

'It's not my fault I grew, and you didn't.' The words leave my mouth in a bitter sounding spit. They were meant to come out lighter but instead I sound every inch the bratty younger sister.

'And it's not my fault I can still wear children's clothes, pay half the price and get away with it.' She shrugs her shoulders and grabs the charity box; I follow her out of the door. Despite my outburst, she seems a lot more chilled today and I haven't seen her on the laptop yet. Perhaps she's told work to do one and rightly so. It is almost Christmas.

Evie and I step out onto Coolsbay high street and survey the shops.

'You do the shops on the left and I'll do the shops on the right.'

‘No way. I am not going off as an elf on my own, we do this together or not at all.’ Evie stands with her hands on her hips again, an angry elf.

‘Oh yeah, I forgot you were shy.’ I roll my eyes, finding it difficult to shake myself out of this bad mood. I must think like an elf and summon the Christmas spirit, especially if I’m hanging out with Neve later, she won’t be wanting to meet a grumpy elf.

‘Not shy, just not a big performer like you, I’m out of my comfort zone.’ Evie blinks at me, her elf hat flopping slightly to the side.

‘Okay, okay, let’s do it together. Come on buddy.’ I link Evie’s arm and frog march her into the first shop. We can be friends as elves, it’s not real life. The first shop is the bakers, the smell of freshly cooked pastries teases my nostrils, and my stomach does an involuntary loud rumble.

‘Hi,’ I say waving to a man in a white apron and baker’s hat behind the counter. ‘How are you?’

‘Good, good, can’t complain. What can I do for you girls?’

‘We’re Pat William’s nieces,’ I say, jangling the charity box bearing a fresh picture of Pat’s face and the words “Yarn Bombing Event, in memory of Pat Williams”. Tony stayed up late last night to print us off a new label, he also made and printed off a load of leaflets. Bless him. ‘You might have known her?’ I continue in my posh theatrical voice. ‘We’re looking after a team of talented knitters, crocheters and sewers who are currently creating a Coolsbay Christmas masterpiece for all the town to enjoy.’ I fling my arms up in the air and almost punch Evie in the nose. ‘Our aim is to spread happiness this Christmas by yarn bombing the town with a beautiful, knitted spectacle, in memory of Pat and with the colour and joy she brought to so many. We’re currently in search of sponsors.’ Evie rattles the charity box next to me which sounds very pathetic, despite Atticus’s contributions. I knew I should have added more to make it sound more appealing. ‘And we wondered whether you would like to donate?’ Evie shakes the box again and I want to kick her to tell her that it’s

now looking a bit desperate in more ways than one. I might actually punch her on the nose in a minute. I don't though, in case baker man sees. Instead, we both stand smiling aimlessly until I put on my best American accent.

'We love smiling, it's our favourite,' I quote from the movie *Elf*.

The baker gives me a sideways glance while Evie makes a noise that resembles something between a balloon deflating and a toad ribbiting.

'That's great and what a wonderful idea,' the baker says, clueless, as Evie and I continue to silly grin at him.

I can't look at her, if I do, I will dissolve into a crying, laughing fit and I'm pretty sure Evie feels the same. How has this man not seen *Elf*?

'I knew Pat and she was a real firecracker. I think this is just great, give me a minute, will you girls?' The baker shuffles out to the back of the shop and moments later he returns with two paper bags and some change.

'Here you go girls,' he says huffing and puffing as he forces the shrapnel into the charity tin. I see 5ps, 2ps and a 20 pence piece. There's probably 80p there, absolute maximum. 'Something to keep you elves going too.' He hands us the paper bags and I take a sneak peek inside.

'Oh wow, thank you so much, looks delicious,' Evie says as we both inhale the chocolate cinnamon roll.

'Thank you.' The baker puffs out his chest. 'Special family recipe.' He taps his nose, and we say our goodbyes. Short of getting paid in pastries it might be harder than we thought to get a decent amount of money raised for the hospice. If only we'd known sooner, we could have put something together online, reached out to a few big companies but instead we have less than 10 days and a high street of independently owned businesses. I don't blame them for not paying us more, they're trying to make a living in a cost-of-living crisis after all. It's hard for everyone at the moment but we have to raise more funds than this because right now it's embarrassing.

‘Where next?’ Evie asks through mouthfuls of pastry. I’m glad she’s eating; she certainly seems chirpier today.

I open my mouth to ask her about work and Olly, but the words get stuck in my throat. Why should I ask about her when she doesn’t care about me. She left home and didn’t bother with me after that so I’m not going to concern myself with her. It’s good we’re getting along, it makes it more pleasant, but we’re mere acquaintances now, sisters by chance, not by choice.

‘Dunno.’ I scoff down a mouthful of chocolatey, greasy goodness to stop myself from being interested in my sister’s life. ‘We could try here, they might be willing to donate more, it’s a bigger company.’ We stroll into the clothes shop, Emmanuels and give a rather po-faced woman the same spiel about late Aunty Pat, the hospice and the yarn bombing. It’s even worse than the bakers and we don’t even get any freebies to stuff our faces with.

‘Well, that was a stinker,’ I say as we leave the store, scanning the street for our next victim.

‘I know, what was her problem?’ Evie asks, throwing her arms up in the air. ‘Anyone would think we were asking her to show us her knickers.’ She giggles and I laugh along with her.

‘Don’t. That’s what Mum is doing to Tony and the man they’re having a threesome with right now.’

‘Yuck! Stop obsessing over it, it’s their lives,’ Evie says, laughing.

‘I know but it’s just so weird and I can’t stop thinking who A could be. Come on, you can’t tell me you’re not wondering too.’ I nudge Evie in the ribs but gently as she looks quite fragile. She almost falls over so I’m glad I didn’t give her a proper good nudge.

‘Okay, okay, I do wonder but then I have my own life to worry about and so should you.’

‘Yeah? And how’s that going?’ We fall into step and I link her arm. My sister. My one and only elf sister.

‘Yeah fine, why?’ Her voice is clipped, almost defensive and I immediately regret asking her.

‘Nothing, was just asking,’ I say as I unlink her arm and she stomps off ahead.

Evie and I spend the next hour diving in and out of shops and focusing on making money for the hospice. We paste on smiles and even perform a little elf dance in the street to passing children.

‘You should do this for a living,’ Evie says after we’ve finished high fiving several happily entertained kids and one very thankful mum who was on the verge of having to restrain a tantruming three-year-old. That was, until I started singing Christmas carols, including my own song about children being good at Christmas time and she promptly stopped.

‘Don’t tempt me.’ If only she knew.

‘What shall we do now?’ Evie asks, like us hanging out is a completely normal thing for us to do. Something tells me she’s enjoyed this afternoon and I must admit, I have too.

‘Well, Nick’s asked me to hang out with him and his little sister, come along if you like? I’m sure they’d be room for another elf.’

‘Oh no I’ll leave you to it, but I’ll pop back and check on the knitters before I go and hand out these leaflets,’ she says, shaking the leaflets that Tony printed last night. ‘And get some more wool. We need more wool.’

We turn left at the top of the high street towards the Mermaid’s Lair pub.

‘Well, I’ll go and see Sandra and get the wool, you can’t do all of that,’ I offer, feeling like the slack off sister.

‘Are you sure? Amber said Sandra can be a bit abrupt.’ Evie grimaces and I know she’s putting that mildly as Amber also told me that she’s a complete battle-axe cow.

‘It’s fine. Nothing I can’t handle.’ I’m a big girl now.



‘Mum, Tony!’ I squawk as Evie and I approach the bar to find them enjoying an afternoon tippie at the Mermaid’s Lair. Mum waves but Tony is deep in conversation with Atticus who is now complaining about the price of beer, hiding his miserable face behind his cowboy hat.

‘Nice relaxing drink after their session,’ I whisper in Evie’s ear as she jabs me in the ribs.

‘Shut up.’

‘Hello, lovely girls, aww don’t you both look sweet, we thought we’d surprise you both,’ Mum says as she claps her hands on her cheeks and visibly melts at her little darlings, dressed as elves and home for Christmas. ‘My lovely little elves.’ She reaches for us, arms stretched out wide and pinches each of our cheeks like we’re children again. Evie and I stand either side of Mum as she quizzes us on what we’ve been doing. I try not to make it look obvious that I’m eavesdropping in on Tony and Atticus’s conversation.

‘So,’ Atticus begins as Tony nods politely, gulping and most likely swallowing a yawn. ‘That’s what I’ve told management anyway, the beds simply aren’t fit for purpose and the mouse droppings are another story. They need to invest more if they want more customers,’ he taps a finger on the bar. ‘No wonder I’m the only one staying here. Coolsbay is a hidden gem though and this place does have the most exquisite hills to go walking in.’

There’s literally one hill in Coolsbay. Nick raises an eyebrow at me as if he’s read my mind. If I remember rightly Nick said that they didn’t want any customers over Christmas, they let this guy stay because he was insistent, desperate even.

‘Atticus, did you want the Coolsbay bitter or the Cornish pale ale this time?’ Nick asks as he waves at me and Evie and I feel a sharp jab in the ribs from Evie.

‘Pale ale please, young Nick,’ Atticus says as my eyes meet Evie’s and the penny drops. Atticus begins with an A. Mum and Dad are having a three-way with Atticus the moaner.

Chapter Twelve

All colour drains from Evie's face.

'I've got to go,' she says, throwing her phone, that I didn't notice her checking, back into her bag. 'Emergency at work.' I know she's thinking the same about the three-way and now faced with the truth, I can tell that she feels physically sick. As do I, but it's up to me to remain strong. I always did have a stronger stomach than she did.

'No worries, hope you get it sorted. Do you want me to check on the group?'

'Yes please, that would be wonderful. Thanks, Demi.' She squeezes my arm, pecks Mum and Tony on the cheek and sprints off out of the pub. Away from this cringe fest.

'No worries,' I say to the back of her head as the door swings behind her. I guess I'll have to face this three-way on my own. Maybe this is what this meeting is for, to tell us their favourite pastime. Our liberated parents want to free themselves of any rules and regulations when it comes to marriage and sex and that includes telling their girls everything. Well, no way. Not in this lifetime.

'So, we just thought we'd pop by and surprise you, sad that Evie had to go,' Mum says sticking her bottom lip out. She reaches out for me again and I recoil a little. Retired mums don't do three-ways.

'Yeah, well I'd love to stay and chat, but I have an afternoon planned with a very special little girl.' I nod at Nick with a smile, and he winks. 'But first I need to check on the knitters, I'll see you all later.' I belt off to the woolshed and breathe a sigh of relief when I get to the door. Now that I know who A is, I can't stop thinking about it. Did they organise this specifically or did they meet him by chance? It would have had to have been organised specifically surely. On a dating app? A swinging app? Either way, I don't want to know. I wish I'd never opened that diary and read what I read.

In desperate need of things more wholesome, I reach the woolshed which is glowing with warmth and cosiness. Peering through the window, I nose at the dream team, everyone looks so calm and serene knitting away as Christmas music plays in the background. I smile to myself as I watch Marco listen intently to Joan who looks like she is explaining how to do something complicated with her needles. I watch her for a second. Crossing the needles this way and that as Marco's eyes follow the motion. The twins are crocheting identical mice, sitting side by side. I watch as the hooks bob in unison. I'm amazed at how much they've done, so much so that I realise I've just said 'wow' out loud.

'Pretty impressive, isn't it?' My cousin Amber grins as she wrestles with fresh balls of yarn in every colour. 'I've just been to get more wool; they're on a mission.' She leans in closer and peers through the window with me.

'Oh, you shouldn't have, I was going to go later today. They really are,' I agree as I take a few balls of yarn off Amber and steal another look at the dream team. Joyce looks like she's in some kind of deep trance as she knits and purls in a gorgeous navy-blue wool. Margaret has a sketch book out and is designing something although I can't make out what. It's really a hub of cosy, lovely creativity. Pat would be so proud. It's going to look amazing.

'Rather me than you, I've basically cleared her out, you'd think she'd be happy for the custom but she's a real sour faced cow. Mum never did like her.' It takes me a second to realise she means Sandra, the woman in the wool shop.

'Ooops. 'Thanks so much for looking after them, I was just coming to check.'

'Oh, it's no worries, Marco was coming in anyway, so I thought I'd come and say hi. When the guys said you girls were out touting for sponsors, I thought I'd do my bit.' Amber clutches at the balls of wool, tears suddenly forming in her eyes.

'You are doing more than enough, you have a family including a young baby and a business to run, we wouldn't

expect you to be here all the time. Just leave that to me and Evie.’

‘I know, I know, but I just want to do my best for Mum. I don’t want to be a martyr,’ she says through a tearful smile as she quotes her mum’s famous catch phrase.

‘Our mum chose me and Evie for a reason, obviously thought we needed this project, so please don’t feel bad.’

‘Thanks, to be honest I just wanted to get out of the house for an hour. I’m glad Dylan is home with the kids because I’ve got a lot of stuff going on with the dog business and I’m just trying to get my head around it all.’

‘Oh, anything I can help with?’ I ask, although I’m not sure what I could possibly help with. I could walk a few dogs I guess but grooming them is another matter. I can’t even wrestle Frosty into the bath and I’m the only one he won’t roll over for, just barks at me and does the play bow.

‘Not really, I just need to get things clear in my mind and make a plan, it’s going to need some concentrating, so I’m glad I wasn’t tasked with this to be honest, I would have done it but...’

‘I know, she’d be so proud of you,’ I say.

‘Do you thi...’ Amber stops talking. We stare wide eyed, and mouths open as a beautiful fluffy white feather slowly drifts down and lands on top of a purple ball of wool in Amber’s arms.

‘Yeah, I do,’ I say as goosebumps form on the back of my neck and arms. I pick the feather up, turning it over in my hand and study it, briefly wondering what bird it has come from. I decide there’s only one option, it’s from a dove. Tears begin to stream down Amber’s cheeks but this time they are happy ones.

‘Thanks Mum,’ she says, looking up to the sky. I pass the feather back to her and balance it on top of the wool.

‘Thanks Aunty Pat, we’ll do you proud.’



‘So, Neve, what are you going to ask Santa for Christmas?’ I ask in my best American elf voice, sounding very much like my idol Dolly Parton, but high on helium.

I don’t know why I’ve gone for this voice as it’s something I’ll have to keep up now. At least it’s only for an hour or so. I told Neve that Demi couldn’t come today so Santa’s best Christmas elf came instead. Okay, so I got a little caught up in the magic and the make believe. Perhaps I’m missing the acting. Nick, Neve and I head for the Santa grotto inside the Coolsbay indoor shopping centre. As we turn a corner, a makeshift wooden grotto, decorated with a snowy rooftop and a white picket fence comes into view. Two young girls about fifteen or sixteen and dressed as elves stand outside the grotto. Arms folded and with scowls on their faces, they look like they’ve been made to stand there with invisible guns against their heads.

‘I’m going to ask him for a rainbow and a unicorn,’ she says with determination as I watch one of the elves clock us. They unfold their arms reluctantly but still chew on their gum, looking very fed up. ‘And for Dad to come and live with us.’ Neve nods and marches on, her huge backpack strapped to her back. Nick says she brings it everywhere. We run to catch up with her, the determined little ball of energy and her big bouncing backpack.

‘Really?’ says Nick as he catches my eye with horror etched all over his face. ‘What about that doll you liked with the hair that you can arrange in different ways and couldn’t you make it change colour too? I’m sure you could make it change to pink?’ he says with an enthusiastic, albeit slightly panicked, tone. It’s a tone that I’ve never heard him use but he’s put it on for his little sister and that’s very sweet. ‘But I think actually that’s just for big girls,’ he continues as he shrugs one shoulder then winks at me. I suppress a smile, seeing what he’s doing there.

‘Well, *I am* a big girl.’ She waves her hands in the air, wiggling her fingers, then continues to march.

‘Remember,’ Nick calls out as she marches on ahead. ‘You can only ask for one thing and the doll won’t be around for

ever, unicorns and rainbows will.'

'I'll ask for the doll,' she says, not looking back. Conveniently forgetting about her dad. For now.

'Hi,' one of the elves says, as we approach. She chews on her gum, making no attempt to smile. 'Have you got a booking?'

'Umm, no we don't,' Nick says, shifting on his feet in his old school shoes. 'Did we need one?'

'Santa's fully booked up until Christmas,' says the other elf, in a completely uninterested tone. She turns away and begins mumbling to the other elf about needing a cigarette break soon.

'No booking, no visit,' the other elf says just as a little girl about Neve's age exits the grotto, clutching at a bag labelled reindeer food and a large, wrapped present. She has a big smile on her face as her mum and dad walk either side of her. We watch them leave as the little girl chats away excitedly to her parents about how amazing Santa was and how he read her a story.

'No, he's not, is he? Neve whimpers. 'He's not all booked, is he, chief elf?' Neve blinks up at me, her eyes glistening with disappointment. My eyes move to Nick to see the colour has drained from his face. He's panicking. It's up to me to save this. Nick told me she's been looking forward to this for weeks, possibly even months. He'll be kicking himself that he didn't book. Not sure of what I'm going to say, I bend down to speak to her, taking her hand in mine. This chief elf needs to fix this.

'Of course not, Neve my cupcake,' I say in my best American elf voice as the other elves snicker in the background. I raise my eyebrows and glare at the bad elves. The smirks disappear from their faces and one of them swallows her gum. Still good at the bitch glare even in the elf outfit.

'I'm going to take you to meet the real Santa,' I enthuse, my voice almost turning into a Micky Mouse whisper. Nick's eyes

widen, he must think I'm bonkers.

'Yay!' Neve squeals, jumping up and down. Nick picks her up and swings her around.

'Yeah, these guys are fakes anyway.' I throw a thumb at the bad elves as they both squint their eyes at me. 'Come on guys, let's leave the fakes to it.'

'Fake, fakes, fakes,' Neve chants, pointing at the elves as a family with two kids exit the grotto looking momentarily confused. Nick takes Neve's hand and we swiftly skip out of the shopping centre, giggling and chanting, 'fakes, fakes, fakes,' altogether as we go.

'I just have to make a phone call to the important big man, be right back,' I say as I skip off round the corner and out of ear shot, leaving Nick and Neve by the exit.

'Hey Mum, is Tony about?' I ask, still talking in my elf voice.

'Umm yes.' Mum chuckles. 'I'll just go and get him.' There's shuffling and mumbling until he eventually comes to the house phone.

'Tony. I need your help please, to save a little girl's Christmas,' I say dramatically as a couple walk past and give me a confused smile.

'Riiiiight,' he says slowly.

'Do you still have the Santa outfit?'

'I think so, why? As long as your mother hasn't chucked it out, you know what she's like for de-cluttering.'

'Nick's sister, she's five, and was promised she'd meet Santa. We've just taken her to the grotto but they're fully booked. It wasn't a great experience at all. She's really upset.' Slight exaggeration but you've got to do what you've got to do.

'What are you getting at, Demi?'

'Can you dress up as Santa and be him for her?' There's a long pause. 'Please? You're the best Santa, I was convinced

for years. It would make a little girl's Christmas.'

'Oh Demi, I don't think...'

'Pleaaaassee.'

Chapter Thirteen

‘That was quite impressive,’ Nick says as we peer through the window of the woolshed. Together we sigh in both happiness and relief as we watch Neve sit on a little stool next to Tony, AKA Santa. Nick smiles, his full dimples showing, as Tony begins to read her a Christmas story that he found in the loft. After a lot of begging and buttering up, Tony dug out the old Santa suit and relented. He’s the best stepdad there is, well I need to stop calling him that, because he’s the best dad. A dad that stepped up when mine and Evie’s biological father couldn’t be bothered anymore. He left us then moved to Australia never to be seen or heard from ever again and the less said about that, the better. Tony’s almost always been there, since I was Neve’s age anyway.

He’s my real dad, biologically or not.

‘He’s good, isn’t he?’ I say, bursting with pride, gulping down my sudden gush of admiration for Dad. I watch him tentatively read to Neve, stopping to ask her questions along the way.

‘Yes. No.’ Nick shakes his head, his huge glasses shifting slightly on his nose. ‘I mean yes, he’s good, but so are you. Look how quickly you sorted all of this out, you even have a present.’ He points to the neatly wrapped gift in my hands complete with gold ribbons and a bow which (in true elf style) I’ll be walking in with once Dad has finished the story. I smile.

‘And a packet of reindeer food,’ I shake the packet of mixed-up oats and glitter that mum quickly rustled up. ‘But I can’t take all the credit. It’s lucky Mum is very organised; I haven’t even wrapped my presents yet.’

‘You really saved my arse,’ he continues as he bites his lip, chewing it on one side.

‘Well, I’ll have to replace it, it was a gift for my niece, but it helps they’re a similar age. We were very lucky.’

‘I’ll replace that of course; this whole day will mean a lot to her. She’s had a turbulent time lately, what with her dad

coming back on the scene. It's confusing for a five-year-old.' We both watch Neve and Tony for a moment as the new information of what this means to the little girl sinks in. I open my mouth to ask about her dad, but he gets there first and then my thought is lost. 'You know you're just as crazy as I remember you, you were always the main character in the school plays. I thought you were so talented.' Nick smiles shyly as our little fingers, resting against the windowpane, ever so slightly touch. I could move my hand away, but I don't. I like the feeling of it being here.

'Really?' I move my head to look at him.

His eyebrows knit together and he switches sides, chewing on the right side of his lip this time. It's almost as if he's chewing his words over in his mind. Carefully choosing each one before he releases them from his mouth. 'Really. Thank you for today. She's, I mean, we've loved it. It will be a special memory. A core memory as they say. One that she'll cherish forever.'

'Thank you too, for not spilling my dreaded secret about my job. I get a bit loose tongued when I've had a few. I should have kept that to myself.'

'It's fine, I'd forgotten all about it anyway. It was a fun night.'

'Yeah, it was.' Our eyes meet and his little finger moves slowly against mine. It's so subtle, I'm not sure if it was intentional or not. 'I've already forgotten all about you not booking Santa for your little sister,' I attempt a joke, feeling a little heady from the closeness of Nick. He smells of leather and citrus. And, it's probably the festive cheer, the cosiness of the woolshed and the warm fuzzy feeling from the good deed but everything combined is making me feel a little gooey inside – for Nick. I need to get a grip.

'Secret's forgotten,' he replies. Now it's my turn to move my finger against his. He lets out a breath which could have been a tiny gasp. Was that excitement? Am I reading this all wrong?

‘Your glasses are all steamed up.’ I giggle, suddenly nervous about this surprise Christmas chemistry. ‘Sorry, it must be me, breathing my breath all over you,’ I continue, instantly regretting my poor choice of words. Of course I’m breathing breath, what else would I be breathing? I roll my eyes at myself and shake my head.

‘That’s okay.’ He takes them off and begins to clean the lenses on his shirt. For a brief second, he looks up at me and I notice the richness and warmth in his eyes but also the tinge of sadness. They are the colour of chocolate fudge cake and, right now I could easily indulge in him. Shit. How cheesy is that? But it’s true. He’s soooo dreamy right now.

‘Santa’s going to get me some kinetic sand!’ Neve bursts out of the woolshed as Dad follows behind her. Nick moves away, our moment just a moment that probably won’t happen ever again. ‘And I asked for a doll for Christmas, the one with colour changing pink hair.’ Nick scoops her up, giving her a big cuddle and a kiss on the forehead.

‘Yeah!’ Neve punches the air then reaches into her pockets. ‘And Santa gave me some treasure,’ she whispers, clutching at the chocolate gold coins in her little hands before she frantically opens one, letting the wrapper and several pieces of her treasure drop to the floor. She stuffs half of the chocolate coin into her mouth and the rest of it into Nick’s mouth, much to his surprise.

‘Hey,’ I say in my best American elf voice, feeling a little self-conscious around Nick now. ‘I’ve got this gift for you, for being such a special, kind and brave little girl.’ I was so distracted by whatever’s going on between me and Nick that I missed the end of the story and my cue to pop into the shed with the present and the reindeer food.

Nick puts an excited, squirming five-year-old down. ‘Here you go.’ I hand her the present and the reindeer food (which she chucks on the floor) then tears open the present with gusto.

‘Mummy always calls me brave. How did you know? Kinetic sand!’ She screams. ‘This is magic, Santa.’ Dad, who has been delighting in the little girl’s joy just as much as we

have, winks at Neve before letting out a very convincing and loud *ho ho ho*. We all laugh as Neve squeals with delight marvelling at her much-desired kinetic sand. This is surely what Christmas is all about. Spreading joy to others, especially small, sweet children.



‘Do you think many people will come?’ I ask as I watch Evie in the mirror.

‘I hope so,’ Evie slaps on another layer of pink lipstick. ‘We told every shop in Coolsbay and you’ve been on the local radio banging on about it, so people are bound to come, they’d be rude not to.’ She checks herself out in the mirror before carefully taking a bite of her sandwich, trying to avoid crumbs getting stuck to her freshly painted lips. She definitely has her appetite back now. Today, instead of having her laptop by the bed, it’s packed away in a bag in the living room. Perhaps it’s out of sight, out of mind. Let’s hope so.

‘That’s true,’ I say. ‘My dulcet tones should be enough to draw the whole of Coolsbay in.’ Evie affectionately pushes my arm. After the sweet afternoon with Neve and Nick, the local radio station called the pub to say that they’d like us to do a quick live interview over the phone about the yarn bombing. Much to Nick’s surprise and horror, I got a bit carried away and mentioned that we were doing a fund-raising party tomorrow night in honour of Pat. It just slipped out, but after a quick chat with a slightly disgruntled owner, all was smoothed over. It will bring more punters into the pub after all. Evie and I have had less than twenty-four hours to turn it around. I just hope we pull it off.

‘Hey, isn’t that your phone going off?’ Evie says as she looks around to see where the noise is coming from. I reach into my handbag and grab my phone, half expecting it to be Alastair. I wish he would stop calling and sexting. It’s beginning to irritate me. He’s a serial sexter and it’s all he thinks about. I should probably reply to him. Already this morning he’s sent seven messages and two voice notes describing what he wants to do to me but I’m not in the mood for it. Or am I just not in the mood for him? His hot and cold

communication is wearing a bit thin. He wasn't this keen when I was in Edinburgh, so what's changed?

'It's my housemate, Phillipa.' I say, staring at the screen.

'Well answer it then.'

I stick my tongue out at my bossy sister and make a mental note to say the same annoying thing to her next time her phone rings. Then scrap that thought because I'm an adult now and I want to behave like one.

'Hey Phil, how's it going?'

'Hey mate, not bad, well not too good actually,' Phillipa whimpers through sniffs. Her voice is thin and reedy, not at all like Phillipa. Oh no. She's split up with Roo. Perhaps she got sick of the cleaning rota too. Her love language isn't acts of service after all. I knew it.

It was a bit much.

'What's the matter?' I ask. Evie's ears prick up.

'It's Bob.'

'Who?'

'Our landlord.'

'Oh yeah.' I think I've met Bob all of twice since moving in. Phillipa dealt with all of that. If things broke or Roo wanted to decorate, she just called Bob.

'He's died. The house has been left to his kids and they're moving in after Christmas. We're essentially homeless after that.'

'What? Can they do that?'

'Yes, yes, they can. I'm sad he's died of course I am.' She sniffs. 'Apparently, he died months ago. They sent us a notice to quit. I never saw it, did you?'

'No.' Did I? No, I'm sure I didn't, not that I take much notice of the post, Phillipa handles all that and it's mostly junk mail.

‘Anyway,’ she continues. ‘When we didn’t object, they took that as us agreeing. We have three weeks to find somewhere to live, Demi. Three weeks!’

I blow air out of my cheeks as I let the news sink in. Shit. ‘Shit,’ I say as a nosey Evie mouths ‘what’ at me. I turn away, she’s not the only one who can be secretive.

‘Yes, shit indeed. Roo is on the case already but everywhere is winding down for Christmas.’

‘Is there anything I can do?’

‘No, it’s okay. Roo has contacted every letting agency in Edinburgh but with Christmas in less than a week no one is interested.’

‘Okay, try not to stress, something will turn up,’ I say as I mentally file through my friends in Edinburgh to see if any of them would let me sofa-surf for a while.

‘Okay, well I’ve got to go. Roo is flailing his arms at me about something. Oh, I think he may have found a place to view. Have a lovely Christmas and sorry for the bad news but I thought you should know.’

‘It’s okay, try not to worry. Thanks for letting me know, I’ll have a think. Enjoy your Christmas and send my love to Roo.’

‘Will do. I’ll keep you updated.’ I hear Roo shout her name in the background. ‘Speak soon.’ She hangs up and my hands fly up to my temples. I close my eyes. This can’t be happening. ‘For fuck’s sake.’

‘What’s wrong, is everything okay?’ Evie rests a hand on my shoulder.

‘So now I’m homeless as well as jobless.’ The words leave my mouth and hang in the air like two balloons about to be popped. Shrinking, I can almost hear the air leaving them. It’s exactly how I feel. Deflated. Squashed flat.

‘You’re what?’ Evie says slowly.

‘Oh, shit shitty shit, shit.’ I pull at my hair; twirl then flump on the bed face first. This is not good.

‘You didn’t mean to tell me that did you?’

‘Nope,’ I mutter into my pillow.

‘What’s happened with your job? Demi? Demi?’ My hands, still on my temples, slide to my face. I want to hide but there’s nowhere to go. Evie rolls me over onto my back and I lay on the bed like it’s a therapy couch, telling my sister everything. All about Alastair (the reason I left my job) and the fact that the landlord now wants us out in three weeks. It feels cathartic to let it all out and she listens intently, nodding in all the right places, being a friend, a sounding board. A sister.

‘Oh Demi.’ Her tone is gentle after my almighty amount of word vomit has finally subsided. ‘This Alastair, he sounds like a bit of a dick, you should never leave your job just because a man makes you feel a bit uncomfortable. Where’s your fighting spirit?’

‘How does he sound like a dick? He’s not a dick. It’s a thing, we were a sort of thing,’ I say feebly. ‘He’s coming to visit me here and you’ll get to meet him. I left because you shouldn’t mix business with pleasure. God can’t you see that? I didn’t want to shit or shag on my doorstep.’ I wipe my eyes, tears of frustration betraying me.

‘When’s he coming?’ she asks evenly.

‘Soon.’ Although we’ve not actually set a date yet. I make a mental note to contact him later. He won’t let me down. I’m his Demi-baby.

‘I dunno, Demi,’ she says my name, sounding sterner this time. ‘You always seem to run away when the going gets tough. Now, you’re left without a job. That’s irresponsible to just leave without sorting something else out. What are you going to do? How are you going to pay your rent?’

‘What rent?’ I laugh at the absurdity of it all. ‘I’ll get a new job.’ I shrug. ‘I’ll figure it out.’

‘Well Mum and Tony aren’t going to be very happy when they find out.’

‘They aren’t going to find out though, are they? Because you’re not going to tell them,’ I spit, now resentful at the

lecturing big sister speech.

‘Demi.’ Evie folds her arms, her voice slow and patronising. It’s like we’re teenagers again and she’s dismissing my feelings because I’m younger. Well, my feelings count, I’m not a child anymore.

‘No. You’re not perfect either,’ I point at her accusingly, thinking of her flirting with Marco when she has a husband at home. I don’t have to say anything because she knows exactly what I’m talking about. She narrows her eyes and I glare back at her. ‘This stays between us. I’m a grown ass woman and I will sort out my own problems without anyone else’s help.’

‘Fine,’ Evie says, not blinking.

‘Fine.’

Chapter Fourteen

My life has turned into a shambles and now my perfect sister knows the mess I'm in.

We approach the pub, both sweaty from the walk, wearing way too many clothes for a mild December evening even though Mum warned us it was mild. At seven pm, although pitch black, it's ten degrees and unlike the atmosphere between Evie and I, the weather is strangely calm.

'They're here!' someone yells, as party poppers are let off remarkably close to our faces. Evie screams and I laugh from the shock. Forgetting our argument for a second, we marvel at the bustling merriness of the pub and the wonderful job we did setting it up. My mood instantly lifts as a live musician begins to play the guitar, belting out an acoustic version of *Last Christmas* by Wham. There are a few stalls including a lady selling homemade cakes, a reiki healer and tarot reader, and a man selling crystals. Someone else is selling homemade Christmas socks and earrings. Then I spot the knitters, who are sitting around a table in the corner showing off some of their handiwork. There's a large photo of Auntie Pat on the wall, with her catchphrase written underneath; *I love you but don't be a martyr*. People are queuing up to put money in the charity box. My heart could burst. There are just enough stalls to make for a nice, cosy atmosphere but not too much to distract from the yarn bombers. For a last-minute event, I'm really impressed with us, me and Evie.

'Well done, us,' Evie says as she links my arm, evidently feeling the pride too.

'Yeah, well done us. We couldn't have done it without him though.' I nod at Nick who's behind the bar speaking to Atticus who appears to be complaining as usual. Tonight, Nick's dressed extra smart in what looks like a nineteen-fifties suit with his hair slicked back. It suits him. I try to catch Nick's attention by waving and he glances up, his glasses steamed up by the dishwasher. He gives me the loveliest of

smiles but then his attention is swiped away by another customer. The pub takings should do well tonight, too.

Evie heads to the bar to get the drinks in as I head over to the dream team who are busy knitting and crocheting even in amongst all the chaos.

‘Great idea to do this on Winter Solstice,’ Harmony says as she sets her needles aside. Destiny does the same and I wait to hear what she says.

‘You know how us Coolsbayarians love to set our intentions on this night, and it just brings such a wonderful vibe to it,’ Destiny continues, right on cue.

‘Oh, thank you, I don’t think it was intentional actually but that’s good to know.’ I groan inwardly, forgetting that the people of Coolsbay are all a bit woo-woo. Almost everyone is into the spiritual stuff. Even Mum used to give us both crystals as kids and make us perform odd rituals with them. While Evie cherished them and would set her intentions on a full moon with Mum, I’d ignore that, preferring to make patterns out of them or draw round them on a piece of paper. Once, I was caught throwing mine into the sea, eager to see the ripples that they’d make, whilst making wishes as they disappeared. That wasn’t what I was supposed to do, but one of my wishes came true; I grew up and moved away from Coolsbay – but now I’m back.

‘Joyce, how’s it all coming along?’

‘Eee pet, like a dream, look at this.’ Joyce pulls out a piece of knitting, it’s a mass of colours, several balls of yarn dangle down from it. It’s so intricate and so clever. Each piece of wool carefully woven into a pattern. I feel someone watching me and when I glance over at the bar, I see Nick is getting his ear chewed off by Atticus (but in a good way I think). Nick smiles and nods in my direction.

‘Wow, you’ve such a talent, it’s really beautiful,’ I tell Joyce.

‘It’s made my Christmas, hanging out with these lovely lot. I’ve hardly been home in the evenings. My daughter is a bit

miffed.’ Joyce chuckles.

‘We did the knitting club at mine last night,’ Joan adds.

‘Joyce is quite talented at bowls too, we’d have her if there was enough space on the team,’ Margaret pipes up.

‘Oh, get over yourself Maggie, who’s to say she’d choose your lousy team,’ Joan quips as Margaret bristles slightly. I hold my breath at another handbag fight but then surprisingly they both laugh. The yarn bombing has clearly begun to soften the tension. Forming a bond through wool.

‘Eee I’d make me own team and you’d both be on it. Good laughs.’ It seems like three isn’t a crowd when you’re over seventy. A vision of Atticus with my parents in a hot tub sipping champagne flashes into my mind’s eye. I hate my overactive imagination. Why oh why did I have to open that bloody diary? Evie’s right; it’s their own business but I wish I didn’t know.

‘Ahh I love this song,’ I say to no one in particular as the singer moves onto *It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas*. I spy Amber arriving with Marco. His huge bag as always is brimming with wool and needles. He shrugs his shoulder up every few seconds to get the bag back into position. Evie arrives with the drinks, and I study her face, gauging her reaction. Marco is obvious with his affections for Evie, turning into a lovesick puppy, gazing at her and telling her how beautiful she is as she hands me my drink. She glances at him and smiles a polite hello and thank you, not giving much away. Of course, she wouldn’t cheat on Olly, she just secretly enjoys the attention. Who wouldn’t?

‘Nick said they’re on the house,’ Evie says before asking Amber and Marco for their drinks order. They both order a beer before Destiny and Harmony start talking to them about patterns and Marco begrudgingly drags his eyes away from Evie.

‘Did he? That’s so sweet,’ I say, glancing over at him again and mouthing a thank you.

‘Sweet indeed.’ Evie raises an eyebrow at me.

‘Oh God no, he’s just an old friend.’

‘Quite dishy though, isn’t he? I mean, he seems like a nice bloke too.’ Marco turns around and gives her a silly grin and just for a second, she flashes him one back.

‘He is nice, yes, but that’s it.’ I narrow my eyes at her, could she be trying to deflect? I’m sure she and Marco were flirting the other day, or was I just seeing something I wanted to see? Seeing the worst in my sister? I watch Marco as he sits down, his eyes barely moving away from Evie’s face.

‘Hello, ladies.’ Atticus appears with a large glass of red wine in one hand and a mobile phone in the other. ‘Have you seen the holly and the ivy? It looks exquisite tonight.’ He points to the plants dotted around the pub before his eyes light up at the mistletoe above Joan’s head. Joan tries to smile but it turns to a grimace as Atticus begins to walk over to her.

‘You know what they say about mistletoe,’ he says as he veers towards Harmony and Destiny. I can’t tell if he’s a little bit cross-eyed or he’s leering at their chests. His hand wrapped around his wine glass resembles a pig’s trotter, big, pink and meaty. He’s a sex pig, Mum and Dad are liaising with a sex pig.

‘I don’t know, what do they say?’ Destiny replies, blinking back at him.

‘Yeah, what do they say?’ Harmony echoes and my heart melts for them, they’re so innocent.

‘Yeah, it’s sharp and it can stab you in the eye if you get too close. Clear off, go on, you’re bloody old enough to be their grandfather, you dirty old man,’ Margaret snaps. There’s an awkward pause as Atticus stands there with his mouth open, catching flies. One of the buttons on his white shirt suddenly pops open and Margaret and Joan stare at him in disgust.

‘Eee, leave him alone man, he’s just being friendly,’ Joyce says before Margaret gives her a daggers look.

‘Can’t talk to anyone these days, good luck with the yarn blasting. I’m going for a walk in the hills.’

‘I think that’s code for wanking in his room,’ Nick whispers in my ear as he appears with a tray of nibbles for the knitting crew.

‘Shut up, really?’ I say as I pop a sausage roll into my mouth. Oh yuk, is that the reason the towels are so crusty? On that thought, I almost gag on my sausage roll.

‘Yup,’ Nick says with a straight face. I can’t tell if he’s joking or not.

‘Why is he here?’ I ask between a mouthful, not sure if I want to hear the answer. Not sure if I’m ready for the hard truth.

‘He’s on business, that’s the most I can get out of him on that subject. The rest of the time he talks about his long list of achievements and his love of ale and red wine.’

‘He sounds lonely,’ I say feeling a bit sorry for him, even if he is a bit of a misery guts.

‘We’re all a bit lonely,’ Nick says, matter of fact. ‘Anyway, that’s me, I’m up next.’

‘Where are you going?’

Nick doesn’t look back. He saunters over to the man who was singing and playing the guitar. They exchange a few words as the singer finishes his glass of water and then Nick sits at the pub piano, adjusts the mic that’s attached to it and begins to play *Who Wants to Live Forever* by Freddie Mercury. A surreal thing happens, the chatter stops almost immediately and people’s heads swivel to watch him. It’s almost as if he has this glow around him, like he’s taken on another persona, a movie star of the past. It’s mesmerising to watch. He begins to sing, and I can’t believe my ears. He’s got an incredible voice. Like Freddie Mercury but with more of a gravely tone to it. I’m transported back to primary school, remembering the very awkward boy who used to sing in the choir. He’s not awkward now. It’s like he’s from another time but when he sings – he’s ridiculous.

Ridiculously attractive.

‘My boy,’ Joyce whimpers, her eyes full of tears. I wander over to her and squeeze her shoulder. ‘This was his grandad’s song, at the funeral. It’s so beautiful. They were like salt and pepper, always together.’

‘It *is* beautiful,’ I say as Nick belts out the chorus and we all watch in awe. ‘It really is.’

Nick finishes his song to a standing ovation from everyone in the pub. The song finished, he returns to the bar, shaking hands and receiving pats on the backs like a celebrity before resuming his role of barman.

The rest of the evening goes by quickly, Harmony and Destiny have their tarots read. They’re told that they will marry twins and have children within six months of each other. That left them feeling very giddy, in search of their matching pair. Joyce gets reiki only to fall asleep and snore loudly for ten minutes and Margaret and Joan get tipsy and end up dancing the night away to all the Christmas classics. Things get a bit messy when Margaret, after one too many sherries, tries to step a bit too heavily into Christmas and ends up doing her shoulder in. Amber goes home early because she’s knackered and needs sleep and Marco, well Marco is now hanging out with Evie along with Nick and I at the bar as we drink festive cocktails. It could almost be a cosy double date apart from the fact that Evie’s married and I’m in a situation-ship with someone. I try to shake that thought and instead think of how nice Nick’s manager was to let him finish a little early.

‘So that why I knit. It silly but it make me happy.’ Marco puts his hand on his heart and Evie smiles at him, a gooey expression flickering over her face once again.

‘I think it’s lovely. Many people would turn to drugs and alcohol but you’re doing something productive,’ she says after he’s just poured his heart out for the last hour about Italy and why he was so keen to leave. Marco frowns, then looks up and to the left.

‘Producteeve?’

‘Umm useful,’ Evie says encouragingly, trying to explain.

‘Ah yes, I can be useless with many thing but knitting I very good.’

‘No, that’s not what I meant.’ Evie giggles and Marco says oh and looks down at his feet for a brief second. Then in slow motion, he looks up and their eyes meet. It’s either the pub’s dodgy Christmas lights or my imagination, but I’m sure I see sparks flying.

‘Hey, Nick, I’ve just had a phone call from a very delirious Atticus,’ the bar manager says. ‘He says he’s stuck on the top of a hill. Can you talk to him? I need to serve these customers.’ The bar manager hands the phone over to Nick who seems to have no choice in the matter.

‘Hello?’ Nick says as I snuggle up close to listen in. Nick’s scent of citrus and leather is masculine and, if I’m honest, a little intoxicating. I inhale, probably a bit too deeply. Immediately I move back slightly, hoping he didn’t notice me sniffing him.

‘I’m on the hill, I walked to it, I’m on top of it and now my feet won’t go down it,’ Atticus yodels down the phone.

‘Okay, have you tried going down on your bottom?’ Nick asks, making a face and clearly weirded out by his own comment. It’s the sort of thing you’d say to a child. Several heads turn and look.

‘No, my knees won’t bend. I came back from the other universe, you know they won’t eat jam sandwiches, no sugar at all in fact and the lizard people are real but not lizard faces with human bodies, the other way around. I saw them but now they’ve taken away my ability to walk and I can’t get down the hill.’

‘Okay, don’t worry,’ Nick says with his voice low. He looks at me with wide eyes and flared nostrils, a hint of a smile playing across his lips as he says, ‘Stay where you are Atticus, I’m coming to get you off that hill.’

Chapter Fifteen

Coolsbay hill is extremely steep. When Atticus said walking in the hills, he didn't mean hills plural, he meant the only hill there is in Coolsbay. But it is a bloody big one.

After leaving Evie and Marco at the pub to hold the fort, and to stop anymore knitters from getting injuries, we jogged the short walk to the hill and are now almost at the top of it.

I'd forgotten that the hill was even here. The last time I was here was on a school trip to draw the ocean, you can see it perfectly from here in the light of day. The sea looked as if it went on forever. Nick was there too. I remember that he and I sat together and spoke about how deep we thought the ocean was, marvelling over what was living at the bottom of it. It wasn't long after that, that we grew apart, I had my girlfriends and he preferred to be alone. We were eleven and best friends up until then. I guess puberty hit, it felt awkward maybe and then we went to different schools after that. I wonder what would have happened if we had remained friends, would we have gone to the same university? Would he have visited me in Edinburgh and me, him in Bristol? In another lifetime, maybe.

We reach the steep, wooden rickety steps that must be at least two-hundred-years old. Nick takes two, sometimes three at a time as I struggle to keep up with him. I imagine Atticus having to stop quite a few times to catch his breath, he can't have done this all in one go. I thought I was fairly fit but this is hurting my lungs. The air smells like bonfire.

'Are you okay?' Nick asks as he reaches out his hand for me once we reach the final step. I take it, feeling his large, warm fingers over mine as we arrive at the top. It crosses my mind that Nick wanted to help Atticus even though he's done little else but complain to him all week. It's a selfless act and when I look at him, my heart melts a little.

'Yeah, fine,' I say, whilst trying desperately not to pant and look as unfit as I feel. As I slowly breathe through my nose, trying to control my wheezing, Nick shines his torch around the hill. It's eerily quiet. No sign of Atticus or anyone else. We

walk in silence, heading towards the only house on the hill. It's a holiday home and famous for being let out to stag and hen parties. Someone must be renting it for Christmas, that's usually when they charge a fortune for these places.

'I hear something.' Nick shines his phone torch on the house, but the lights are switched off. 'Listen.' I stay still, now hearing the clear thud thud thud of a music beat. We get closer to the house, to the music, which sounds like slowed down trance music. It's eerily hypnotic.

'Look, what's that?' I say catching a flicker of light from the front room of the house. Nick shines his torch on the front room then moves it to the front door.

'It's open,' I gasp, pointing at the door which is half ajar. Apart from a small security light above the door, it's dark but there might be people there, people that can help us find Atticus, even if they are squatters. We walk up to the door, stepping inside, finding ourselves in the corridor in pitch-darkness.

'Hello, yoo hoo,' I sing out into the dark. My voice sounds calm, like I've just popped over to someone's house for a cuppa but I'm feeling anything but, calm. Nick swishes his torch from left to right, there's several doors coming off the hallway. Which one to pick?

'Who goes there?' says a muffled voice, as we both jump. Nick shines the torch around again but although we can hear someone, there is no one to be seen. Nick's phone shines on abstract murals covering the walls, the trance music stops, and I cling to Nick's arm as he opens one of the doors.

I'm scared.

Invisible people begin to hum a melodic tune as we step inside a very dimly candle lit room.

'We're looking for Atticus,' Nick says, shining his torch in search of the voice and the hummers. The light finally rests on a man with a long beard, wearing a suit, he's standing still. We continue to walk towards him. The hums get louder before the harmonies commence. 'He rang us and said he couldn't get

down the hill,' Nick explains a little more loudly. He lowers the torch to the man's torso, careful not to blind him. A strong smell of weed penetrates my nostrils.

'Ouch,' a high voice comes from out of the darkness. 'You just stepped on me.'

'Oh God, sorry.' I move my feet, trying to feel for flat ground, but I trip on another lump under my feet. There are lumps everywhere, a sea of what feels like bodies on the floor. I swallow hard, hoping they are all alive. Is this about to get sinister? With that thought I clutch onto Nick's arm, bile rising in my mouth. Are we about to meet our deaths?

'Ouch, careful,' yelps another voice.

'Oi, that was my groin,' says another.

'Stop stepping on me, man, lay with us.'

'Hey, we have feelings too, big feelings.'

'Ow ow ow,' howls someone who could be impersonating a wolf or yelping in pain because I've just stepped on them, again.

'Lay with us, lay with us, lay with us, brother. Lay with us, sister.'

I can't move, every which way I step, I'm stepping on a new body, dead or alive, this is freaking me out. What have we walked into? Where is Atticus?

'Sorry,' I whimper. 'We're just looking for Atticus, he called us for help,' I continue, in a strangled voice that I don't recognise. Nick shines his phone torch on the floor and around the room. I hold my breath, frightened for what my eyes might see.

'It's okay,' Nick says as he squeezes my hand and we both gasp.

The floor is completely covered in bodies. I'm pleased to see that they (from what I can tell) are all alive and fully clothed but they look completely and utterly off their chops on drugs. Wide eyes stare and arms flail around, catching at things that aren't there. Vacant smiles spread across their

faces. At least they aren't in any distress, in fact they look very happy. One woman starts to sing a song about mermaids captivating sailors lost at sea as the humming chorus continues as her instrumental. I breathe a little sigh of relief.

'Okay everybody, cut,' the man shouts as the lights switch on and he steps forward with a director's clapperboard. The sea of bodies slowly starts to sit up and chatter amongst themselves. The sinister ambience melting away with the stark fluorescent light. 'It's okay, we've got him. He's out the back,' the man finally says. He doesn't appear to fit in with any of the hippies lying on the floor. He also doesn't appear to be off his chops, which is a bonus. 'He's had a lot of shrooms,' the man adds. 'Had to take him off for some one-on-one time to calm him down but it was necessary to feel what he needed to feel.' What is this man talking about? What is this? Is Atticus part of some Coolsbay cult that I didn't know about? What if he's kidnapped Mum and Dad and they are here too? I have a word with myself to calm down, my overactive imagination running away with me yet again.

'Everybody, that's a wrap, pack up your things and enjoy your Christmas. Thanks for taking part, we're glad we found you,' the man booms to the room as the bodies begin to disperse.

'What's shrooms?' Nick whispers to me and I let out an uncontrollable giggle for a few seconds. Releasing nervous energy from the stress and strangeness of this situation.

'Mind altering drugs,' I whisper back as we follow the man.

'Ahh, yes.'

We follow the leader of this mass drugs orgy, finding ourselves in the corridor again, the man escorts us to another door and Nick laughs quietly.

'This is so freaky,' Nick whispers as the man opens a door to reveal a beaded partition.

'I know. Coolsbay is so weird, that's why I left,' I whisper back.

The man turns, puts his finger on his lips and shushes us. Nick and I do as we're told. The man dives with his hands into the beaded partition, and we follow him, the smell of weed getting much stronger.

'Ouch,' I say quietly as one of the beaded strings hits me. It stings my face, but not as much as the next image stings my eyes.

'Oh, my good lord,' Nick exclaims as one of his hands flies up to hide his eyes from the sight in front of us.

Atticus is lying on the floor, completely naked. He holds a red rose across his groin, but it doesn't cover much at all. He's smoking a giant spliff and is completely oblivious to us.

'Atticus has just had an out of body experience,' the man explains. 'It's exciting because that's what I wanted, for him to really see and feel my vision. He's a fantastic method actor but I've given him something to calm him down now.' The man runs to get a blanket and puts it over his body. He slaps him round the face a few times and Atticus looks at the man, high as a kite still but seemingly more aware.

'Okay, what's going on? Atticus, are you in danger here?' I run towards him. 'He looks like he's about to be sacrificed,' I say as my eyes linger on the demonic painting on the wall of a possessed goat with red eyes. I rearrange Atticus's blanket to cover more of his body as he blows a big puff of smoke out of his mouth and into my face.

'Ah you came,' he says holding his hands up towards me. 'Have you seen the hibiscus?' He points to a painting of a huge flower on the wall.

'No, no.' The man laughs, ignoring Atticus. 'Not sacrificed, but that might not be a bad idea, it could actually work, what do you think, Atticus?' The man puts his forefinger and thumb to his chin, seriously contemplating the idea. I shake my head in disbelief and Nick takes my hand, pulling me up onto my feet.

'It could work,' Atticus says, using a much gentler tone. 'But I think we'd need to talk to Jeremy first, hear his take on

it.’ Okay, now I’m more confused than before.

‘Sorry,’ the man says, meeting my gaze. ‘I bet this looks a bit odd to you guys.’

‘Umm, just a tad,’ Nick says.

‘We’re rehearsing for a film. It’s a comedy horror and Atticus plays the main character who is a grumpy everyday man working the nine-to-five during the day, but by night he has a penchant for hallucinogenic drugs that open up another realm, which end up taking him to the stuff of nightmares. Atticus plays the part very well. Oh, I’m the producer by the way.’ He steps forwards and shakes both our hands but doesn’t give a name.

‘The guys in the other room.’ He throws a thumb towards the beaded partition and the direction of the bodies. ‘They’re extras, who were just up here celebrating the winter solstice when I asked them to take part as our loving zombie aliens and Atticus, you should have seen them, they improvised so well out there.’

‘Learnt from the best,’ Atticus nods, meaning himself. He stubs out his joint, his eyes resting on Nick and I and in a much kinder tone says. ‘Now can someone please help me make use of my legs, I think it’s about time I get to bed.’

Chapter Sixteen

The journey down, even though we're carrying a fifteen stone man who has seemingly lost the use of his limbs, is surprisingly a lot easier than the journey up. Atticus, now fully clothed, sits on his bottom, and we drag him and sometimes roll him which isn't a great idea as it seems to make him a little delirious again. In between rolls and obviously still a little high on the mushrooms, he talks about the lizard people and how they've been sent to teach us about ourselves. He says they are helping earth raise its vibration or some such nonsense. He insists we're all connected as one.

By the time we're halfway down, he's on his feet, using Nick and I as his crutches and speaking a little more coherently. The mushrooms effect is finally starting to wear off. Atticus is a big man, and it feels as if he's now pulling us down the hill. He also looks as though he might fall asleep at any moment because his eyes close for prolonged periods and he becomes silent.

'So, you're an actor, Atticus?' I ask in an attempt to keep him awake for the last few hundred metres.

'That I am,' he winks, suddenly much perkier. The perkier I've ever seen him, in fact. 'I must apologise profusely for my demeanour in the pub. I've been busy getting into character for the film. Method acting. Once I break it, it's really hard to reconnect.' He winks again as he shakes a knowing finger at us then stumbles a few steps before Nick and I catch him.

'What's the film?' How come you're filming over Christmas?' Nick asks. Atticus inhales a big lung full of air, unlinks both of our arms and begins to explain as he watches his own feet plod down the hill.

'The film is on a tight budget. We heard that people go up there for the Winter Solstice, so we asked if they'd like to be extras, they were really good and provided the free pass to another universe.' He chuckles and we laugh along with him, not sure what to make of that. 'The storyline is superb, if you

like that kind of thing. It's being entered into the Toronto International Film Festival.'

'Sounds impressive,' I say, watching him stomp heavily down the hill, gathering momentum as he goes. I open my mouth but close it again, resisting the urge to tell him that I act too and have also performed at a festival. Now isn't the time to compare notes. I'm too tired.

'You know Demi is a trained actress, she also teaches drama,' Nick chips in like a proud friend as we continue to stomp.

'Is that so?... Well, that is... oh, oh, oh.' Atticus trips and before we can do anything about it, he stumbles down the hill, gathering speed until he eventually falls over and begins to roll at quite a rate. We run after a rolling Atticus with Nick trying to keep track of him with the torch. It's dark and disorientating and we lose him.

'Ouch!' Atticus calls out. 'Help!'

Nick scans the hill with his torch until it rests upon a ditch about two thirds of the way down. A ditch that Atticus has rolled into. We rush down and help him out while he protests that his legs feel like lead.

'If you don't get up,' Nick says in a stern voice. 'I'm just going to have to roll you again, Atticus.'

'Do it, my man, do it. It'll be quicker.'

Atticus lays down straight, wraps his arms around himself and we roll him. He quickly gathers up an impressive speed. As Nick tries to keep Atticus in the beam of his phone torch. We laugh and run after him in hysterical excitement. Soon after Atticus lands at the bottom with a thud and lays very still. We reach him, laughter turning to panic. I hold my breath as we watch him not moving.

'Atticus?'

This could be the start of our very own horror film.

Nick prods Atticus with his foot.

‘That was quite a ride,’ Atticus says, opening his eyes and grinning.

Finally on flat land, we help him up and continue the last few minutes of the walk in silence as Atticus uses us as a crutch again. My legs ache with every step. I’ve never been so ready for bed.

Nick puts the key in the pub door and Atticus, and I follow him in. The pub has been all cleared up, not a knitting needle or stall in sight.

‘I’m hitting the sack young fellows,’ Atticus exclaims cheerfully. ‘Good day and thank you from the bottom of my heart.’ He nods towards us, and we wish him goodnight as he pads over to the stairs. I briefly wonder if the mushrooms have altered not only his state of mind but his personality but then I remember, he was method acting. Nick stands with his hands on his hips, surveying the room.

‘I feel bad I didn’t help my manager with this,’ he says, motioning at the sparkling clean room. He pulls up a stool at the bar and pats the stool next to him.

‘You’ve got to be joking,’ I say, perching on the edge of the stool. ‘We basically just saved a man’s life. Your customer. He would have ended up living or rather dying at the top of that hill. Walking in the hills for all of eternity in this life or in another realm.’ I laugh, feeling hysterical. What even was that?

‘Looking for another dimension? Have you taken mushrooms, too?’ Nick laughs. I shake my head and shift on the stool, suddenly feeling giddy from all the adrenaline.

‘At least he wasn’t wanking in his room like we thought.’ I laugh and Nick lets out a snort.

‘Yes, that’s true. But that producer guy could have helped him down.’

‘He was far too important.’

‘Yes, he thought he was.’ Nick smiles and mops his brow with his hand. We both jump as music starts to play in the pub. *At Last* by Etta James belts out from the speakers and we’re

both rooted to the spot, our eyes fixed on each other. The music gets louder and saliva gathers in my mouth.

‘Ahh that’ll be the ghost,’ Nick states, all matter of fact.

‘What? Is Atticus playing a joke?’ I ask, half believing him. ‘Tell him we don’t want to be part of a horror film!’ I continue, meaning it to sound light and half joking but it comes out whiney and hysterical. Nick pulls his stool closer to mine and puts his arm around me to comfort me.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.’ He moves his arm and rests it on my knee. ‘We think it might be something, it’s probably a faulty wire with the sound system.’ He pauses, hesitating for a second. ‘Or something that really loves old love songs. Either way it’s harmless. I like to think it’s my granddad, it makes it less scary as crazy as that sounds. He loved Etta James.’

‘No, no, it doesn’t sound crazy at all.’ I think of the white feather that landed just as we were talking of Aunty Pat and the dream I had when she died. Could I be succumbing to the Coolsbay woo-woo mentality? Etta James sings about finding a dream that she could speak to as my hand moves to Nick’s knee and we sit there for a few minutes, listening to Etta’s dulcet tones and just being.

‘Care to dance?’ he asks, with a silly grin. Holding his arm behind his back he gets up and reaches out to me. He looks so smart, so sophisticated. I feel like I’m in a 1950s movie.

‘Okay.’ I giggle and get up. It might be my imagination, but the music appears to have got even louder.

We waltz around the room, ever so slowly as the track changes to Bing Crosby’s *White Christmas* and Nick gently sings the song into my ear. It sends shivers down my spine as I focus on the Christmas lights, shining on the tree. The lights resemble how I feel right now, all warm and twinkly. We’re cheek to cheek and I enjoy the tingling sensation of his stubble on my skin. I move my head slightly and he does the same until we brush lips. Then, he’s kissing me so tenderly, so softly, that I feel as if I could float along with him like the ghost that’s put this music on. It reminds me of the film,

Casper. I really have to stop myself from whispering ‘Can I keep you?’ in his ear. I don’t want him to think I’m a complete creep. We continue to kiss, this time more urgently. I could do this for days.

Next, there’s a popping noise followed by a loud bang. I jump as the lights go out and we’re plunged into complete darkness. This night couldn’t get any more dramatic.

The music stops. Ghosty has well and truly pulled the plug on the romantic ambience. We continue to kiss anyway, not fazed, and too wrapped up in each other to care, the darkness adding to the excitement.

‘Oh shit.’ Nick pulls away, leaving me yearning for more. As my eyes adjust, I can just about make out that he’s reaching into his pocket and taking out his phone. The phone lights up his face as he answers it, concern etched all over it.

‘Hello? Alright?’ he answers, still holding my hand. He rubs my fingers with his thumb. ‘Okay, yep. Where could she have gone?’ His voice sounds shaky as I squeeze his hand reassuringly. ‘Okay, I’m coming right now. See you in a bit.’ He hangs up, taking both my hands in his.

‘That was Mum. It’s Nan, Joyce. She’s gone missing.’

‘What? Has someone taken her?’

‘Yeah and no, she’s done this before, but not for a while, it’s always around this time of year, when Grandad passed. She misses him, she gets a bit confused and goes looking for him.’

My thoughts turn to Joyce at the train station. She was quite confused then, but then she’s also so switched on, especially with her knitting.

‘Do you want me to come with you?’ Help you find her?’

He doesn’t answer, his thoughts taken up with worry.

‘I’m coming with you,’ I say assertively. He nods or at least, I think he does. I follow him out of the pub and we run to his house. The usual ten-minute walk takes us just a few minutes. My legs ache even more but I have to focus on finding Joyce.

‘Mum,’ Nick calls out as we approach the front door and she opens it before we knock. ‘How long has she been missing?’

‘Well,’ she says wringing her hands. ‘She went to bed at around ten-thirty, I went to bed around an hour later and she wasn’t in her room. I normally wouldn’t check but the bedroom door was wide open.’ Tears begin to run down Dawn’s face and Nick hugs her.

‘She’ll be okay, I’m going to take the car so we can drive around It’ll be quicker that way.’

‘Take these,’ Nick’s mum hands us two heavy torches from the side table. ‘I have to stay here for Neve.’

‘Of course, see you in a bit.’

We leave her still wringing her hands in the doorway as she watches us get in the car and pull off the driveway. My heart beats fast in my chest, knowing that time is of the essence. This is a vulnerable, old lady.

‘Do you want me to call the police?’ I ask as I watch fresh rain begin to splash onto the window screen. Typical, trust it to rain now. I hope Joyce is warm. I think of her in her beige raincoat, walking around in the cold and wet.

‘It hasn’t been twenty-four hours,’ Nick says as we drive slowly out of the street and approach the high street. ‘They won’t look at it until it’s been at least twenty-four hours.’

‘I know but she’s slightly vulnerable,’ I say carefully. ‘And that’s a different matter.’

‘She’s not vulnerable,’ he says more to himself than to me.

I don’t reply, instead I look out of the window, concentrating on the road. We pull up at the graveyard, jump out of the car and shine our torches onto the graves. Shadows dance about and play tricks on my mind. It’s creepy but there’s nothing. No one. Not a person in sight. We don’t hang about and sprint back to the car to continue our search and rescue.

‘That’s the only place I thought she’d be,’ Nick comments as we get back in the car and drive along the town’s high street

again.

‘Wait, stop,’ I shout as I spot a figure in a long coat walking on the pavement by Emmanuel’s clothes shop. Nick does an emergency stop which I’m sure gives me mild whiplash. I unclip the seatbelt and bomb it down the road towards Emmanuel’s. ‘Hey, hey.’ I wave frantically as rain attacks my face and the figure turns into the porch. Nick joins my side, panting from the run and soaked through. ‘Stop.’ My hand reaches out to them just as they turn the key in the lock.

It isn’t Joyce.

‘Get away, get away.’ The figure screams as she lashes out at me and Nick with her heavy handbag. She opens the door and scurries inside, slamming the door behind her. We hear the lock turn. She doesn’t want to speak to us.

‘So sorry, we thought you were... we’re looking for someone, a lady in her seventies,’ I shout desperately through the letter box. ‘She’s gone missing. North-east accent, friendly face, possibly a bag full of knitting.’

‘No and no. Go away please or I’ll call the police,’ the voice replies.

Nick runs back to the car and I follow him. Seat belts clipped, we continue our journey in silence. As we near the end of the road we spot three lads in tight checked shirts coming out of Prancers, the one and only, albeit dilapidated, night club in Coolsbay. It’s scummy and it’s usually where you find the scumbags.

‘Excuse me, have you seen an elderly lady walking alone?’ Nick asks as he rolls down the window. ‘We’re looking for my nan.’

‘You what mate?’ The one in the middle says. He looks smashed and I instantly regret approaching them. ‘I don’t know where the kebab van is, no. Go look yaself, lazy bastard.’

‘No. We’re looking for someone, she’s lost,’ I try, hoping that they might pay more attention to a female voice.

‘Awww she’s lost,’ another one says. ‘Little bo beep is lost.’ They all roar with laughter until one of them begins to hiccup and they start punching him in the stomach to shut him up. ‘I’ll look after you darlen, come to poppa, you look like you could do with a good time. Won’t be having much of a good time with him.’ He stretches his arms out and his mates copy him as they march towards us like three overgrown wobbly toddlers.

‘Yeah, sexy, much sexier than the ugly bitches in Prancers,’ one of them says as another belches. They all roar again, still stomping towards us in perfect Neanderthal unison. I glance at Nick who has a glint in his eye that I haven’t seen before. His foot hits the gas, causing us to jolt forward as he speeds at them. I brace myself for I don’t know what. Is quirky Nick also a psycho killer? What comes next is brilliant. Like a fierce wave out of the sea, Nick drives into a huge puddle by the curb, covering the Neanderthals completely. They stand there, shell-shocked, dripping wet and absolutely fuming.

‘Quick, go,’ I scream as Nick slows down for a second to admire his handiwork. They make a feeble attempt to run after us until one of them falls over and they spend an exceptionally long time trying to get him up. Finally on his feet two of them start fighting whilst the other tries to break them up. We turn the corner and lose them.

Neanderthals defeated. Now, to find Joyce.

Chapter Seventeen

‘Do you make a habit of that?’ I ask, with a shaky voice. I’d be amused, laughing even, if it wasn’t for the bleak circumstances.

‘Helping people get sober?’ he almost growls. ‘I usually assist in getting them drunk I suppose, but they needed to cool down a little, too much happy juice, don’t you think?’ He gives me a wry smile then focuses on the road. I allow myself a little smile, proud of his work, before my eyes turn to the car window and the roads. It’s still raining and cold and apart from the odd streetlamp which are few and far between, the closer we get towards the sea, the darker it gets.

I’m worried for Joyce, really worried.

We drive towards the coastline, the road winding as I strain to see out of the window. It’s making me nauseous. Rain hits the windowpane hard, and my torch does nothing but reflect the glare back at me.

‘I’m phoning the police,’ I say. Nick nods silently. Moments later, the missing and vulnerable persons report has been filed. This is all beginning to feel too real. I try to remain calm by listing my top five Dolly Parton songs in my head.

1 I will Always Love You (Obviously)

2 Two Doors Down

3 Jolene

4 Working Nine to Five

5 It’s All Wrong, But It’s All Right

‘At least there’ll be more of us looking now, better chance of her being found sooner,’ I say whilst the lyrics to I will always love you play solemnly and slowly in my head.

‘Yes, yes, thank you.’

We drive in silence, the minutes feeling like hours.

‘Where could she be? Where would she go?’ I burst, panic exploding out of my voice.

‘If she isn’t at the graveyard then I don’t know where, that’s where she has always gone before. She never goes too far.’ We turn a corner, the sea fierce in the distance.

‘Let’s get out,’ Nick says as he parks the car in a layby. A photo stop for tourists during the day. We traipse the coastal path, shining our torches on benches with plaques of deceased loved ones.

‘There’s people,’ I say, shinning my torch into the distance. ‘Look, on the last bench.’

Nick moves his torch to the same spot, moving slightly to the left to reveal a large fisherman’s umbrella with a cover around it, turning it into a tent. There could be people huddled underneath that, people who’ve seen Joyce. Nick breaks into a run and I force my legs to do the same. My legs ache. I think I’ve surpassed the number of steps I’ll ever do in a lifetime in one single night. Nevertheless, I try to keep up with him, slowing down as we approach the umbrella tent.

The shadows look like three big burly men. Could it be them? I think I hear laughter, but the wind picks it up and takes it away out to sea. People probably camping out drunk, could it be the thicko Neanderthal trio? The laughter gets louder, something’s obviously very funny. We reach the bench and Nick begins to pull back the umbrella’s cover. I’m already wincing, afraid of what I might see. After the night I’ve had anything is possible. A couple having an alfresco festive shag? A dead body? What’s my imagination doing? It’s probably just a fisherman snoring, laughing in his fisherman dreams.

There’s loud shrieking as mine and Nick’s mouths fall open.

Margaret, Joan and Joyce are cosied up under the umbrella on their camping chairs. They’re all wearing big thick coats, hence the look of big burly men. The bench, which is being used as a table, is loaded with a picnic basket brimming with late night snacks and a bottle of champagne. Several lanterns are scattered around them making it very well lit, hence the ominous shadows. They all freeze, each with a glass of fizz in

their hands. Looking very much like naughty little children in grandma's clothes.

'Eee, my boy, what are you doing here?' Joyce squeals with glee, completely oblivious to the grief that she's caused this evening.

'Nothing, just going for a midnight walk and we stumbled across you ladies.' He grins from ear to ear. It's kind of sweet he's lying to save face. Not wanting to embarrass her in front of her friends.

'We could ask you ladies the same thing. It's so late,' I exclaim, feeling very much like a parent telling off naughty thrill-seeking children.

'Oh, late nights aren't just for young ones,' Margaret slurs as she retrieves a knitting needle from her bag with her good arm and waves it at me. 'We can party like the rest of them and anyway this shoulder was giving me jip, needed a late-night tittle to ease the discomfort.' Margaret nods to her make-shift sling.

'Well, you've certainly got stamina,' I say, thinking that even Mum and Dad, at almost fifteen years younger, don't usually stay up this late.

'We went home and had an hour nanna nap then met up here, it's wonderful being with new-found friends.' Joyce's eyes sparkle like an excited child.

'We're night knitting, come here nearly every night,' Joan exclaims as if it's a completely normal pass time. 'Apart from Margaret, she's injured. She's now just barking the orders.' She giggles then points to Margaret who lifts up her sling and winces. 'Well, Joyce and I were until Margaret went on and on about opening the champagne and then we all got carried away with tales of late husbands and all that jazz.' Joan waves her hand away as if it's a completely normal pastime to chat about the dead. I guess it gets more normal the older you get. Inevitably, you know of more dead people, the longer you stay alive.

‘Your grandad loved the sea,’ Joyce says to Nick as he wraps a protective blanket around her. ‘I sometimes go to the graveyard when I’m back, but I think I’ll come here from now on pet, it’s much more atmospheric. I can feel his spirit with me, perhaps I’ll scatter his ashes here, I still have them.’

‘Yeah? I can feel him too,’ Nick says softly. They both look out to the sea which is now calm and still. A sudden wave wooshes up and over, foaming at the last second. It’s almost as if Nick’s grandad is saying hello. Goosebumps form on the back of my neck.

‘I know you can boy, I know.’

‘Hello, hello, hello,’ comes a booming voice from the darkness. Two policeman rock up, all hi vis vests and shining torches.

‘What’s this? Has someone ordered strippers for us old dears?’ Margaret cackles and the others join in as Nick leaps up to talk to them. I expect he’s keen to save face on Joyce’s behalf. They don’t need to know we panicked and called the police.

I grin at the three women sitting before me, they make getting old seem such fun. Maybe it isn’t so bad after all. Maybe there’s no need to dread it. Age is a privilege after all, not everyone makes it this far. My thoughts turn to Aunty Pat. She was only fifty-nine and had so much more to give but she still didn’t act like a martyr, right up until the end. My eyes move to Nick, motioning with his hands and quietly explaining the situation. I plonk myself down on the floor and rest my feet up on a large rock. That’s better. I feel my quads stretch and my body relax as my eyes fall to the colourful intricate creations.

‘Wow, you ladies have been busy,’ I exclaim, reaching for the design. Joan slaps my hand away.

‘Sorry,’ she titters. ‘Not quite finished yet, need to cast off properly. We don’t want it to unravel.’

‘No worries.’ I laugh. ‘What it is?’ I ask as I turn my head from side to side, panic rising. This wasn’t part of the plan.

What else have they created that wasn't part of the plan? Does it really matter?

'It's for John,' Joyce says. 'A jumper for his headstone, to keep him warm in the winter months.'

'That's lovely. It's gorgeous.' I marvel at the brightly coloured headstone jumper complete with a couple of crochet bees and a bottle of beer. 'So clever.'

'I did the bees.' Joan says with a slight head wobble and a proud look on her face.

'Glass of champers?' Margaret asks, before eyeing the policemen suspiciously. 'What are they here for?'

'Here, have mine, I've had enough,' Joyce passes me a very full glass, a few slops landing on the floor.

'Aww, thank you, think the policemen are just doing the rounds, checking for any Christmas naughtiness.'

The ladies laugh and debate what that might be as I take a sip and let the soft bubbles wash over me. Drinking champagne at one in the morning by the sea with three pensioners after rescuing a guy high on mushrooms from the top of a hill and indulging in a mind-blowing kiss with an old friend isn't quite how I envisioned my Christmas holidays going. It's not what I envisioned at all.

'Penny for them?' Joyce asks.

I glance up at Nick walking back from the policemen, and we lock eyes. My stomach swirling with newfound emotion as his dimples return and a silly grin spreads across his face. I bite my lip, desperately trying to suppress my own silly grin but it escapes eventually. Like morning sunshine glaring through your bedroom window, it's bursting out of me. I can't contain myself. I grin, feeling as high as Atticus on his mushrooms. Not able to hide this feeling of pure joy and elation any longer.

'Just enjoying being home for Christmas,' I say, softly. 'Just enjoying the moment.'

Chapter Eighteen

This has got to be the best and weirdest night I've had, since well, forever. Creeping into the house, careful not to wake anyone and after floating home on a high, I jump out of my skin when Frosty starts barking and alerting the house to the fact that I'm home.

'Shhh shhh, it's me,' I whisper as I try to calm the loud bouncy cockerpoo. He carries on barking, stuck on a loop. I hot foot it into the kitchen to silence him the only way I know how, with one of his tasty chicken treats. I bring him into the living room and make him sit whilst I plonk myself down on the sofa. I give him the treat.

'There we go Frosts, that better?' He gobbles it down immediately. I sigh deeply as he rests his paw on my leg and blinks up at me. It's a happy sigh that Frosty mimics.

'Oh, thank God you're home.' My sister is standing in the doorway, her arms folded over her dressing gown, clutching her phone. 'I've been calling you all night!' She raises her voice as she squeezes her phone then sighs, exasperated. 'Thought something had happened to you, didn't I?' she says in a slightly gentler voice, her agitation subsiding. She now looks less annoyed and more relieved.

Still pumped from my serotonin hit, I sit up straight, suddenly wanting to share everything with my sister.

'Evie, I've had the most magical, odd and wholesome night.' I fling my arms up into the air, think about hugging her but feel too exhausted to get up so relax back into the sofa instead. This excites Frosty even more. He jumps onto the sofa, balancing both paws on my knees and licks my face with an aggressive passion. There's slobber dripping from everywhere, even my eyeballs. Evie laughs. Enjoying this all too much.

'That'll teach you. Go on Frosty, more kisses, more kisses for Demi,'

Frosty stops in his tracks for a second. Not quite believing his luck that he's allowed to do this, he goes in for more, leaving no area of the skin on my face un-licked.

'I'll kill you,' I say in between breaths and slobbers. 'Frosty stop. No.' I protest. Evie lets me suffer for a little longer before she pulls him off me and sends him to his bed. I never was good with disciplining animals. They're just too darn cute and slobbery.

'Dumb dog.' She laughs.

'Hey, that's a bit harsh.'

'I meant Frosty, not you. But now I come to think of it.' She sits down on the sofa next to me and frowns. 'I was so worried about you. I know I sound like Mum and you're an adult and all that but where the hell have you been all night? Would a quick text have hurt you that much?' I pull my phone out of my bag. Just as I suspected...

'It's dead, battery gone.' I must have used it all up using my phone as a torch for most of the night. Performing operation search and rescue for the elderly of Coolsbay.

'What are you smirking about?' she asks, eyeing me suspiciously.

'Well, it's kind of a long one,' I admit, because it is.

'Go on then.' Evie leans back into the sofa. 'Try me.'

So, I tell her everything. From the hallucinating method actor to the drunken night knitting grannies and the earth shattering ghostly interrupted kiss. We stay up for the next hour giggling and talking about Nick, the yarn bombing and Atticus until a thought enters my head like a lead weight bullet. Popping all of my balloons.

Alastair.

He'll be here on Boxing Day. I can't have that happen. I just can't. Not with everything that's happened with Nick. It would just feel wrong and I've been so consumed with Nick and everything going on here that I've hardly thought about Alastair. I think that says it all. I need to act fast and nip this in

the bud now. He isn't serious about me anyway, he never was. It was nice while it lasted but now, I need to take charge. Whatever this thing with Alastair is, it needs to end. It isn't good for me, the constant guessing and snatching for loving moments. I want more than that. I deserve more than that. That's not what it's meant to be like. I chat it through with Evie and she helps devise a message on her phone for me to send to him which I'll do first thing in the morning, when my phone is fully charged. When I've hyped myself up enough.



Morning rolls around too soon. I could have done with at least another eight hours of sleep but the knitters need our assistance and today we need to get them more wool and check the plans are being stuck too. After filling Evie in on Margaret, Joyce and Joan's extras she began to panic that perhaps they've gone completely off-piste. It's one thing to yarn bomb parts of Coolsbay for which we have permission, but she envisioned the whole graveyard and church being bombed in multicoloured knitted wool which, she admitted, gave her slight heart palpitations.

'I sent it to you. Have you sent it yet?' An eager Evie asks as I force myself to peel open my eyes and reach for my phone.

'Not yet,' I croak before hitting forward on the message and sending it to Alastair. After several checks that it's gone to him and not someone else in my phone book. I release a shaky, yet satisfied sigh. 'It's done.'

'Good, you've done the right thing. Feel relieved?'

Me: Hi Ali, so sorry for my very slow response. I've been thinking and I don't think it's a good idea for us to meet up over the holidays, sorry it's short notice. In fact, I think we should stop seeing each other completely. We both want different things and it was never going to work. Thanks for the memories. I'll always think fondly of you, Demi. X

'Yes, strangely I do.'



Evie and I trudge to the yarn shop, today there's a chill in the air and with three days to go until Christmas it feels like it could snow. A white Christmas in Coolsbay would be so pretty and the first one in thirty years, so Mum keeps telling us. Today, we have to get as much wool as possible from Sandra, who Amber has warned me is a bit of a battle axe, so we must tread lightly. It's a shame, I remember her as a child, and she was always so nice. The shop closes from now until after the new year so with big baskets and big expectations we arrive at the shop to see that the shelves are bare, all except for a couple of balls of pink and oatmeal coloured wool which there seems to be bucketloads of.

'Umm, will you be getting more wool in this side of Christmas?' I ask Sandra, suddenly feeling quite sick.

'No dear, we close at midday,' Sandra says as she potters about dusting the shelves and humming to the radio. If I didn't know better, I'd say she was slightly enjoying our distress. Revelling in it even.

'Anything out the back?' Evie asks, her voice getting higher with each word.

'No dear.' Sandra laughs. 'You girls really ought to be more organised with this yarn blasting thing. This time of year, people knit, it's what we do in Coolsbay. Experienced knitters use the winter to craft and create.' Sandra wobbles her head like a sanctimonious old goat.

Evie huffs and I glare at her. Don't poke the bear or in this case, the goat.

'Sandra,' I say, suddenly having a eureka moment. 'Were you asked to participate in the yarn bombing event?'

'No.' She stops dusting briefly and her shoulders stiffen.

'Because,' I say slowly as I catch Evie's eye. She nods at me, knowing exactly what's going on. 'We could really do with an extra pair of hands and you're basically the knitting queen of Coolsbay.'

'It's inconceivable that you haven't been asked to be a part of it,' Evie agrees. 'I can't actually believe it.'

‘Sandra,’ I say. ‘I’m terribly sorry you weren’t asked, but I’m asking you now because it would really be an honour if you were there to help.’

‘You see, we’ve had an injury’ Evie says.

‘Margaret,’ Sandra says, now not dusting but fully paying attention.

‘Yes, Margaret. And I know that even though you and Pat didn’t always see eye to eye, she’d want you to be involved because she so admired you.’

‘She used to call me a bloody martyr that woman, all the time. Said I had a face like a slapped bottom and the charisma of plain low-fat yoghurt,’ Sandra says with a straight face.

Evie and I don’t look at each other because if we do, we’ll burst out laughing. Pat did always say that; they didn’t get on but Sandra’s heart’s in the right place even if she just likes to moan – a lot. Plus, I’m sure Sandra gave as good as she got.

‘Well, prove her wrong then,’ I say with conviction. Sandra blinks quickly then nods even quicker.

‘Yes, prove her wrong,’ Evie backs me up.

Sandra’s eyes dart between me and Evie, frantic with what ifs. ‘It is for charity after all, for the local hospice,’ Evie continues.

‘It is for a good cause,’ Sandra says slowly ‘And Pat would be turning in her grave if she knew I was involved.’ A sly smile spreads across her lips. ‘And I can knit efficiently and I suppose I could provide some of my own wool from home if we’re short.’ I bet she has hundreds of balls of wool at home. Squirreled away all over her house, just in case an event like this ever cropped up.

‘Come and join us then. Coolsbay is a community, and you are very much part of it, you’re at the heart of it really. The hub of knitwear,’ I say as I watch Sandra contemplate our plea. ‘Martyr or not. We’d be honoured to have you on our team.’ I hold my breath thinking that calling her a martyr is probably not the best way to get her to join in and save us.

‘Okay, why the heck not. I’m closing for Christmas in a few hours anyway, it will give me something to do over the holidays.’ She shrugs as if it’s nothing. Evie and I breathe a sigh of relief. Problem solved.



My stomach flips and fizzles as we march to the pub. Festive excitement bubbling within me, buzzing that we have added another member to the team but if I’m honest, what I’m most excited about is seeing Nick. I’m also nervous, which is not my style.

‘You’re quiet,’ Evie links her arm through mine and we trudge together in perfect synchronised strides. Each with a bag of oatmeal wool in our hands.

‘Just nervous to see Nick,’ I admit.

Evie squeezes my arm. ‘Ooh you have it bad for him,’ she teases.

‘Stop.’ I gently dig Evie in the ribs with my elbow. ‘Let’s sing a song to keep my mind off the mania. Like we used to do.’

‘A Dolly song?’

‘Of course, what else?’

Evie begins to hum the tune to *I Will Always Love You* and before long I’m singing the verses while she chips in on the chorus. It transports me back to our childhood. A happy childhood with plenty of laughter and fun times with my sister. I squeeze her arm back. I’m glad we’re re-connecting. Perhaps we can continue this when we both go our separate ways in the new year. Perhaps we can be friends again.

‘Remember when we used to go carol singing for money?’ I say, after a very loud and harmonious rendition.’ I love a good sing song, it has the power to relax and cheer me up, all in one. Partly why I became a performing tart, as Mum politely put it when I went off to drama school. Singing is good for the soul.

‘Yup, you threw a hissy fit when Mrs Heddington tried to give us apples instead of money.’

‘I did.’ I laugh. ‘But I was only five and she was loaded, and she tried to give us mouldy old apples that had been sitting in her fruit bowl for God knows how long. Even as a five-year-old I could tell they were riddled with maggots.’

Evie giggles.

‘You’re terrible.’

‘Okay, maybe that’s a bit of an exaggeration but we deserved to be paid well for our performance, it was brilliant,’ I say. That year I was able to buy myself a new bike from our carol singing antics, so I know we did alright. The look on Mum’s face when we brought it home from the bike shop. Years later Mum admitted that they had to return the one they’d got me for Christmas and get me something else. It was a stress with two days to go until Santa’s arrival.

‘Remember when you...’ I begin but then chicken out. Is now the right time?

‘What?’ Evie asks, waiting.

It’s now or never. This is the perfect time. ‘Remember when you left for university and then forgot all about me?’ I walk a little faster, but Evie stops abruptly, jolting me back into the conversation that I’ve been running away from for years.

‘Demi, is that how you felt?’

‘A bit, yeah.’ I look the other way, years of anger and resentment that have been bubbling under the surface begin to melt away as I look at the expression on her face. Hurt. Love. Guilt.

‘I’m so sorry.’ She pulls me into a big sisterly bear hug. I let her hug me but the words that I really want to say get stuck in my throat. We also have to meet with the knitting dream team who are about ten feet away. I can’t afford to go on a crying spree right now.

‘It’s okay,’ I say. ‘Just don’t behave like a selfish teenager again, alright?’

‘I won’t. Love you, big little sis.’

‘Love you too, little big sis.’ I sniff into her ear.

‘Hey guys, we hate to interrupt your clearly, sisterly joyous moment.’ Destiny says as she links Harmony’s arm tightly.

‘Thing is, there’s a problem,’ Harmony adds.

‘A big problem and it’s affected moral too,’ Destiny finishes.

‘What’s happened?’ Evie and I ask in unison.

‘The charity money’s gone missing. All of it.’ They say together like it’s been rehearsed. ‘We’ve searched high and low and nothing.’

My mouth drops open. Surely it must be misplaced. Crime is non-existent in Coolsbay.

Isn’t it?

Chapter Nineteen

‘Where’s Nick?’ I ask no one in particular as we enter the pub and the manager loiters behind the bar.

Atticus props himself up, nursing a pint of Coolsbay ale. I wave at him, and he holds a hand up to me. He looks exactly how I feel. Probably still recovering from last night’s mind-altering drugs session, I think as I survey his pasty skin and the dark circles under his eyes. Today, he’s wearing a large white hat with a very big rim, as though he’s under cover.

‘He’s been searching the pub for the missing money,’ Harmony replies as the twins hover by the loos.

‘He’s quite frantic with it,’ Destiny adds as she rubs her hands together and shuffles in close to her sister.

Right on cue, Nick arrives and heads straight for Atticus. A new knot forms in my stomach. It’s a strange one, excitement, anxiety and dread all rolled into one.

‘Evie, will you go and check on the dream team, get their drinks orders and tell them the plan with the wool and Sandra. I’ll help Nick out with the search for the money.’ Because of course, I’m now an expert at search and rescue.

‘Roger,’ she says, saluting me with a smile. It’s what she used to do when we were kids, when I was being bossy and she was humouring me.

‘Roger.’ I salute her back. Our sisterly bond finally formed again.

‘All I’m saying is that it’s just a bit strange that the money was here last night and now it isn’t,’ Nick says to Atticus while his manager cautiously watches on.

‘I don’t know what you’re implying, young man, but it wasn’t me who took the money. Good heavens, I even donated. Preposterous.’

I frown. Is this Atticus or one of his characters? At this point, I really can’t tell. Could Atticus really be a swinging

stealer? Bile rises in my mouth on both counts. If he's both then the sooner he leaves Coolsbay, the better. Then again, I'm leaving soon, aren't I? That very thought pinches me with a sadness I wasn't expecting.

'I wasn't implying anything, I...' Nick continues.

'Was it definitely here last night?' I interrupt. 'It's just, I don't think I remember seeing it on the bar last night, that's all.'

Nick and Atticus's eyes ping to me.

'I just assumed it was being passed around for contributions.' I bite my bottom lip, feeling guilty for not looking after it. That was one of mine and Evie's main jobs and we've failed. Miserably.

'I thought I saw it, but I wasn't paying much attention,' Nick admits. 'It was busy behind the bar and then we got called out.' There's tension in the air. Nick is too polite to say why we got called out.

'I can't remember, it was a long night.' Atticus shifts his eyes to the floor.

'There must be someone who remembers, let's ask the dream team. Someone will remember whether they saw it or not last night and then we can start from there.'

'Good plan.' Nick winks at me and I have to stop myself from beaming from ear to ear. This isn't a smiling matter.

'Yes, very good,' Atticus agrees. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going for a walk in the hills.'

We watch Atticus walk out of the pub, well more like hobble, he has a slight limp now, probably from last night's shenanigans. That tumble couldn't have done him any good. I'm not sure if he should be going up that hill, but who am I to tell him what to do.

'I think he took the money,' Nick says, once Atticus is out of ear shot.

'Really? You didn't make it obvious, honest.' Nick's manager laughs then walks over to serve someone.

‘You could just look in his room, you have a key,’ I say.

‘No, I’d rather he admitted it, that just feels wrong, snooping through his stuff.’

My thoughts turn to images of quirky sex toys and bags of illegal drugs. My imagination is so dramatic. He probably just has a newspaper and a few hankies, possibly a book on method acting. ‘True, but you’d have every right to.’ I shrug, my face not giving away my thoughts.

‘I feel responsible, the money was in my care and now it’s gone.’ Nick slumps down on the bar stool. His shoulders hunched over. I want to hug him, kiss him, and tell him it’s fine but I don’t because it’s a bit inappropriate in his place of work and also, it’s odd between us. His manager chucks him a cloth and he begins to wipe the bar down, his forearms flexing as he does so.

We kissed and now we’re friends that have kissed. We’ve entered murky waters. Nothing is clear anymore. He isn’t the little boy I splashed around with in the paddling pool. He isn’t the boy I teased for being different. He’s a sexy, vintage, forward-thinking man and I can’t help not feeling good enough for him. Oh, how the tables have turned. He has it all together, a career x 2, a lovely house, and I don’t.

‘No, the money was in mine and Evie’s care,’ I say as I watch him wipe the bar area. I lean back to get out of his way and try my best not to inhale his scent too loudly, it’s intoxicating. ‘It can’t have gone far. It’ll turn up, I’m sure,’ I continue, not feeling sure at all. ‘I’m kicking myself really, the thought crossed my mind to ask you to chain it to the bar, because the ones in Edinburgh are like that but this is Coolsbay,’ I say, throwing my arms up into the air. ‘Nothing like this ever happens.’

‘It’s not perfect here, there’s still crime and people with bad intentions. It was *my* responsibility.’ He frowns, stops wiping and sits next to me on a bar stool, his hands resting on his knees.

‘Where are the people with the bad intentions?’ I look around, as if they’ll turn up at any moment. A whole team of

Coolsbayarian baddies hidden within this town.

‘Neve’s dad, although he’s getting better, making more effort for now.’ He thinks for a minute, resting his elbows on the bar. ‘There’s other’s too, what Neve would call ‘bad guys’ but we won’t do them favours by speaking about them.’ He nods. I hold my breath, wondering if he’ll expand further. He doesn’t.

‘I’m sorry about the bad guys,’ I say as Nick’s manager summons him over.

‘It’s fine.’ Nick gets up and brushes his legs down, giving his manager a thumbs up. ‘It was a long time ago now.’ He laughs, but it sounds a little forced. He pushes his glasses back up onto his nose as his trademark dimples appear before he walks off to talk to his manager, leaving me longing to talk more. Yearning to know more about the years we didn’t see each other makes me want to share mine with him too. But that will have to wait. Nick’s manager, the dream team and the mystery of the missing money calls.

As I march to the woolshed, I marvel at the fact that no one has told me about Nick and his ex-running off with his best mate. For want of a better word, this is Coolsbay scandal, surely Mum and Dad would have known about this. I make a mental note to ask Nick if he wants to do something later, perhaps we could go on the Christmas light walk or go and browse the markets and watch the choir in the town, they start to sing every evening until Christmas now.

With a renewed feeling of warmth and Christmas fuzziness in my chest, I begin to daydream about Nick visiting me in Edinburgh. Taking him to my favourite viewpoints of Calton Hill and Arthur’s Seat. Introducing him to my friends and my now ex housemates Phillipa and Roo. Just as I’m enjoying a coffee in Artisan Roast with daydream Nick whilst discussing the history of Edinburgh, hushed voices cut through my thoughts, stopping me in my tracks.

Slowly, I let go of the door handle of the woolshed and creep round to the other side, ducking at a ninety-degree angle so the knitters don’t see me through the side window. This

could be where I catch the charity box stealers, case solved. That would be a result. I bet it's them. It's got to be them. With bated breath and adrenaline firing in my belly, I curl my fingers round the corner of the shed and stealthily pull myself forward. I can't see them yet, but I can hear them planning, conspiring. There's a large pub bin, blocking my view of the voices. I stay behind the wall. Whisperings of what sounds like *what shall we do and what if we get caught* circle back round to my ears. I close my eyes and get into character. There's a dirty steak knife on the floor by the bin, I pick it up. I have no intention of stabbing anyone but it helps to look threatening.

'HALT!' I shout in my best deep sounding male voice, giving myself a South-east London accent for extra intimidation as I shake the steak knife. Straight from the diaphragm, imagining I sound like Atticus's much rougher younger brother, I continue. 'CAUGHT YOU BASTARDS REDHANDED.'

'No please, please,' a voice whimpers as I step out to let them face the music.

Arrrghhhh.'

'Arrrghhhhhhhhh.'

The screams come loud and clear before a big fist comes flying straight for me.

Chapter Twenty

The fist, which belongs to Marco, knocks the dirty steak knife out of my hand. It drops to the floor with a pathetic tinny twang.

‘Ooops.’ I manage with a grimace.

‘What are you doing, you bloody psycho?’ he says in much better English than I remember as my sister Evie, the damsel in distress, trembles next to him. She’s obviously been giving him pointers on the English language and some French kissing lessons on the side, too. I raise an eyebrow accusingly as he pulls her in closer, protectively shielding her from me, the psycho sister.

‘Demi you really are behaving like a bloody psycho. Why are you sneaking around, watching us? It’s creepy.’ She shudders then emits a girly giggle which Marco joins in with. He beckons me over, ready to forgive my psycho episode, making light of it.

But I’m not ready. Olly is a bit of an idiot but he doesn’t deserve this, no one does.

‘Excuse me?’ I say with my hands placed firmly on my hips. ‘Don’t deflect this onto me. You always do this,’ I say, as the old sisterly resentment begins to bubble again. ‘Face your problems, deal with them; well it looks like you’ve decided to snog the face off them instead.’

‘Face my problems. Like you do?’ Evie says smugly as she clutches onto Marco’s arm. This makes my blood boil. Nothing makes me madder than my sister being smug.

‘You know she’s married,’ I casually say to Marco before checking my nails. ‘Trying for a baby too.’ Truth bomb dropped, I take myself off and enter the woolshed. If they know what’s good for them, they won’t follow me.

I spend the next twenty minutes on tenterhooks, making small talk with the dream team and checking their yarn bombs, discussing the rest of the project. I immerse myself in the

woolly woven heaven. It's so comforting in here and the dream team have done such an amazing job. I'm excited to see the display out in the town and now we have Sandra helping it will give us an extra pair of hands, although it will still be tight, we could do with even more help really. Marco has clearly been using his fingers for things other than knitting, I think bitterly.

I try to push the feeling of hurt and betrayal down as I chat to the dream team about the missing charity box. Evie and I were just beginning to heal our relationship. I opened up to her and she kept her mouth shut and told me nothing about herself. What the hell is going on with her? How long has this thing been going on with Marco? No one remembers seeing the charity box last night, but they do the night before. No one has a clue who might have it which worries me further and horribly makes me suspect everyone.

1. *Evie and Marco are planning to elope with the funds – on their way to Gretna Green right now. I've been the catalyst they were looking for to leave. Scrap that, she's already married, okay well they've run away and gone on a nice holiday with it.*
2. *Joyce has taken it and used it to put her husband's ashes in – got confused and dumped everything including the money in the sea.*
3. *The twins have taken it to embark on their journey to travel and find their future twin husbands.*
4. *Margaret and Joan have taken it and have already put the funds into a new bowls club and kit for the team.*
5. *Sandra's taken it because she and Pat didn't see eye to eye and she wants to pretend to help whilst sabotaging us in the process. It's merely a ruse.*

It's official. I'm a horrible person. I feel so mean suspecting everyone and questioning everyone's motives. Of course, it isn't any of these guys, that's ridiculous but it is someone and I will get to the bottom of it, with or without Evie's help.

I say goodbye to the guys and end up doing what Atticus does when he has something to mull over and think about. I go for a walk in the hills.

With my legs still aching from last night, I reach the top of the hill and slump onto my bottom. It feels ten degrees colder up here and I can see my breath, but the air is still and there's something very calming about it. I close my eyes and try to still my mind despite the cold permeating my backside. Retracing my steps this past week, I desperately try to remember if I saw anything untoward with the charity money box. I draw a blank. Nothing springs to mind at all.

'Have you seen the winter rose?' Atticus's voice cuts through my thoughts. He stands over me. Palms placed on his back as he juts his belly forward, looking out onto the horizon.

'Hey, Atticus, no I haven't.' I smile politely, wondering what he's up here pondering this time. There's no film crew or producer in sight.

'It's simply stunning,' he carries on. 'Otherwise known as the snow rose or as I like to call it, the Christmas rose.' Is he acting or is this really him?

'Where is it?' I stand up now, interested in this elusive winter flower. Also, my bum is frozen.

'It's just left of the house, I've never seen one so high up before, you know in the depths of winter, on the coldest and darkest days when everything else has frozen or died, the Christmas rose will bloom.'

'Hmmm. It was very cold last night,' I muse, as we begin to wander to the rose. 'Do you think it came out then?' I continue.

'I would have thought so yes.' We walk round to the side of the house and pause as we come to the white roses. Beautiful and delicate, I breathe in the smell and marvel at this rose that I've never seen before, probably because I've never bothered to look. Nick's face flashes in my mind's eye.

'It's like a metaphor,' I say as Atticus tilts his head at me. 'Some people bloom in unexpected places where others

cannot.'

'Yes indeed, indeed it is. Or where they will only allow themselves to, when no one else is looking or expecting.'

'Yes.' I agree, not really sure what he's going on about but it's a gorgeous flower, nonetheless.

'Are you in character now?' I ask.

'If I was, I couldn't tell you, because the character wouldn't say.'

'Right.' We stand in silence and admire the rose for a minute. 'Thank you to you and your friend who thinks I stole the money. Thank you for saving me. I really felt like I was stuck up here but here I am again, because you have to face your fears. Get back on that horse as they say.' He chuckles and his voice does a little yodel at the end.

'That's okay, I don't think he thinks it was you but you're not from here and we know everyone else so you're the obvious scapegoat. Sorry, he didn't mean it, I'll talk to him later.'

'It's okay, I haven't been kind to him, testing my method acting on him. And as for your money, the truth will out in the end, it always does.'

'Yes, I'm sure it will.'

'Care to chaperon me down?' Atticus holds out his arm and I take it and for the second time in the last twenty-four hours, I escort Atticus down the hill.



'Mum? Dad? Evie?'

There's no one home and I breathe a sigh of relief. Frosty isn't even here so they must have taken him for a walk. I hope it's a long walk because I could really do with some alone time now. I need time to think. It's Christmas Eve tomorrow and soon the yarn bombing event on New Year's Day will come and go and I'll be on the train back to Edinburgh. I slump down on the sofa, kick off my shoes then pull my phone out of my bag and ping Phillipa a quick message.

Me: *Hey, how's it going? Any luck with house hunting? Xx*

I watch my phone until she replies twenty minutes later, even though she saw my message the moment I sent it. The two blue ticks giving it away.

Phillipa: *Nothing suitable for three people, hun. Will keep looking. Having a nice time in Coolsbay? Xxx*

My fingers hover over the keyboard on my phone. Is there something in that message? I wouldn't be surprised if they wanted to move in together without me. They are a couple after all, and this is the perfect opportunity to detach themselves from me and move out on their own. I wouldn't blame them, it's perfectly normal. The next step.

Me: *Having lots of fun, Anything suitable for two? I want to tell her all about Nick but I'll save that for another occasion.*

Phillipa: *There is a flat, it's gorgeous and cheap but we can't ditch Roo just yet, he's good at the housework.* She pings me a few laughing cry face emojis to show me she's joking. I feel a pang of guilt. Am I holding them back from each other? The third wheel. I think of all the times I've interrupted their date nights in the living room and cringe at the thought of having to go back to that. I like being here. I like someone here.

Me: *I know you wouldn't ditch Roo. I'm just wondering about staying here for a little longer while I get my act together so perhaps don't worry about me. Just go ahead and find a place for the two of you.* I imagine Roo punching the air when Phil tells him the news then dutifully crossing my name off the cleaning rota.

Phillipa: *But how will you go to interviews if you're down there? Are you sure? I'll miss you. Xx*

Me: *I'll miss you too. I'll figure something out with work. Go ahead and get a place just for you and Roo. My Christmas present. Xx*

I groan inwardly at the thought of having to share with a houseful of strangers but if that's what needs to happen, then

so be it. I can't be the third wheel forever and it will be an adventure anyway. Most people like me, I'm not exactly shy.

Phillipa: *Love you xx*

Me: *Love you too. Xx*

Feeling like the world's nicest and most gracious person at Christmas, almost balancing out the steak knife incident with Marco and Evie, I pad to the kitchen and raid the cupboards for lunch. Pickled onions, crackers, all the cheese including pineapple cheese (the best) and some cold meats get devoured in minutes, washed down with a pint of squash. I wonder if Mum and Dad would mind me staying here for a little longer? Shit. That was one thing I didn't think about. What if they don't want me here? I could take Nick's job at the bar once he goes back to teaching if they'll have me. Pondering my life choices, I flick the switch on the kettle to boil for a cup of tea then pad to the bedroom to pull on some thick bed socks. My feet are freezing now the weather has turned and a cup of tea will warm my hands up nicely. After that, a nap I think. Ah, this is bliss and the sister will go back to Olly soon and I'll never have to speak to her ever again.

'Oh.' I utter as my eyes spy Evie on the bottom bunk, face down, bawling her eyes out into her pillow. The noises she's making sound like a dying animal, guttural and so sad, which probably drowned out me opening the door. 'What's happened?'

Chapter Twenty-One

‘Evie, Evie.’

Leaning over, I rub her back as her shoulders bob up and down accompanied by big sobs. The sobs eventually subside a little and she rolls onto her back covering her face with her hands.

‘Oh Demi, it’s just all so much, it’s all gone a bit tits up,’ she manages in between wobbly breaths, her fingers still covering her face.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen my sister this upset. Not since I was a kid and we dropped her off at uni. She told us to *just go* as she wailed loudly and pushed us out of her dorm room. It was painful to see her so sad but hurtful to feel so rejected too.

‘It’s fine, we’re only human,’ I say almost robotically. I’m still in shock from seeing my sister cheat on her husband. I didn’t think she was like that. My little big sister. Demi sits up and wipes her nose on her sleeve.

‘I’ve left Olly,’ she blurts out.

‘What? Don’t you think that was a bit drastic? You hardly know Marco!!! Plus, he’s going back to Italy after Christmas. What will you do then, bloody elope?’ With the money. They’ve got the charity money.

Evie smiles through her tears, even managing a little laugh. ‘No. no.’ She shakes her head. ‘I left him ages ago.’ I should be getting the final divorce papers through soon. Just had a few loose ends to tie up with the solicitor. He was being a bit difficult with the financial statement but it’s pretty much done now and unless Olly has any more questions It’s final.’

My mind transports back to the beginning of the holidays. Evie typing away on the laptop with a big frown on her face, Evie taking private calls. That ‘work’ all seems to have stopped now. So that’s what she was doing, finalising her divorce with Olly the wally.

‘Wow.’ My mouth drops open, I can’t believe it. They’ve been together for years. They were trying for a baby.

‘Yeah, I’m happy,’ she says before she begins to cry again. Her head flopping into her arms which are now resting on her knees.

‘Yeah? Because you really look it,’ I say sarcastically as I tap her on her hands.

‘I am. It’s just a release you know, it’s done,’ she manages before howling into her arms again. I reach over and grab some tissues out of the tissue box and stuff them into her hand.

‘Thanks.’ She sniffs, wipes her nose then performs several more minutes of howling. Finally, with a red blotchy face and watery eyes, she looks at me, blinking, then offers a small smile.

‘What’s gone tits up then? If you’re happy about the divorce, what’s wrong?’ I frown. She’s a complicated one, my sister.

‘I’m just scared. Scared of the unknown. And I didn’t expect to meet someone so soon after Olly. I don’t want to have feelings for someone else because it complicates things but he’s just so lovely, Demi. And already, he makes me feel things that Olly never could.’

‘Marco?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me any of this? You led me to believe everything in your life was perfect whilst you firstly judged me but then helped me sort out my problems. We could have helped each other, simultaneously.’ I pause and Demi squeezes my hand, pressing her lips together. ‘I’m not a child anymore,’ I say in a softer tone. ‘You can lean on me too.’

Evie closes her eyes briefly, as if somehow reliving the past.

‘Olly and I started counselling over a year ago. He had mummy issues and took them out on me with belittling comments and condescending looks. I guess it all really snowballed when he got obsessed with watching this

YouTuber who absolutely hated women. Over time it chipped away at my love and respect for him.' I knew it. He always had an air of *women were the lesser sex* about him and now I know why.

'It all got to me and once we'd finished the counselling, we had a whole new set of problems. Afterwards, when he wanted to get intimate, I couldn't bear it when he touched me. It made me so angry, so much so that he thought I'd found a new love of bondage but really, I just wanted to hurt him. He made my skin crawl. It was then I knew that this wasn't right and I needed more help or to get out.'

I nod encouragingly as my sister pauses to collect her thoughts. Careful not to speak in case she clams up again.

'I went and saw a counsellor on my own and came to the conclusion that I needed to leave him. I couldn't have a baby with a man that I couldn't bear. It didn't go down well, as you can imagine, but he's slowly come to terms with it. Weird thing is he's being so nice about it all now and it makes me remember the good times, makes me miss him, our friendship, our marriage. It wasn't all bad, there was many good parts, but over-all it just wasn't working. It's odd though, I feel like I'm grieving something, like a part of me has died.'

'You were together for a very long time. But now a new part of you will be born. It's time for a new chapter. You've done the right thing.' If only she'd leaned on me, she wouldn't have had to do this all alone. A tingle dances around the back of my neck. Perhaps we have more in common now than we ever did. Sisters starting again, together.

'Yes, yes I know, thanks Demi.'

'Do Mum and Dad know?'

'No, I need to tell them. I was going to ask if I could stay here for a bit, just until I get myself sorted. I can work from home so that isn't a problem.'

'Oh shit.' Now it's my turn to bury my face in my hands.

'What?'

‘I was going to ask to stay here too, I’ve just told my friends to go and rent without me.’ I grimace, then a thought occurs to me. ‘Oh my God. How are our parents going to have their dirty threesomes with A with us two hanging around?’ Evie and I fall about laughing before we both cringe and groan at the thought of it.

‘It will be okay,’ Evie says. ‘Once I get the money through from the divorce, I can move out. The solicitor said it shouldn’t take long as we have no children to consider.’ Sadness washes across her face again. She so wanted children; it must have been so hard to leave him because she was giving up the life they’d planned together.

‘If you stay in Coolsbay,’ I say. ‘You might have to put me up at yours for a bit.’

‘I’d love to, it’s been fun hanging out with you, sis.’

‘You too, sis,’ I say before nudging her gently and putting on my best Dolly Parton accent before quoting her. ‘You know, the way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you got to put up with the rain.’

Evie laughs.

‘Ain’t that the truth,’ Evie says in a really bad Dolly Parton accent that always makes me snort a little. This time I don’t because the fact that she’s joining in with my silly antics makes me smile. She plugs her phone into the blue tooth speaker. ‘Best Dolly Parton song for new beginnings?’

‘Two doors down?’ I say, thinking about Nick literally being just up the road, almost two doors down. I begin to daydream about him. What he’s up to. What he’s doing. I make a mental note to message him later and see if he wants to hang out.

‘Definitely, very apt. I’m not crying in this room anymore,’ she quips.

‘You’ve also got a new love,’ I tease.

Evie tells me to shut-up whilst laughing then turns the sound up on the speaker. We dance and sing around the room as Dolly sings about laughing and drinking and having a party, just like we did when we were five and eleven. My favourite

memory and a core one that I'll cherish forever. I never thought I'd get to do it all again, twenty years later and staying in this room again. Next, the door slams and Frosty barks to let us know they're home. Evie looks at me and we both take a deep intake of breath.

'Right,' she says. 'Let's go and ask Mum and Dad if we can move back in.'

'Let's do this. A new chapter.' I link her arm and we march into the room ready to take charge of our futures and start again.



'What both of you?' Mum asks as her eyes dart between Evie and I. Mum and Dad have rosy cheeks. They've been at the Christmas markets all afternoon, sampling mulled cider and buying last minute gifts. Dad's eyes widen. They both look a little shell shocked. Even the dog is giving us a strange look. I pat Frosty on the head, hoping he'll be the first to welcome us back home but he just whines and goes to sit on Mum's feet.

'Yes,' Evie and I say together as Evie tries to coax Frosty back over.

'But, can I ask why?' Mum croaks, blinking excessively as Dad nods next to her. He puts a hand on her knee to calm her. Well, I didn't think they'd be over the moon about it but I didn't think it would reduce Mum to tears either.

'There are actually a few reasons,' I say slowly as I look to Evie. 'I'll go first.' So, I tell them all about leaving my job, including the toxic relationship with Alastair and the fact that I've now ended it completely. I tell them about my flatmates getting together, being evicted and giving them permission to go ahead without me and find a place of their own. Mum and Dad nod silently with passive faces, not giving anything away.

Once I've finished, there's silence and then Dad turns to Evie and says, 'And you?'

Evie relays the story that she told me earlier about divorcing Olly, leaving out the therapy part probably because Mum and Dad are old fashioned and might think that it's very 'American

and silly.’ She gets upset again which results in Mum going on one of her happy crying spree’s and everyone having a big group hug, including Frosty who stands on his back legs with his paws either side of my legs. Once mum’s calmed down, her and Dad exchange looks.

‘Of course you girls can come back here,’ Mum says.

‘Yes, we’d be delighted to have you back, all my girls together.’ Dad beams.

‘Thanks Dad, thanks Mum,’ I say as Evie sniffs into Mum’s armpit. ‘It’s just until we find somewhere else,’ I continue. ‘We know you guys like your privacy now.’

Evie’s sniff turns into a snicker. I didn’t actually mean that, but it makes me smirk too.

‘We have our routine yes. We’ll have to get you a TV for the bedroom won’t we, Tony? We don’t want you putting that Love Island crap on when we want to watch our quiz shows.’

‘Oh, I dunno, I quite like that Love Island crap,’ Dad chuckles as Mum slaps him.

‘I bet you do,’ she scolds.

‘Any other confessions or revelations to add?’ I say looking between them. I try not to look at Evie as her mouth falls open in my peripheral vision.

‘I think that’s enough secrets shared for one night, don’t you?’ Evie says in a strained voice.

‘Well, we might as well all get it out in the open, it’s now or never,’ I agree. It’s on the tip of my tongue, who is A, who is A?

‘Yes,’ Mum says before she looks at Dad pointedly, who rests a hand on his knee. He nods back at her, like some secret agreement spoken between them.

‘Yes,’ Dad says, still looking at Mum. ‘Anything else can be saved for another night,’ he continues as he turns to face me and Evie. ‘I think this is cause for a celebration. Let’s get a takeaway and I think I have an old bottle of champagne knocking about somewhere.’ He slings an arm around Evie

and I. 'My precious girls, friends again and back together.'
This sets Mum off crying again, so we hug her close until the
crying turns to laughter at Frosty trying to lick her tears away.

Chapter Twenty-two

Christmas Eve

Evie and I are visiting the dream team in the woolshed, providing mince pies and mulled wine (as brewed by Nick). Today they are only knitting/crocheting/sewing until midday and then it's a break until Boxing Day although Sandra has already said that she's probably going to do some at home on Christmas Day as she'll be on her own. Once she said this, several of the others said that they would do the same. Yes, competitive knitting and crocheting is a thing.

'If anyone is up for a bit of Christmas Eve night knitting later, then Margaret, Joan and I will be more than happy for you to join us on the cliffs,' Joyce announces as Margaret frowns and shakes her head.

Joyce is just trying to include everyone but as always there's a bit of drama and competition between some of the older lot, especially Sandra and Margaret. Margaret's nose has been a little out of joint since she joined the team and showed off all her skills and Margaret can't do much with her gammy shoulder. Margaret said Sandra needs to get off her high horse and stop lording the fact that she's the *keeper of the wool* over everyone. Joyce tactfully pointed out that we would be stuffed without Sandra because Margaret is out of action due to her vigorous dancing so we should probably keep our thoughts to ourselves. The yarn bombing has been made with so much love in the community but in the words of Shakespeare, the course of true love never did run smooth and that relates to the masterpiece that has been made for the Coolsbay yarn bombing event. Not only is the charity money still missing and no one has a clue where it's gone, but there are half-finished pieces everywhere and the two turtle doves that the twins have knitted are completely different. Destiny told me they were trying to show their individuality though their knitting, which is great except the doves do need to look like they have the same father at least.

I leave the dream team in the hands of Evie and the gooey eyes of Marco and skip off to the bar to speak to Nick. Butterflies dance about in my stomach as I make my way down to see him. As usual Atticus is propped up at the bar. Instead of complaining, he's observing.

'Hello.'

'Hello, young lady. Good day?'

'Yes, very good thanks,' I feel a lot lighter since coming clean to Mum and Dad last night. After we'd cried and stuffed our faces on Thai takeaway, Evie told Mum that as soon as the divorce money comes through, she'll be looking for a place of her own. Mum asked if she would stay in Coolsbay and Evie said she didn't know. I hope she does, it would be nice to see more of her and I know Mum and Dad feel the same way too. Who would have thought that I'd be saying that about my sister this Christmas? My whole future has changed in just over a week. I'm home, maybe not for good but for a bit. It's crazy.

'Have you *seen* the new wreath?' Atticus points to the wreath hanging behind the bar, it has what looks like a winter rose intertwined around it.

'It's gorgeous.'

'Why, thank you.'

'Did you make it?' I ask as I imagine Atticus picking the single Christmas rose on the top of the hill before spending some time contemplating life with it. It almost seems a bit sad, a sacrifice to Christmas.

'Indeed, I did,' he says. 'The rose is a fake,' he says in a stage whisper. 'Just don't tell the locals, I like to wind them up.' He winks and I stifle a laugh. I think I'm beginning to get to know Atticus's real personality now he's stopped method acting. I quite like it.

'Hey.' Nick steps out from the staff room and walks behind the bar. He doesn't look too happy and I wonder if him and Atticus have had words again. He smiles at me but the smile doesn't quite reach his eyes.

‘Nick was just telling me about his sister,’ Atticus offers as Nick nods at him. Perhaps they’re okay now, he doesn’t suspect him of taking the money.

‘Is everything alright?’ I ask.

‘Not great,’ Nick replies. ‘Her dad’s let her down, again. He was supposed to come and visit this evening, but he’s come up with a lame excuse as to why he can’t. I have a feeling this may become a regular occurrence.’ He sighs then begins to empty the dishwasher; his glasses begin to steam up which reminds me of our almost first kiss by the woolshed.

‘Aww, poor Neve, that sucks,’ I say as Nick’s sad eyes lock onto mine. I want to hug him, kiss him and make it all better but that won’t cheer up his little sister. Stay focused, Demi. Stay present.

‘I just hate seeing her upset, especially at Christmas. What a bastard.’ He shakes his head, and his eyes darken with a flash of anger. She’s lucky she has him as a big brother.

‘Yep. Well, it’s not a solution but I know one thing that might cheer her up on Christmas Eve. What time do you finish?’

‘Three.’

‘Okay, let me make a phone call.’ I leave a bemused looking Nick and run outside.

‘Hello,’

‘Hey Dad.’

‘It’s so sweet you call me Dad now.’

‘I know, listen I have a favour to ask.’ I tell him my plan, excited to get it started and cheer up a little girl’s Christmas. This will be amazing; I just know it.

‘I’d love to darling; you know I would but I’m ashamed to say I have a case of the Christmas squirts.’

‘Urrghh Daaaaad.’

‘I know. I’m embarrassed to say, I’ve eaten too much, maybe it was all that Thai food mixed in with too many mince

pies, but I can't be further than two minutes away from a toilet. These guts aren't what they used to be. At any point I fear I could explode.'

'Way too much info, Dad.'

'I'm sorry darling, you'll have to think of something else.'

'Shit. Okay.' I say bye and sit on the steps outside the pub. After fifteen minutes of staring into space, I peel myself off the steps and with a heavy heart, stomp back to the bar. I could always do this by myself, I suppose.

I stop in my tracks as I watch Atticus laughing jovially with Nick.

Ah hah.

He could definitely play the part well. Marching over with newfound hope, I sling an arm around Atticus.

'Atticus, have you seen the mistletoe?'

He looks up at the mistletoe dangling above him and a slight scoff escapes him as he notices his own regular saying. 'It's wonderful, are we going to kiss?' He waggles his eyebrows, then laughs, swiping a hand at me as if to say as *if I'd kiss you, you're merely a child, dear*.

'Oh no, no. But I have a favour to ask and maybe it could be a thank you for rescuing you from the top of that hill?'

'Okay,' Atticus yodels. 'I'm all ears.'



The next couple of hours consists of me running around like a headless chicken. I get the Santa suit from Dad, sling the elf suit on, complete with elf ears and then run back to the woolshed. An idea occurs to me half-way there, so I sprint back home again, grab a few more bits then race back to the woolshed.

Santa's grotto is now complete, after dragging a large chair over to the window and arranging some cushions all around it. I throw a red blanket over them just in-case Neve doesn't want to sit on Santa's knee. I place the book on the chair and a

selection box behind it, not forgetting the extra little treat. A special little girl has been let down at Christmas, she deserves it. Meanwhile as Nick is working in the bar I pop back to see him for a well-deserved drink break.

‘Lemonade please, I’m so thirsty,’ I say in my Dolly Parton elf voice as he saunters over with a shy, albeit amused smile.

‘Coming right up.’ Nick slinks off to make the drink as I watch him move gracefully behind the bar. For a tall man, he knows how to move. My mind flashes back to our dance and our kiss. How I long to do it again. There’s no rush, I tell myself. *You can stay here as long as you want.* Mum’s words echo around my head as I admire Nick’s toned back through his shirt. He puts the lemonade down in front of me, slightly frowning before something amuses him and a small smile spreads across his face.

‘Are you doing that method acting that Atticus was talking about?’ he asks as his smile grows and those dimples appear. He lightly bites his lip and I half want to scream. Oh, get a grip, Demi. I’m like a child at Christmas, accept I’m an elf, wearing big elf ears. Sooo not attractive. *Don’t be such a bloody martyr,* Pat shouts in my head half making me jump. I wish all of these people would just get out of my head!

‘Yes, yes,’ I lie as my silly grin breaks out. I decide to wait to tell him my news about staying in Coolsbay, hoping that my silly grin doesn’t give me away. I’ll let him think I’m in character, for now. ‘Speaking of Atticus, where is he?’

‘Ho, ho, ho,’ comes a jolly voice as Atticus appears in the corridor. He jiggles his belly in his hands as he walks towards us holding his belt. He reminds me of the Santa out of the classic film *The Santa Clause*. If I was a kid, I’d totally believe he was the real deal and not one of the elves doing a shift dressed as him to give Santa a rest which was Mum’s go-to excuse when either me or Evie questioned the state of a skinny or beardless looking Santa in our childhood. *It must be one of Santa’s elves stepping in and doing a shift, he’s busy on Christmas Eve you know.* We were easily convinced then. His beard looks incredible. Not at all like the crappy one that came with the costume. He must have a little dressing up box in his

hotel room ready for all of his characters. He stands with his legs wide apart and his hands behind his back, looking at Nick and I for approval.

‘You look amazing,’ I say as I note that he is considerably bigger than Dad. I hope Neve doesn’t question it. That could be awkward.

‘Thank you, it’s taken me two days to get here so I’m surprised but thankful.’ He winks at me, but not in a creepy way, more in a twinkly Father Christmassy way. ‘Rudolph was a bit of a menace but he’s back on track now that the other reindeers put him in his place,’ Atticus says in a booming voice.

‘He’s method acting,’ Nick whisper-laughes into my ear. His breathe sends a shiver down my neck and all the way down my spine. I cross my legs. Feeling giddy with festive glee.

‘Well gee, you know what Rudolph is like,’ I say in my giggly American elf voice. It seems to have gone up an octave; I put that down to Nick’s breath on my neck. Nick watches us in amusement, occasionally chuckling as Santa and the elf have a whole conversation about the state of the economy in the north pole.

‘She’s on her way,’ Nick says as he slips his phone back into his pocket. ‘Mum’s bringing her down, shall I send her over to you guys?’ Nick’s eyes meet mine and yet again I struggle to get the dance and the kiss out of my mind.

‘Yes, yes that will be elfalicious,’ I say in squeaky elf voice. I really am an idiot. In this case. Elfidiot.

Ten minutes later, Santa is sitting in his chair and Elf is stood outside the woolshed.

‘Welcome, little girl. Neve, is it?’ I ask as Neve slowly walks over with her mum, her signature backpack bobbing around on her back. Her long hair has been neatly braided into two Dutch plaits and her eyes are wide and a little sad looking. She clutches her teddy with both hands as I bend down to her level.

‘Hey, I heard you’ve been a really lovely, kind little girl this year.’

I watch her face turn from sad to excited as her little tongue pokes out of the side of her mouth. It struggles to go back in as she smiles. She sways from side to side, her backpack swinging as she does so. She really is the cutest.

‘Mummy says I’m a little rascal.’ She giggles as Dawn squeezes her shoulders. My eyes move to Dawn who has dark circles underneath her eyes. This must be hard on her too. To think you’ve found love again and the joy of an unexpected baby to then have the man abandon you. And then he comes back and gives you a glimmer of hope to desert you all over again. I can see why Nick never left Coolsbay; he stayed here to look after his mum, his family.

‘So, I guess you wanna see Santa huh?’ I say to Neve.

‘Yes, and talk to him about all the reindeers.’

‘Can you name them all?’

‘Ummm Prancer, Dancer, Rudolph and Victor.’

‘Nice try, those are the best ones.’ I wink as Dawn brightens at her little girl’s attempt. ‘Come with me.’

I lead Neve in to see Santa, she dumps her backpack on the floor and runs over to the cushions, still clutching her teddy. I close the door and wait outside with Dawn. We watch through the window as Atticus reads her a story and asks her questions about what she wants for Christmas. We can’t quite hear everything they’re saying, but we do catch the ominous word *daddy*. Dawn looks at me in a panic. They appear to be having a very in-depth conversation about something. We watch on as Neve expressively moves her hands and Atticus nods patiently, only asking the odd question. He eventually looks at the window and summons for me to come in. Dawn follows.

‘Hello, elf,’ Santa says as he gets out of the chair. ‘Neve requires to speak to you and you only. I’m sorry Mummy but you and I will have to sit outside.’ Santa jovially waddles outside as I go into the room.

‘Hey, Neve, what can I do for you today?’ I say as I skip into the room to find her lying on the cushions with her hand dramatically placed on her forehead.

‘I’ve not been a good girl. Santa said it’s okay and that he will still deliver my presents, but I have to tell *you* the truth first. I can’t tell Mummy because she might get cross and take away my pudding for the night.’ She looks towards the window and Dawn quickly ducks.

‘Okay, I’m all ears.’ I waggle my fake ears then quickly clutch on to one that almost falls off. I can’t blow my cover now, not when she’s about to tell me a secret.

‘Well,’ she says as she begins to twist her teddy’s ear.

Chapter Twenty-Three

‘I took the box of money.’

My mouth falls open.

I find it hard to believe that this sweet child has been the reason for all this stress. She’s taken the money. Playing dumb, I rearrange my face into a confused expression. I am an elf after all.

‘What money?’ I blink back at Neve. ‘You can tell me Neve,’ I continue. ‘I won’t tell a soul,’ I whisper before taking her hand and patting it gently.

‘The charity money. I wanted to buy Daddy a present for Christmas. Mummy doesn’t have any money. *She’s* not a bloody charity.’ Neve stomps her foot and folds her arms, seemingly mimicking her mum’s words and actions.

I nod and suppress a smile at a five-year-old saying *bloody*. Why is that so funny? ‘Where is the money now, Neve?’

She blinks back at me a few times then sets her teddy down and wanders over to her huge backpack. She unzips her bulging bag and lifts out the charity box.

I cannot believe my eyes.

‘Why are you laughing?’ She clutches at the charity box, her huge eyes blinking quickly.

‘I’m sorry, have you been carrying that around in there all week?’

‘Yes.’ Neve looks down at her feet.

‘You must have some strong muscles for a little girl. Did you spend any of the money?’ I ask as I cross my fingers.

‘No. Please don’t tell the grownups,’ She begs. ‘Brother Nick will be sad at me.’

‘Aww, I pinky promise. I reach over to link our little fingers. ‘This seals the deal then, all done. But you mustn’t take what

isn't yours again, okay? Next time, ask your brother Nick, I'm sure he'll help you out.'

Neve nods slowly.

'Okay. I just wanted to buy Daddy a present, but he doesn't deserve my love if he can't even come to see me.'

I gulp back a huge wave of emotion as this little girl utters the wisest and saddest words I think I've ever heard. Not just from a five-year-old but from anyone of any age. If only we all had this mentally, a lot of hearts would be saved from being broken. If people aren't willing to make the effort with you then they don't deserve your love and presents. A life motto to live by. I think of Alastair and all the time and energy I wasted on him when he often couldn't make the effort to see me apart from the odd stolen grope in the staff room. I definitely made the right decision there and he hasn't even replied to my message. Shows how much he really cared.

I lean forward and give Neve a huge elfin hug. 'You're one wise little girl, do you know that?' I say, careful not to break character as the words almost get stuck in my throat. She's too adorable and she shouldn't have to know what heartbreak and rejection is at such a young age. I swallow another lump, telling myself to reign it in.

'Yeah, Mummy always says that.' She brightens and a big cheeky grin spreads across her face. 'Can I have my presents now?'



'Hey,' I approach the bar holding the charity box behind my back. I've taken my elf ears off because quite frankly I feel stupid in them.

'Hey, how did it go?' Nick asks as I try not to melt in his presence.

'It went really well, she was a very happy little girl, but even better...' I pull the charity box out from behind my back and jiggle it at him. Nick's mouth falls open.

'What? Where did you find that?' he asks as he stops polishing the bar.

‘It was in the woolshed under a load of wool. I found it when I was clearing up, it must have been misplaced, just like we thought,’ I lie, not wanting to break Neve’s trust. There’s really no need for anyone to know, not even Nick. Her intentions were innocent.

‘That’s amazing news and just in time for Christmas. We better get it chained up this time.’

‘Oh, trust me, it’s not leaving my side, I’ll wear it round my neck if I have to.’

‘That would be one heavy necklace.’ He laughs.

‘I feel like we should celebrate,’ I say as Nick raises an eyebrow, looking as sexy as hell.

‘Should we?’ He grins. Good lord, I want to dive into those dimples. I could actually live in them. Bet they’d be all warm and snuggly.

‘Got any ideas?’ I bite my lip and smile, thankful that I don’t have the elf ears on.

‘Yeah. Maybe. Shall I pick you up at seven?’

‘I’ll see you then.’ I skip out of the pub, still cuddling the charity money, feeling a warm fuzzy feeling in my heart. I crane my neck to see Nick gazing back at me with what looks like a dreamy look in his eyes. This is turning out to be the best Christmas EVER.



After a huge clothes crisis where I’ve tried on everything in my wardrobe including the dress that Evie bought me, I’ve gone with my trusty old dress. I’d even stuffed myself into some of Evie’s tiny clothes that quite frankly looked as if I was wearing children’s clothes that I’d grown out of five years ago, a big no no. Sometimes your old trusty is best and in my case it’s the floaty rainbow dress with the huge pockets. I feel comfortable in it. I’m me in this dress and I like being me around Nick. No method acting required.

‘You look gorgeous,’ Evie says as she shimmies herself into a tight black dress. ‘I like that dress on you, sorry about what I

said before, I didn't mean it.' She purses her lips and lowers her eyebrows. Her serious face. Her sincere face.

'Thanks, and it's okay,' I say waving her apology away. 'I do dress like a drama teacher.' I smile, feeling a sudden tinge of panic for not having a job again. It's fine. I'll get a job, something will turn up and at least it's all out in the open now. 'Where are *you* off to tonight then?' I look her up and down. 'No more secrets remember.' I waggle my finger at her as she comes over, motioning for me to do her zip up at the back.

'No more secrets,' she says as I stand up to do her zip up. 'I'm meeting Marco for a Christmas stroll.' She faces me and grins from ear to ear before smoothing down her dress. She looks beautiful and her skin is glowing. A significant difference from the Evie that arrived here ten days ago.

'Sounds very middle-aged,' I tease.

Evie laughs. 'It does, doesn't it? But I've got a feeling it will be anything but that.' She winks and wriggles her hips and now it's my turn to laugh. 'Shall we put a bit of Dolly on?'

'Let's do it.' I put on another layer of red lipstick and check myself out in the mirror one more time. Evie flicks the CD player on and puts on *Bygones*. As we sing about *being sorry, so, so sorry*, I feel thankful for being forced to share a room with my sister this Christmas. We're certainly letting bygones be bygones and it feels lovely to have her back again. All secrets out in the open.

No more drama.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘Girls, there’re people at the door for youuuuuu,’ Mum calls in a sing song voice from the living room.

They’ve arrived together?’ Evie questions as she quickly cakes on a bit more eyeliner. ‘I hope they haven’t plotted a double date, no offence but I kind of want Marco all to myself.’

‘None taken, I was thinking exactly the same.’

We pad downstairs, through the hallway and into the living room, past a napping Dad with a newspaper on his face and a giddy looking Mum who I can hear telling the boys to come in out of the cold. I cringe inwardly but if I’m moving back home for a while, I suppose I’ll have to get used to parents being embarrassing.

‘Drinks, boys, while you wait?’ she continues as Evie and I appear in the doorway. ‘Here they are. Well, aren’t you both just gorgeous.’

Marco stands in the porch clutching a huge bouquet of red roses. He says something about my mum being beautiful and seeing where Evie gets it from before he reaches into his satchel with his free hand, pulling out a beautifully knitted scarf.

‘For you, Mrs Holly.’ With his free hand he drapes it around her neck, and she gasps as her hands reach to feel the wool. Mum does a little dance, twirling around before she admires herself in the hallway mirror.

‘Oh wow, thank you so much,’ she titters, seemingly won over by the charming Marco already, bewitched by his skills. ‘It’s not every day I get gifts from a handsome man.’

‘Did you make that?’ Evie asks.

Marco nods, closing his eyes for a second. I side-eye Evie, half expecting her to ask for her scarf, but she doesn’t. She’s so gooey on him that the fact he’s made Mum smile has made

her go even more gooey for him. Old Evie wouldn't have been so chilled. Old Evie would have asked where her scarf was.

'Yes, I make it, good huh? With love.' Marco gives a brooding stare while Evie and Mum swoon again.

Olly is well and truly forgotten about. Mum never liked him, she confided in me a few years ago that she thought he was a bigot when she'd had a few too many wines. She denied it the next day, saying she would never have said such a thing. I wish I'd recorded it at the time.

Nick stands next to Marco with a large satchel slung over his shoulder. Mum stops what she's doing for a second and looks at him expectantly, but I don't think he'll be whipping any homemade scarves out of his man bag. I wonder what he has in it. It's unusual to see him with a bag. Shifting from side to side, he looks uncomfortable with so many eyes on him, but so beautiful. My heart swells. His eyes meet mine and he visibly relaxes when I smile at him. The others go back to obsessing over Marco's scarf as Nick holds out his hand to me and asks quietly.

'Shall we?'

'We shall,' I reply as I take his hand. We swiftly say goodbye to the others, leaving them in the cosiness of the porch and Marco's woolly scarf.

'Where are we going?' I ask as we step out into the night. My cold breath travels towards him and dances around his face, like a caress of electric energy.

He replies with a cheeky glint in his eye. 'Surprise.'

We walk in silence for the next few minutes, snuggled into each other for warmth until we come to the bottom of Coolsbay hill.

Oh no, not this again.

'We're going for a wank in the hills?' I squeak, befuddled as Nick's face explodes with laughter.

'Oh no, no. I mean a walk. A walk in the hills!' I giggle, suddenly feeling very unlike myself and a little shy. To say the

word wank in front of Nick feels weird.

‘Come on,’ he says. ‘I promise they’ll be no rescue missions tonight.’ The climb feels easier than the last few times. Probably because now I’m pumped full of dopamine and my legs have had a good rest. It’s almost as if I’m floating up the hill, maybe because unlike Atticus and his mushrooms, this evening I’m on a natural high.

High on life.

High on Nick.

We reach the top of the hill and I squint my eyes to try and get a better look.

‘Where are we going?’ I ask. Nick takes my hand again and leads me towards the house. Half terrified that we’re going to hang out with the weird rolling bodies again, I follow behind him, bemused by his choice of location. I thought we might be going to catch the last hour of the Christmas Eve markets or a romantic stroll along the beach or even better, the pub. There’s nothing on this hill apart from a holiday home. We keep on trekking until we pass the house, which seems to be abandoned now, before finally arriving at a two-man tent.

‘Wow.’ The tent is covered in colourful fairy lights and as we bend down low to enter it, my already leaping heart warms further with joy.

‘Take a seat.’ Nick motions to two large beanbags covered in thick tartan throws. He flicks the battery-operated switch to the indoor white fairy lights then reaches into his manbag and pulls out the portable record player, the one from his house. He selects a record out of his bag of tricks and places it into the record player before turning it on. I smile, he reminds me of Neve with her backpack of tricks, or rather, money.

‘Glass of champagne?’ he offers as he pulls a bottle and two plastic cups out of his bag.

‘Umm, yes please,’ I say as I take it all in and watch Nick go outside to open the bottle of champagne. I hear a pop and then moments later he’s back with bubbles.

‘There you go.’ He hands me a plastic glass, and I take a sip, feeling the bubbles tickle my tongue and then my brain. ‘You cold?’ he asks with an attentiveness in his tone.

‘A bit,’ I say, in the hope that he’ll come and join me on my beanbag and snuggle up to me. Instead, he delves into his bag and hands over a box of chocolate truffles. With a quick flash of a smile, he’s outside again, shuffling behind the tent until he drags out a fire pit, wood and some kindling. I enjoy watching him get the fire going for a few moments, noticing his pert bum in his trousers, until, clutching at my champagne, I go outside to join him. Together, we watch the flames in silence with only the faint sound of Bing Crosby playing in the background. It feels very dreamlike.

‘Well, this is a little bit special,’ I say as I place my hand on his back, instantaneously feeling his energy burning onto my hand. He doesn’t move and we stay like that for a while, just watching the flames crackle and pop in the dark, cold crisp air.

‘Special, like you,’ he finally says. ‘I wanted to say thank you.’

‘For what?’ I scrunch my nose up.

‘For making a little girl’s Christmas magic instead of tragic. You really cheered her up. She can’t stop talking about the elf. It’s been a welcome distraction from what’s been going on at home with her dad being completely shit.’

‘I’m glad to be of help.’

‘You’ve always been really kind, I remember you sharing your jelly sweets with me, even then you enjoyed seeing other people happy.’

‘Before I got in with a bad crowd and abandoned you?’ I wince. But it has to be said. It’s been the elephant in the room since I came home.

‘Yeah,’ he looks at me then back at the flames. I squeeze his arm before taking a sip of my champagne.

‘For what it’s worth, I’m so sorry, Nick. I was a stupid teenager. Image was the only thing I cared about, I just wanted to be with the cool girls. And look at me now, I practically live

in a rainbow dress, and I'm obsessed with Dolly Parton. I'm not exactly bang on trend or even anywhere near within the realms of cool for that matter.'

'Well, Neve thinks you're pretty cool and not just when you're being an elf.' His mouth twitches as he stands with his hands in his pockets, every so often kicking at his own shoes.

'Thanks, I'm sure she'll change her mind in a few years, I'll be like the weird wacky aunt who wears bright dungarees, parrot earrings and blue lipstick.' Shit. I've just described Aunty Pat. Sorry Pat. God bless your soul.

'Yeah?' Nick tilts his head, smiling quizzically then gently taking my hand in his. Now might be the opportunity to tell him that I intend to stay in Coolsbay for a while but as our fingers intertwine and his lips move towards mine, I feel like the worst thing to do right now would be to discuss my future plans. I don't want to scare him off just yet. He isn't the reason I'm staying but it makes it a lot nicer that he's here.

Don't spoil the moment.

Just be, Demi.

'Mum, she had a bit of a break down,' Nick says slowly with a frown. 'And I didn't want to talk about it, wasn't sure how, as a young lad. It happened so fast. She left Coolsbay to do whatever she needed to do, get whatever it was out of her system and my grandparents came to live with me. They basically brought me up and Grandad, well he became my best mate when I had no-one else. He's the one who got me into all the old music and the clothes. We'd spend hours going through his old records.' Nick smiles wistfully as I watch him, watching the fire crackle and pop. Shame washes over me. We were best friends and then he became un-cool and I didn't want anything to do with him anymore. Little did I know he was going through his own stuff at home, his mum leaving him for years to 're-live her youth' when he was just a teenager himself. Then being brought up by his grandparents who have obviously done such a wonderful job.

'I'm so sorry you were going through this.'

‘It’s fine. Mum kept in touch, she didn’t leave completely but she had other priorities and needs, she needed to get better, find herself.’ He shrugs, completely accepting of his mum’s part abandonment. She did what she had to do and now she’s back. ‘Also, if mum hadn’t gone away for a bit then we wouldn’t have Neve and I can’t imagine life without her now. Neve has made her a better mum.’ She didn’t just go away for a bit, it was years, but his forgiveness is refreshing, and Dawn clearly loves her son, both children. Families are so complicated; you never know the backstory of the intricate tapestry. All the threads that have had to weave together to make it work.

‘Well, I think you’re a great role model for Neve too. She clearly thinks the world of you.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

We kiss by the fire, slowly and sensually at first. But as the heat of the flames help to intensify our desire, we stumble kissing, taking clumsy hungry steps into the tent. Still kissing and eager to express our feelings, Nick throws me onto a beanbag. I giggle before he gently lowers himself on top of me, caressing my face and hair. He stares into my eyes, looking at me like no one has done before. It’s longing, desire, respect, and could it be love? All wrapped up into one. It feels safe. Unconditional. We watch each other, gazing into each other’s eyes, the feelings getting more intense. Just enjoying being together. I remove his glasses and feel his body press further against mine.

‘I’ve dreamt about this for so long, I’ve wanted you since forever,’ he whispers as he trembles with masculine vulnerability. I feel a shift happen as an animalistic urge ignites between us.

‘Now you can have all of me,’ I whisper back.

Chapter Twenty-Five

‘Well, that was unexpected and well, it was umm, well, you definitely have an imagination.’ I beam, blushing into the darkness.

Now fully clothed, I wrap myself up in the blanket, revelling in the aftermath of making sweet, passionate love to Nick. God, I sound like one of Mum’s *Mills & Boons* novels. Now she’s more like *Fifty Shades*, I think before quickly shaking that thought off and snuggling back into Nick. It’s true though, it was earth shattering. It was special and heartfelt. It can’t really get much better than this.

‘It was hmmm, very hmm, but I didn’t bring you here for that, it wasn’t my intention, I want you to know that,’ he says as gets up to fetch me a glass of champagne. His hair’s ruffled and his shirt is all creased. He slides his glasses back up his nose. The man has never looked sexier. I could go for him again and if it wasn’t so cold, I’d be ripping off that shirt like a blind dog in a meat market. ‘It was supposed to be romantic, but I got a bit carried away...’ He frowns as if he’s heard my unromantic metaphor. I smile as his shyness resurfaces. There’s no need to be embarrassed, my love.

‘And it *was* romantic. It was beautiful.’ I giggle, feeling silly and he grins before he gets up to change the record to Dolly Parton.

He remembered; I think as a smile creeps across my face. *I Will Always Love You* begins to play and for a moment I feel a wash of sadness. Like the song and Kevin Costner in *The Bodyguard*, I’ll have to go soon, Coolsbay is only temporary for me but for him it’s his forever home. He can’t leave Neve, he’s her father figure. He motions for me to go outside, positioning pillows in the doorway of the tent. As I push my negative feelings back down, we lay back with our heads on the pillows. Both wrapped in blankets, just looking up at the stars. The sky is so clear now. An immense dark blanket, filled with sparkling stars. Mother Nature’s very own Christmas fairy lights.

I sigh a big, happy sigh.

‘I’ll remember this night for a very long time,’ I say as I continue to stare up at the stars. It really is mesmerising, I can see why Atticus felt so trippy looking at the sky, it feels hallucinogenic even without the mushrooms.

‘Me too.’

‘What star constellation is that?’ I say pointing at three bright stars in an almost perfect line.

‘It’s Orion’s Belt and if you look beyond that you’ll see that it looks like the outline of a human.’

I squint my eyes and tilt my head and sure enough it does.

‘Wow, that’s so cool.’

‘Yeah, Orion’s Belt means rebirth and Coolsbayarians say it means the ghosts of the dead are looking at you.’

‘Oh no, Coolsbay woo-woo got you too,’ I tease him, feeling a little freaked out by the thought of ghosts looking down at me but then I guess Aunty Pat is watching. Although I hope she wasn’t ten minutes ago, or she may have had a shock.

‘It’s always so clear up here on the hill.’ I close my eyes, breathing in the cold, still air, filling my lungs with hope and positivity for the future. Dolly sings about wishing happiness and love and we lie together listening to her dulcet tones. I sing along quietly, enjoying the happy haze of after sex euphoria. Before I know it, I’ve sung along to six songs and the album finally comes to an end. We stare up at the stars for a long while, enjoying the pretty display of Mother Nature. It feels Christmassy, twinkly and magical. If I died now, I’d be perfectly happy. A single white feather slowly wafts down from the sky and lands on my forehead. I gasp. *Don’t be a bloody martyr*, Pat’s voice echoes in my head. Okay, I don’t want to die now. I want to live. Live and have more moments like this... with Nick. Thanks Aunty Pat.

‘The ghosts are definitely watching us,’ I say taking the feather and twizzling it between my fingers. Now feels like the right time to tell him my plans to stay in Coolsbay. I roll onto

my side and place my hand on his chest. He has his eyes closed too, probably enjoying my singing just as much as I have. ‘So, I have some news... Nick?’ He says nothing so I gently shake him. ‘Nick?’

He lets out a mumble then rolls onto his side, facing me. He’s asleep. I touch his cheek, feeling the soft stubble upon my palm. It stays there for a few moments. Not being able to tear my eyes away, I study his face, he looks so peaceful, so gorgeous. Suddenly afraid that he might open his eyes and catch me gawping at him, I quickly roll onto my back again and move my eyes to the sky. Okay, there’s no rush. I can tell him any time. After all, I am back home for a while.



‘He’s been, he’s been.’ Mum comes running into the bedroom with the stockings. She’s dressed in what my sister and I used to call her Christmas turkey outfit with all the trimmings. It’s a fancy velvet red dress with gold edging. There’re no turkeys on it. We were just being facetious children.

‘What time is it?’ Evie croaks as she sits up and rubs her eyes.

‘It’s time that you girls came and opened your presents.’ Mum grins manically. I grab my phone off the table to check the time.

‘It’s seven am, you maniac.’ I giggle as Evie, never a morning person, slumps back down and begins snoring.

‘Oh, come on girls, you used to get up at five am when you were little, right up until you were teenagers in fact. Seven am is a lie in, surely.’

She shakes the stockings and I swing my legs over the side of the bed to get up. I want to see what’s in those stockings, and I want a chocolate and strawberry croissant for breakfast. Last night’s antics have made me hungry, I think as an image of Nick and I laying under the stars flashes in my mind’s eye.

‘It is most certainly not a lie in.’ Evie groans as I climb down the ladder then pull her out of bed.

‘Come on grumpy, Mum’s excited. We’ll sing the Christmas turkey song later,’ I say as I manage to conjure up a small smile out of Evie.

‘Oh no you won’t,’ Mum says wagging the stockings as a threat. The Christmas turkey song used to be a tradition, a made-up song, sung every year to wind up Mum and Dad. It worked a treat, as you can tell.

‘Honestly, what will you girls be like when *you* have children of your own.’

‘I’ll be training them from birth to lie in,’ Evie grumbles as she slumps over to Mum and lets her give her a hug. There was a time when Evie would take offence to that kind of comment. The having kids scenario, playing heavily on her mind. But something’s shifted in her. She’s different.

‘Come on,’ I say, slinging an arm around my little big sister. ‘Let’s go and see what Santa has brought us.’

‘Merry Christmas, girls,’ Dad says as we enter the kitchen to a gorgeous spread of Christmas breakfast food. There’s one thing that our parents always do well and that’s a buffet. My mouth waters as my eyes move over the grazing board of goodies. Of course, the signature chocolate and strawberry croissants are there as well as more pastries, American pancakes, Bucks fizz, orange juice and pineapple juice. Dad has even done some pineapple and cheese sticks which is completely random, but I love him for it. He knows they are my favourite.

‘Hmmmmm,’ I hear myself say as I reach for a croissant only to have Mum promptly slap my hand away.

‘Not yet.’

‘First, presents.’ She leads us into the living room, still clutching at the stockings. We sit on the floor, regressing back to little children as Mum and Dad sit on the sofa. When we’re suitably seated, Mum hands us the stockings.

‘Here we go, do these first.’ We take them, delving in like the little children that we used to be. We dig in to find the traditional orange that always goes back in the fruit bowl

along with a big chocolate Santa and several bags of gold coins. I smile.

‘Aww this feels very nostalgic,’ I say as Mum blinks back tears and Dad takes her hand to comfort her.

‘It does,’ she says. ‘Go on.’

We delve in further until my hand touches something hard but soft and velvety. I pull out a little jewellery box and wait for Evie to do the same. Once she has hers, we open them to reveal two sets of pearl earrings.

‘They were Pat’s,’ she says, sniffing into a tissue. Amber doesn’t have her ears pierced so she thought you girls might like them. It’s very kind because she could have kept them for Sophia, but she insisted you girls have them. She said you’ve made the dream team feel very well-looked after, bringing together the Coolsbay community. You’ve even included that cranky old cow, Sandra.’

‘Mum!’ Evie and I say in unison.

‘Well, she is a cow bag, Pat hated her but Marco,’ Mum continues in a silly voice, whilst looking at Evie, ‘I’m told, can’t stop raving about it. It’s given him a purpose.’

‘He’s been inspired to start selling some of his creations online,’ Evie says. ‘Thanks Mum, they’re beautiful.’ Evie pulls hers out of the box and inserts them into her ears.

‘Yes, thank you,’ I say, admiring the shiny earrings. I think I can remember Pat wearing these. These were the more modest kind of earring she wore, usually she chose something wacky, bright and colourful. She liked bright things like I did. ‘Do you believe in life after death?’ I blurt out as an image of all the white feathers I’ve seen since I’ve been home float about in my mind.

‘Bit deep for a Christmas morning,’ Dad jokes as he shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Go on,’ Mum says as she pats Dad on the leg and blinks back at me.

‘No, it’s just that since I’ve been home, I’ve been seeing some things and it feels as though Pat is around. I’m probably going mad, high on the fumes of mushrooms,’ I blurt out. Whoops.

‘What?’ Mum squawks.

‘Did you not hear that people were getting high off supermarket mushrooms? It appears they sold a dodgy batch.’ Evie comes to the rescue with her impressive improv skills. Mum visibly relaxes, safe in the knowledge that her daughter isn’t a drug addict because that’s the type of conclusions that parents will jump to.

‘Anyway,’ I interrupt before Mum has a chance to reply and we go down the rabbit hole of the local supermarket selling drug induced food. ‘I keep seeing white feathers. I feel like it’s a sign from Pat. Is that a thing?’

Mum gasps and now it’s Dad’s turn to pat her on the leg.

‘Oh darling, it is a thing, she’s showing you she’s watching over you. I’ve seen them too, when she first passed.’

‘She wouldn’t be calling us martyrs now, would she?’ Evie pipes up.

‘Oh no, she’s very proud of you girls as are me and Tony.’

‘Dad,’ I correct, as Dad blushes and blinks back at Mum. The atmosphere gets very emotionally charged and it feels as though everybody might begin bawling at any moment.

‘That’s so lovely.’ Mum looks at Dad almost as if she’s willing him to cry first. ‘And it’s lovely to finally see you two as friends again.’ She sniffs as she begins bawling. Oh no. Mum’s going on a crying spree. This could go on for hours.

‘Well, I wouldn’t go that far,’ I tease in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Evie gives me a push which is very forceful for someone so small. It sends me flying backwards and of course, Frosty sees that as his perfect opportunity to lick my face off whilst the rest of the family do nothing to help. Instead, tears turn to laughter as they fall about in hysterics, encouraging him to

really go for it. I squeal and bat him away but that just seems to encourage him further. He has me pinned down, his paws on my shoulders, there's no escape. After a few moments of fighting off Frosty with still no help, Mum, Evie and Dad wipe hysterical tears away from their eyes as he finally gets bored and runs off to have a drink. Let's face it, he probably lost a litre of saliva from all the licking.

Yuck.

Well at least Mum's crying spree was averted.

'You know, you're your own worst enemy with Frosty,' Evie says after they've all calmed down from my traditional Frosty kisses ordeal. 'I could tell you how to deal with him when he does that, but I also don't want to ever stop you being slobbered on by him.'

'She's right,' Mum agrees. 'It's just too funny.' She dabs happy tears away from her eyes as Dad begins to silent laugh again next to her.

'Ah, I'll work it out one day, won't I, Frosty?' Frosty, who is now sitting on Mum's feet licks his lips and jumps up. I quickly stand up, not about to be slobbered on again.

'Oh, did we say, we've invited Atticus to join us for Christmas dinner.' Dad grins at Mum as Evie and I exchange looks. Is this some sort of a joke?

'Yes,' Mum chimes in, nodding enthusiastically. 'We got chatting to him at the bar the other day and he mentioned he was here on his own for business. He seemed like a lovely chap, and we felt sorry for him.' She frowns at me and Evie, narrowing her eyes. 'Girls. Why are you looking at me like that? Have a sense of charity at Christmas, will you?'

Oh my God.

I don't want to think about Atticus and my parents, especially not in this lifetime, not ever in fact, but especially not on Christmas Day.



The rest of the day whizzes by in a happy Christmas haze. Atticus cancels. Thank God. Presents are exchanged as are plenty of funny and lovely memories. An embarrassing amount of food and drink is devoured, and, in the evening, Amber and her family come over for more festivities. It's the perfect Christmas and I'm so glad I'm home for it. I go to bed, feeling all warm and fuzzy and as my head hits the pillow, I glance at my phone, the perfect text to end the perfect Christmas.

Nick: *Happy Christmas beautiful. Hope you're having a good one. Want to meet up tomorrow? xx*

Me: *Merry Christmas. You bet I do, will message in the morning, falling into a food and drink coma now. Night. Xx*

Chapter Twenty-Six

If I could use a Dolly Parton song to sum up my mood right now, then it would be Gettin' Happy. It's been the loveliest of Christmases with my family and soon it will be time to see my other family and thank them for their work so far. I also have some good news to share with them regarding the miraculous appearance of the charity money. This good news should spur them on to get the final pieces finished. Although I'll be keeping quiet about who took it, I pinky promised a little girl I wouldn't tell.

It's Boxing Day morning and the dream team are meeting at noon for a buffet, kindly supplied by Amber, before they crack on with their needles and hooks and continue on the final stretch to get the yarn bombing finished. It's also Wednesday, the day that Mum and Dad usually meet for their three-way with 'A.'

Vomit.

'Anything planned today then, girls?' Mum chirps as we slurp on copious amounts of tea and help ourselves to more strawberry and chocolate spread croissants. This yummy tradition has probably been the main staple of my diet since coming home for Christmas. I will eat healthier in the new year as well as get a job. Groan. I side-eye Evie who was the one to point out to me earlier what day it is. She catches my eye and gives me a look that says, *I know*.

'We're at the pub with the dream team this afternoon,' I say. 'How about you guys? Meeting anyone special?' I say as Evie scoffs into her pastry. I can't believe I just said that. Mum looks at me curiously, pursing her lips together.

'No, no, just pottering around the Boxing Day sales with Dad. Might get a new frock for New Year.' She wriggles her shoulders, excited at the prospect of her new purchase.

'No meetings?' Evie asks with a smirk, not being able to help herself, whilst I turn my back and chuckle into my croissant. After a few wines last night, I wanted to ask Mum

and Dad outright and check they are being safe with this three-way arrangement. Evie pulled me to one side whilst they were busy clearing up in the kitchen and told me to reel it in. It's their private life and I got the usual lecture about them being entitled to do as they please.

'No, no meetings today,' she says eyeing us both suspiciously. 'What's going on with you two?' Mum brandishes a butter knife in our direction. Dad sits next to her completely oblivious and engrossed in his newspaper. Occasionally licking his fingers to turn the page.

'Nothing, nothing, just feeling all Christmassy and giggly, you know what we get like,' I say, hiding behind my croissant.

'Yes, yes I do.' Mum rolls her eyes then smiles. 'Still, it's nice to see you teaming up on us again and not at each other's throats, it's just like the old days, isn't it, Tony?'

'What?' Dad looks up from newspaper.

'These two, it's just like when they were little, isn't it?' She waves the knife at him.

'Oh, yeah, yes, still as cheeky as ever.' Dad returns to his newspaper, engrossed in celebrity home Christmas décor and tartan inspired living rooms.

We spend the rest of the morning skirting around the three-way scenario whilst I continue to make what *I* think are subtle jokes. Mum just seems to get more and more irritated by us as the morning goes on but we are still no closer to finding out who this mysterious 'A' is that they meet up with – is it Atticus? Did he cancel coming to ours for Christmas as even he isn't that cringy and brazen? Perhaps Evie's right. Perhaps we should just leave them to it but since reading it in the diary, I just can't get the idea out of my head. It's so unlike them. So out of character. So grim.

Evie and I stroll down to the pub as Evie taps away on her phone. She's texting Marco, who'll she'll see in approximately five minutes. I watch her face as she blushes and smiles and feel nothing but warmth for my sister. She deserves to feel like this at Christmas. It's lovely to feel loved and wanted. In fact,

it's the best feeling. We arrive at the pub and my eyes scan the room for my new love. I wonder how he'll react to the news about me staying in Coolsbay? I think he'll be pleased, perhaps I'll tell him today, it's as good a day as any. A grin spreads across my face as I imagine the scenario. Maybe I'll take him up the hill to tell him, the views are incredible up there and it does seem to be becoming our place. Then, I feel my smile slowly fade as my eyes dart from Atticus propping up the bar to Nick talking to another man. It's the back of his head. But I know that head. It belongs to a man I know. A man who I thought wasn't interested, not fully invested, but now here he is. In the Mermaid's Lair, my local pub and he's chatting to Nick. It's so surreal, it's like a dream. An unbelievably bad dream.

My stomach flips.

Then it flops.

Then it sinks.

I stop walking.

'Who's Nick talking to? Not a local, is he?' Evie says. I grab her arm. To hold myself steady if nothing else. 'God, you look like you've seen a ghost, woman,' she continues.

'Alastair,' I whisper as Nick waves over at us. 'That's Alastair.'

'Oh. My. Shit. What are you going to do?'

Run, I think. The old me would most definitely run but that isn't me anymore, I need to face my problems now. I've faced a few difficult conversations recently so what's one more? This must be a misunderstanding, perhaps he didn't get the text. I force myself not to check my phone, now isn't the time.

'Alastair,' I say as I approach him with a breezy smile. My face not giving away my true feeling of panic.

'Demi baby.' He engulfs me in a big hug. His smell, that I once couldn't get enough of, is now nauseating. It's too strong. Too overpowering. Just like him. Nick watches from the bar, his face arranged in a passive expression.

‘What are you doing here?’ I laugh as he attempts to kiss me on the lips. I move my face only to have him smooch my cheek a little too enthusiastically. He smells a bit of Marmite and aftershave.

I hate Marmite.

‘Surprise,’ he says, sounding very Scottish amongst the people of Coolsbay. ‘I wanted to surprise you, it’s the least I could do.’

‘But my...’ Text. I sent you a text. I dumped you.

He interrupts me. ‘Look, I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you, not giving you one-hundred percent and all that. But I’m ready to go all in. I want this, if you’ll have me.’ He flashes me a charming smile and leans forward to grab my hand. ‘The days of me being distant are over, well and truly. I’ve not felt this way about anyone, Demi.’ A few heads turn in the pub and someone whistles. Who is this guy? It’s true when they say men are like buses, they all come at once. But I cancelled this one.

‘But I...’

‘Shhh, don’t say a single word more. I’ve got the Tesla waiting out the front now and an even bigger surprise waiting in it for you.’

‘Yup. It’s quite impressive,’ Nick says in a flat tone as he looks at me. He pulls on a dish cloth with both hands. His facial expression remaining still before he looks away. My mind transports back to our game of *Porky Pies*. He used a similar expression then, but it hits differently with that tone of voice.

Alastair beams into my face and before I know it, I’m being whisked away back out into the cold to his car. How did I not recognise it? Parked out the front in all its glory, a dark green Tesla with those lovely-heated seats. He probably programmed it to come around and meet us. Those things drive themselves. It’s a bit freaky. Evie’s still in the pub, she’ll explain the situation to Nick, he’ll understand. Now what to say to Alastair?

‘Surprise,’ Alastair sings again as he reaches into the boot and pulls out a huge bouquet of flowers.

‘They’re beautiful,’ I say, gobsmacked as I stare at the most enormous display of colourful flowers, I think I’ve ever seen.

‘Oh, and one more thing...’ He reaches into the boot again and pulls out a present wrapped in red, shiny wrapping paper with a gold frilly bow stuck on top. It looks like it’s been wrapped professionally. From Harrods or somewhere equally as fancy. ‘Here, you go.’ He hands the present over and we perform an awkward dance before Alastair eventually takes the flowers and puts them back in the boot. I open the present, not sure what to expect.

‘Oh wow.’ I turn the picture over in my hand. I spotted it in one of the restaurants we went to a while ago. It’s by a local artist and it’s titled *Home*.

‘See, I remembered. You like it, don’t you?’ He smiles his lazy smile as his hair flops into his eyes. My body surprises me by unlocking a new ick, inwardly cringing at the number of times I’ve run my fingers through his hair. The very thought of touching it now sets my teeth on edge. Can you really go off people this quickly? *No*, a voice says in my head, *you’re just into someone else so everyone else is obsolete. Plus, he was a shady dickhead.*

‘Yes, yes, I did, I do. I can’t believe you’re here.’

‘I know.’ He grins. ‘Hey, I bumped into your housemate in the supermarket, she said you were moving out.’

‘Yes, well, it sort of fell through.’ I shake my head, not wanting to get sidetracked from my thoughts. ‘But, how did you bump into her? I thought you were down in Cornwall the whole time?’

‘Last minute change of plans, I had to pop back. Work stuff.’ He shrugs it off.

‘Right,’ I say, wondering what possible urgent work stuff a teacher would have to do over the Christmas holidays that warranted him to travel all the way back to Scotland. I smell a rat.

‘What work stuff?’ I ask.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ he says smoothly as he waves my question away and leans on his precious car. ‘What matters is that I’m here and I’m ready to take you away for a few nights. Our little dirty weekend has finally come to fruition.’ He rubs his hands together and, in that moment, I can’t think of anything worse. I don’t want dirty weekends with a man almost twice my age. I want love, respect and friendship.

I want Nick.

‘No.’

‘No?’ Alastair pulls his hands through his hair.

‘No. I sent you a message. I’m so sorry Alastair but me and you are no more.’

‘Yes, but surely you didn’t mean that, you were mad at me, you were testing me. I know you, come on Demi, baby. I know you want me.’ He raises an eyebrow and smiles out of the side of his mouth. Another ick is unlocked, side-smiling.

‘It’s not going to work between us, you couldn’t make the time, you never fully let me in, and that ship has sailed now.’

‘I know, but I can now. That’s what the canvas was for, to hang in our home. I want you to move in with me, Demi, baby.’ I’ve never seen him look so... desperate, apart from maybe that one time he wanted to do something weird in the bedroom. But it gets worse. A whole new level worse. Before I can stop him, he falls down onto his knees and presses his hands together. Looking up at me with forlorn puppy dog eyes.

‘Move in with you?’ I almost laugh. We’ve completely swapped roles in this relationship. Desperation is so unattractive. That must have been what I looked like all those times I begged to see him. Urgh.

‘Yeah, then we can be together all the time, no sneaking around, just you and me in our own little cocoon, our own place.’ He tilts his head and gives me one of his charming smiles. But from this angle, with him on the floor and me looking down at him, it just looks pitiful. Suddenly, I want to cry for him, so I get on my knees, bending down to his level.

‘Alastair, I’m so sorry but you and me aren’t going to work out. I don’t think we’re right for each other. Also, I’m staying here for a while now. This is home for me,’ I say gently as his eyes well up with tears of hurt and frustration. Poor man.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ he mutters under his breath. It’s the first time I’ve heard him swear unless he was using it as a verb for what he wanted to do to me. He’s really upset. Much more than I was expecting, it almost doesn’t warrant this kind of reaction. We weren’t that serious and it gets my hackles up.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘FUCK’S SAKE, THERE’S NO POINT SAYING SORRY NOW, THE DAMAGE IS DONE,’ he spits, then gets up and kicks his Tesla, hurting his foot in the process.

‘Ow,’ he squeals. ‘I fucking left Jess for this.’

‘Jess? Who’s Jess?’

‘My wife. Oh, come on, Demi. Don’t pretend you didn’t know. That innocent act was all a pretence to save face and act like we weren’t doing anything wrong. You and I both know it. Christ, even your teacher friends knew I was married. And I’ve got her bloody photo as my screen saver for God’s sake.’

‘I didn’t know. I wasn’t acting innocent. I just thought you were busy,’ I say evenly, still trying to process this new information and the fact that my so-called teacher friends knew. I press my hands against my stomach. ‘And I never saw your screen saver because you were always hiding your phone from me.’ I get up and kick his car. Now it’s my turn to be angry. ‘I CAN’T BELIEVE I’VE BEEN SO STUPID,’ I bellow. ‘ARE THERE KIDS TOO?’

Alastair hides behind his car, using it as a shield in case I decide to kick him too. He says nothing, just stares off into space and juts out his jaw. My skin tightens. Those poor children, having him for a father. I could never be with a man like that. Not after what my biological dad did to me and Evie. That stuff messes with you for life.

‘Of course, there’s kids.’ I say, realisation dawning. I take a step back, a sour, bitter taste in my mouth. ‘Alistair. Fuck off

back to Scotland.’

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Alastair speeds off down the high street. I cover my eyes and watch through my fingers as he performs an emergency stop, just moments away from an elderly couple about to cross the road. He hovers impatiently. Then zooms off, not even waiting for them to land their feet on the other side of the pavement. Did I actually love him? I was in lust with him for sure. But love didn't even come close. Sometimes, it takes your feelings for someone new to realise how small and superficial your feelings were for that person.

Nick.

I have to see him and explain. I bet he's thinking the absolute worst of me right now. I hot foot it into the pub and race over to the bar.

'Atticus, have you seen Nick?'

Atticus looks up from what looks like a script and frowns. He shakes his head and wobbles his jaw, seemingly disconnecting from his character. He takes a sip of his beer then wrinkles his nose as if he's smelt something foul, probably my desperation or maybe my lies. But I haven't lied, I just wasn't forthcoming with the truth. The truth that I had a sort of boyfriend but then I ended things.

'He's gone home, family emergency or something. Hey, I wanted to talk to you. I've been thinking...' Atticus yodels.

'Not now, Atticus,' I say in a kind but firm voice. 'I have to find Nick.'

'Oh, but you won't, it's a family emergency, and your sister has given strict instructions for you to come straight to the woolshed.'

'Okay,' I begin to back away. My head all over the place. It won't have looked good to Nick. What must he be thinking? I should have told him about Alastair, I should have been more open with him. My nerves are on fire. I might just be sick.

‘I’ll catch you later,’ Atticus replies as I speed off in the direction of the door. ‘I think you’re going to want to hear me out though.’ He tips his hat and goes back to his script and back into character.

‘Okay,’ I say breathlessly as I pelt it to the woolshed, almost tripping over and spraining my ankle in the process.

‘You’re here,’ Evie squawks as I enter the woolshed in a puffing, panting state.

‘Yeah. Just about.’ Everyone stops what they’re doing and silence falls. I can hear myself panting so loudly, it’s almost deafening.

‘Are you okay?’ She edges closer, a concerning arm reaching for my shoulder.

‘Nick, I need Nick.’

‘I know. He’s with Joyce, she’s had a bit of a turn, but she’ll be okay, don’t worry. Dawn just needed some help with Neve. Come and see what the dream team have been doing.’ Evie smiles sweetly and links my arm.

‘Sweet tea, dear?’ Joan asks as I survey the teapots and covered buffet at the back of the room. The last thing I could stomach now is food, but I could do with a cup of tea. Don’t people drink sweet tea for shock? That’s what I’m experiencing right now. Shock.

‘Please, that would be amazing, thank you, Joan.’

‘Sit down, dear,’ Margaret instructs as she forces me onto a beanbag with her good arm. ‘Joyce will be fine, she’s as tough as old boots. Northerners are built to last, she told me.’ I think back to the confusion at the train station and the worried look on Nick’s face when they thought she’d gone missing. Is there something he isn’t telling me too? Is she ill?

‘Demi, take your mind off whatever is bothering you and just look at the yarn bombing, it’s really coming together,’ Margaret instructs as she shakes my shoulder, rattling me back into the present.

I take a deep breath and let my eyes move around the room as the colourful yarn begins to calm me. There are intricate creations everywhere. Pillar box toppers lined up on the windowsill with delicately crocheted little creatures on top of them. There's a large purple and blue stripy cardigan for the Mermaid's Lair front door laid out on the floor with exquisite, crocheted flowers spread over it. Harmony and Destiny sit next to it deep in concentration as they hand sew crocheted Christmas robins onto a green knitted cover for the bench. A basket of crocheted bees and birds sit beside the girls as Sandra meticulously quality checks each one. It's gorgeous, stunning. They've worked so hard. I gulp, suddenly feeling very emotional. It's amazing what they've created in such a short time.

'Guys, this is beautiful. You've done such a wonderful job.' I bite my lip, in an attempt to stop the emotion from spilling out of me. I'm feeling everything right now; relief, mild panic, guilt, gratitude, love. It's a bizarre old mix of emotions and it wants to come out in a huge, ugly cry. Oh God. I'm turning into Mum with her crying sprees.

'I've told them the good news,' Evie whispers as the dream team all graciously take my compliment, saying how it was nothing and how much they enjoyed it.

'About the money?' I manage.

'Yes. It's really lifted their spirits and I think it will give them the boost to get this done in time. Plus, Sandra has miraculously found more wool.' Evie winks as I glance over at an overly helpful Sandra who's now assisting Marco with a complicated stitch. She feels needed and valued in this group, there's no need to be a martyr anymore, as Auntie Pat would say.

'Amber!' I pull my cousin in for a big hug as she enters the woolshed and surveys the work. She mouths a wow. And once more, we all admire the sheer volume of knitted and crocheted pieces which near enough cover every surface in the woolshed. 'This looks amazing. I can't wait to see it out in the wild.'

‘Me too, it’s going to look stunning,’ I say loudly for all to hear.

A couple of the team turn around and smile. They truly have created a masterpiece and I am honoured to have been a part of it, even if I was just getting their drinks and refereeing a few arguments. Evie and I did round up quite a few sponsors I guess, but we couldn’t have done any of it without the Coolsbay community. The dream team.

‘Mum would love this,’ Amber says. ‘She really would.’

‘And the money has been found,’ Evie pipes up, looking very pleased with herself. I wince because I don’t think Amber ever knew it was missing. Shit. I guess she was going to find out sooner or later.

‘Oh?’ Amber raises an eyebrow.

‘Yeah, it just got misplaced for a minute, buried underneath all the wool,’ I say, batting away the revelation as I eyeball Evie to not drop us in it any further. I don’t want Amber thinking we are that incompetent. Because we were beyond incompetent really. A five-year-old managed to steal all of the charity funds and keep it for several days. It’s either shameful or Neve is a little genius. I’ll go with the latter.

‘You alright?’ Amber asks me. ‘You seem a bit wired.’ She motions her hands towards me as if she’s trying to cleanse my aura. A typical Coolsbayarian, into all her woo-woo stuff.

‘Oh, you know, just last-minute nerves.’ I wave my hands around, hoping to give the illusion of someone bright and breezy but instead I look like a mad woman swatting flies. ‘I just want it to be great in honour of your mum and raise as much as we can for the hospice.’ I move my hands to my hips and take a deep breath, trying desperately to keep it steady. Adrenaline begins to pump through my veins again as the fresh memory of Alastair in my hometown comes back to taunt me.

‘They’ve done a great job and you girls have too looking after them and raising the funds. I wish I could have helped more, but I had other things to sort out, I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t say sorry, it’s okay, we know,’ I say, patting her on the back, happy for once to have the focus taken away from me. I need to silently collect my thoughts and get over this shock visit. Evie watches me and smiles. She knows I’ll be spinning from this; she knows me all too well.

‘It’s not a problem.’ Evie rests a hand on Amber’s shoulder. ‘You’ve had stuff going on, we understand.’

We’re suddenly distracted by Destiny and Harmony having a heated, under the breath debate which quickly escalates into raised voices on whether to include Jesus on the cross on the Mermaid’s Lair front door. Destiny is dead against it and thinks it’s too morbid and crude to take centre stage and should be in a more subtle location such as the side of the bench cover or not at all because this isn’t a religious event. Harmony says she’s being a prude and it’s just a naked human body with a bit of blood on his hands and does she now not believe in Jesus. *Oh Lord*. I never would have thought yarn bombing would become such a divide for religious views.

‘I have,’ Amber says, coming back to our conversation. ‘But it’s a lot better now your mum and dad are onboard, we’ve had some really good chats, they’re so open-minded about stuff,’ she says as all the colour drains from mine and Evie’s faces.

‘Really, why?’ Evie asks in a wary voice. What in the? They’ve been meeting for chats. A. We’ve found our A and it’s the last person we expected.

Of course - A is for Amber.

It’s Amber.

Oh fuck. It’s Amber.

‘Yeah, haven’t they told you yet?’ Amber asks, looking slightly amused.

Evie and I shake our heads slowly.

‘I’m sure they won’t mind me saying,’ Amber continues. ‘But your mum and dad are coming into business with me. They knew how stressed out I’ve been since Tamsin’s

departure, so we've been meeting to discuss details and make sure they definitely want to do it.'

Evie and I blink back at her. 'Part-time. Tony's doing the accounts and all that stuff that Stella did, that I hate doing, and Karen is going to get stuck in with the grooming and dog walking. She said she's been so bored since retirement, and she loves dogs. Frosty's even going to be the new mascot,' Amber laughs, and Evie and I breathe a sigh of relief.

'That's fantastic, I'm so pleased for you, of course it's a great idea.' I squeal, not being able to contain the happiness at discovering that my parents aren't depraved animals who indulge in regular threesomes with strangers. Atticus. Although I'm rather fond of him now, he is a bit strange.

'Amazing,' Evie adds, looking as relieved as I feel. 'I'm so pleased for you, Ambs.'

'Right, let's eat,' Amber says, chuckling at nothing. 'I've spent all morning getting this spread ready and I'm not about to let it go stale.'

My dirty brain. Of course, three-way didn't mean some sordid sex threesome. It meant a three-way meeting with A – Amber. Why does Mum write in weird code? *Probably because it wasn't for you to see*, my conscience goads once more. Yeah, I should have just kept my beak and my imagination out, that'll teach me.

We spend the next hour stuffing our faces with turkey sandwiches, pickles, crisps and cakes. I've gone from can't stomach anything to very much eating my feelings. The dream team reminisce about the trials and tribulations of the yarn bombing knitting and crochet marathon. Margaret and Joan regale us with stories from their night knitting including Margaret animatedly telling us about her skinny dipping and that it was so cold she felt her soul leave her body for five minutes, and that was in a wetsuit. As we all fall about laughing at Margaret's dramatics, I can't help but think about Joyce, she should be here laughing with us too.

As soon as the buffet is over and the team is happy, there's only one place I need to go and that's to Ivy Cottage to see

Nick and his lovely family.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Nick.

My heart beats heavy in my chest as I take the short walk to Ivy Cottage.

I need to see him. I need to see them. I can't believe the love I've acquired for these people in such a short space of time. Nick's passive expression haunts me as it flashes into my mind's eye. He'll be okay, he'll understand. He's laid back, isn't he?

I watch my feet step onto the path leading up to the cottage, my boot shoelaces flopping as I pad gingerly, slowing down as I approach the door. I grip the knocker in my hand, knocking hard three times, not my usual knock. Maybe, subconsciously, I'm afraid he won't answer the door to *me*. But why wouldn't he? I'm being ridiculous. I'm a serious hot mess. Don't go on a crying spree, Demi. Don't go on a crying spree.

'Demi.' Dawn smiles warmly as she answers the door. 'Come in, come in.' She ushers me inside and I take off my coat, hanging it on the coat stand before following Dawn down the corridor.

'I just wanted to check that you guys were okay, I heard about Joyce, is she okay?'

'Yes, yes she's okay, thank you,' Dawn says, stopping half-way down the corridor. She lowers her voice and looks at me pointedly. 'Think we need to get her seen to properly in the new year at the doctors. It's just every now and then she gets confused. Like she's not sure where she is or what's going on completely, but then it's over, she snaps out of it, and it doesn't happen for ages. She's back to her normal sharp self and it's forgotten about. Until next time. But the next times are becoming a little more frequent, you know, love?'

I nod, remembering her face at the train station. She looked so vulnerable, so lost. 'She has a lovely family to look after her,' I say, not really knowing what else to say. 'Where is she?'

‘She’s upstairs with Nick, they’re looking at some of his grandad’s things that she left here. Sort of a tradition. They won’t be long, cup of tea?’

‘Yes. please,’ I say, not really wanting one but accepting anyway. My blood is probably pure tea with the amount I’ve drunk over the last few weeks but what’s one more, hey?

Dawn motions for me to follow her into the living room where Neve is playing with her dolls. Cinnamon spice dances about in my nostrils, emitted by a snowman oil burner standing on the fireplace. The warm, welcoming fire crackles and pops making me feel instantly sleepy and reminiscent of mine and Nick’s romance on the hill. I blush at the memory.

‘Demi!’ Neve shouts with glee as she comes running up to me, throwing herself into my arms. It’s as if we’re long-lost friends and I love it. She’s such a sweetheart.

‘Did you have a nice Christmas?’ I ask as I bend down to her level. She nods, her bright eyes and toothy grin enchanting me.

‘I got these dolls.’ She shakes the dolls at me fiercely as their freaky eyes roll around in their heads.

‘They’re lovely,’ I lie. ‘And you’ve lost a tooth!’ I point at her bottom gap as she grins at me inanely.

‘Yes, the tooth fairy came too.’ Neve leans forward and whispers in my ear. ‘I kept my wobbly tooth a secret surprise.’

‘Well, you look very grown up.’

Dawn pads off into the kitchen leaving me and Neve to play with the dolls, which we do for a few minutes, until a doll is thrust at my face and begins to speak to me. One to one.

‘Neve was naughty, and Santa still got her presents,’ the doll says in a little meek voice as Neve tries her best at ventriloquism. She’s clearly been studying it on YouTube or something as her head is turned away from me and her lips, through gritted teeth are only slightly moving. For a five-year-old it’s quite impressive but it’s also hysterical.

I bite the inside of my cheeks before a huge guffaw escapes me which I then quickly disguise as an unconvincing cough.

‘Oh really?’ I say to the doll as Neve continues to look away.

‘Yeah, shhh, don’t tell her I told you, ‘The doll says, struggling with the shhing.

‘Your secret’s safe with me.’ I pat the doll on the arm. ‘Why was she naughty?’ I ask.

‘She took some money for a present but then told the truth and gave it back to the elf.’

‘Ah there we go then,’ I say, trying to stay focused on the doll as Neve’s little face comes over all worried. ‘It’s hard to stay good all the time, isn’t it? But as long as we try our best to put right what went wrong then all is forgiven, and it sounds like Neve did just that.’ It reminds me bleakly of own wrong doings. I need to speak to Nick. I need to put things right with him.

‘Yeah, she did.’ Neve breaks character and looks at me and smiles. She’s so sweet. It’s her dad’s loss; who wouldn’t want to spend time with this delightful little girl?

‘Here we are.’ Dawn beams as she enters the room with a tray containing a teapot, three cups, mince pies with icing on top and what looks like homemade short bread. My mouth waters, despite feasting upon a very carb heavy beige buffet earlier. The more carbs you have, the more carbs you want.

‘I love your teapot,’ I say as I eye up the quirky colourful giant teapot.

‘Oh, thanks, made this when Nick was a teenager.’ Her face flashes with a tinge of what looks like guilt. Ah when he lived with his grandparents, and Dawn went a bit off the rails due to a new love, new love that didn’t last the test of time but did produce a lovely child at the end of it. Dawn pours the tea and gives Neve a cup of milk in a teacup. She offers around the mince pies and short bread, and I smile as Neve licks her lips in anticipation of the sugary goodness.

‘Nick, Mum, you’re just in time, I’ll get some more cups.’ Dawn stands up whilst I paste on my best genuine apologetic, I’ll explain everything, face. I imagine it looks a bit like a confused smile, so I rearrange my face quickly into just a smile. Why am I so bloody awkward today? It’s catching.

‘Hi guys,’ I say, sounding like a different person. I may as well have spoken in my American elf voice. I cringe inwardly, I’m becoming an ick. Even Neve is side-eyeing me right now.

‘Eee pet, how are you?’ Joyce asks as she sits down beside me, shuffling up close, I give her a side hug and a kiss on the cheek. She beams, it feels so natural until I look up at Nick who remains standing, unsmiling and looking off into the distance.

Shit.

‘I think I should be asking you that,’ I smile kindly as she shakes her head and bats my concerns away with her hand.

‘I’m fine, all a fuss about nothing, I’m not a martyr.’ She winks and I giggle. Yeah, she’s alright. A fuss about nothing.

‘Glad to hear it,’ I say. ‘And you?’ I continue, looking up at Nick. My heart is now beating fast in my chest.

‘I’m fine, all good.’ He continues to stare straight ahead. I’ve messed up big time. Of course, he isn’t going to forgive me.

‘Want to talk?’ I say meekly as his eyes briefly meet mine.

‘No,’ he says quietly. ‘No, I don’t right now, in fact I think you should leave.’

‘Nick!’ Joyce admonishes.

‘No, she will not,’ Neve protests as she tugs at my arm.

‘Everything alright?’ Dawn asks as she pads back into the room with more cups and saucers.

‘Yes, all good,’ I say cheerily as my heart shatters. His words stabbing me like tiny little shards of glass. ‘I was just leaving anyway, got to get back and prepare the final bits for the yarn bombing tomorrow.’

‘Toodle pip.’ My face grins the biggest grin as my eyes begin to involuntarily water. Oh God. You’re bloody trained in drama, act fine. Act happy. Toodle bloody pip.

‘Goodbye love, don’t mind him, we’ve been reminiscing about the past, gets him a bit chocked up, doesn’t it, love?’ Joyce’s eyes flit between the two of us until something clicks and she makes an O shape with her mouth.

Nick says nothing, just slowly walks over to the record player and begins to riffle through the vinyl’s. Dawn and Joyce stare as I gather my things and shrug on my coat.

‘Brother Nick’s being a grumpy one, don’t worry,’ Neve says as I wave and smile, leaving the room with blurred vision so bad that I can’t see straight. As Dawn follows to let me out, I hear Dolly’s *I Will Always Love You* playing. It takes all my strength not to bawl on her shoulder. Instead, I wish her a Happy New Year and leave Ivy Cottage with quite a few backwards glances.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next few days are spent busying ourselves with the dream team. Making sure they're fed and watered, making sure there aren't any more deviations from the plan in preparation for the yarn bombing event on New Year's Eve. They get their heads down, focusing on the end result, occasionally stopping to reminisce about Pat or ask each other how to get out of a knitting, crocheting or sewing conundrum but apart from that it's surprisingly calm and quiet.

Too quiet.

Nick hasn't been back to work either, but I wonder if he'll be working tonight. It is New Year's Eve, it'll be busy. Apart from the knitters, it's completely dead in the pub now anyway, that weird lull between Boxing Day and New Year where everyone eats too much cheese and chocolate, and you really have no idea what day it is. You can't fit in your trousers anymore so all you can do is lay about, eat more and watch more TV. You long for the new year and to start again. Normality. But what is mine? I don't have a normal anymore. This lull, this in-between, has become my new normal.

Evie and Marco steal glances and secret smiles at each other over the woollen masterpieces in the woolshed. My heart aches for the one person that doesn't want to see me.

Nick.

I've sent him messages explaining and apologising about Alastair but nothing. He's read them, two blue ticks tell me so, but still no reply, not even to tell me where to go. I suppose I deserve it really. I wasn't honest with him, it must have looked way worse than it was, like I encouraged it.

A Wham! tune blasts out of the speakers in the woolshed and everyone gushes over each other's work and gossips and surmises about the huge mystery anonymous donation we've just received in the post, a cashier's cheque for £2500. Everyone is buzzing and the hospice will be absolutely made up. This helps to make my heart feel a tad lighter, I'm trying

hard not to be a martyr. Today of all days is no day for being a martyr, not in Aunty Pat's memory.

As George Michael sings about being once bitten and twice shy, I clear a space amid the wool and sit on the floor, my mind transporting me back to my last Christmas. It was so vastly different to this one. So very lonesome. My housemates, Phillipa and Roo were in the early stages of their relationship and although we all ate a roast Christmas dinner together, you just can't beat your mum's and as soon as they could, they sneaked off to the bedroom for a 'lie down' leaving me to watch the King's speech alone whilst finishing off a box of sickly chocolates and drinking copious amounts of gone off eggnog. It was miserable. Not like this year at all.

'Penny for them, pet?' Joyce asks as she smiles at me, holding a pillar box topper in her hands. This one is bird-themed and is covered in gorgeous robins surrounding a fierce looking kestrel who reminds me of Margaret if Margaret were a bird.

'Ahh, just reflecting on this past year, you know.'

'Eee pet, well I'm here to bring you back to the present. It's time.'

'Already? Okay let's bomb Coolsbay.' Joyce gives me a funny look before I correct myself. 'Yarn bomb Coolsbay.' I heave myself up, just a few mince pies heavier than normal and begin helping to collect the pieces to box them up and take them outside.

Harmony, Destiny, Margaret, Joan, Marco, Joyce, Sandra, Evie and I spend the next few hours bombing Coolsbay with beautiful yarn creations. We're lucky it's not raining but it is freezing cold. Everyone is wrapped up in their big coats, scarves, hats and gloves and the sky is a clear vibrant blue. Mum said it's the perfect temperature for snow, but we haven't had snow here in years. After we've almost finished, Evie and I stand back for a moment and admire all that the team have created. A bright, colourful blanket, covering our hometown. The people of Coolsbay stand outside watching and clapping and there are a lot of *oohs* and *aahs* as the twins take the

second from last piece to cover the Mermaid's Lair door. Lots of photos are taken with the masterpieces and their creators and many stop to upload them onto social media. It's a proud day for Coolsbay. Marco and Evie drape the final yarn bomb topper on the pillar box outside the pub. This one has the King crocheted onto the top of it, expertly done by Joyce. He looks very noble, nodding his head majestically as he's positioned onto the pillar box. Bobbing his approval at the people of Coolsbay.

'All this looks like it's come out of your wardrobe,' Evie jokes as she comes to stand beside me, her breath dancing in the frosty winter air. 'Vibrant, fun and gorgeous, a coat of many colours,' she continues doing a very bad Dolly Parton impression as she pulls me into a tight side hug. She's regained her strength these last couple of weeks. Seems like I'm not the only one where coming home has been good for the soul this Christmas.

'Aww, that's lovely. Love you sis. Couldn't have done it without you and the dream team. It's a real masterpiece, isn't it? How are we going to top this next year?' I nuzzle into my scarf, the cold stinging my face now that I've stopped moving.

'Love you too.' Evie pauses and studies me. 'You want to do this all again next year?' She makes a face, but I can tell she's considering it too.

'Maybe, who knows? Do you think you'll be here?' I ask, with a little wobble in my voice.

Evie looks over at Marco wistfully as he chats with Margaret and Joan by the pillar box. His arms fly around dramatically as he tells a story. He still has his bag full of knitting needles and we watch him for a moment, joking and bouncing around as he repeatedly hoists his bag back onto his shoulder.

'Who knows where the wind might take me.' Evie takes my hand and squeezes it.

'Really? The wind? Or a foreign exchange student from Italy?'

Evie shakes her head as Marco catches us looking at him. He waves at her with a big silly grin on his face. She waves back then when he looks away, she shakes her head again, albeit a little sadly.

‘No, we’re going to keep in touch, but he goes back soon. He’s eight years younger, I don’t want to plan my life around a man again. Plus, I can’t leave my job, I’ve worked too hard to get where I am.’ Evie’s face lights up. ‘And I have my eye on a flat here in Coolsbay, not far from the harbour. I’m going to see if I can view it in the new year. Come with me?’ She squeezes my hand, and we swing our arms like little girls again.

‘Absolutely,’ I say, still swinging. ‘You kept that quiet.’

‘I only noticed it this morning, so not really.’

‘Fair enough,’ I say letting go of her hand. ‘Look, there’s Mum and Dad.’ I point to our parents as they walk, arm in arm towards us. Mum already looks like she’s about to go on a huge crying spree. I hope she doesn’t because it might set me off on a spree of my very own.

‘Darlings, it looks fantastic. Pat would be so proud,’ Mum croaks as she gives Evie and I a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. Dad hugs us both and tells us well done quietly before dutifully handing Mum a packet of tissues out of his pocket.

‘I love what they’ve done with Jesus, very snazzy pants.’ Mum giggles as she dabs her eyes. She points to the huge, crocheted Jesus on the front of the Mermaid’s Lair door, he’s wearing rainbow-coloured pants.

I look over at Destiny and Harmony who are hovering by the pillar box chatting with the others and give them a huge grin and a big thumbs up. They compromised in the end.

‘We better go in, hadn’t we?’ Dad says, looking and tapping at his watch. ‘It’s almost time.’

‘Yes, let’s do this,’ I say as I notice that most of the others have already started to make their way into the pub. It’s going to be a full house. I link Dad’s arm and Evie links Mum’s and together, as a family, we head into the Mermaid’s Lair.

Mum and Dad get themselves settled in a corner table near the front of the stage and Evie and I approach the bar to get the drinks in. My stomach is a bag of nerves and it's not because I have to do a bit of public speaking. It's because he's here. Nick. A huge sigh escapes me as we reach the bar.

'Hello ladies and happy New Year's Eve,' Atticus booms with a big smile and round rosy cheeks as he tips his hat at me and Evie. It's a different hat, not his usual large white one. Today, he's wearing a flat cap and appears to be talking in a Scottish accent. He takes a sip of his whiskey and coke, again a different choice to the usual ales I've seen him drinking.

'Happy New Year's Eve, Atticus,' I say. 'Getting into character for something?' I nod to his drink.

'I, that I am, that I am, dear girly.' Atticus rolls his R on the word girly and I giggle at this odd yet strangely fascinating man. He takes off his hat and leans into me whilst Nick appears behind the bar and Evie orders drinks from him.

Remain calm, Demi. Remain calm. I glance over at Nick as he goes off to make the drinks. He looks gorgeous today. I hope he forgives me; I hope we can at least be friends. Saliva forms in my mouth. My new Year's resolution will be to always be honest and open with people from now on. I'm cross with myself for messing this up, although the old me probably would have bugged off back to Scotland and run away from all this. But I have other duties and responsibilities to attend to.

'I wanted to speak to you about a possible job,' Atticus says as he loses the Scottish accent, replacing it with his usual yodel.

'Oh, a job. Doing what?'

'An acting job with yours truly.' Atticus arches both eyebrows as he slides a large envelope across the bar. 'Have a read, have a ponder and let me know what you think.'

'Ahh, you've seen my amazing elf improvisation,' I say, taking the envelope and sliding it into my handbag.

‘Something like that.’ He winks as Nick approaches with our drinks and sets them down on the bar. He’s now in front of me, face-to-face.

‘Hey,’ Nick says as he pushes his glasses up onto his nose. He smiles, dimples appearing. Despite being ignored for days, I melt a little.

‘Hey,’ I reply nonchalantly.

‘I’m paying,’ Evie says as she shoves her card in front of Nick and beeps it on the card machine. She picks up Mum and Dad’s drinks. ‘You bring ours over, Demi.’ She marches off, leaving me with Nick and Atticus.

‘Have you seen the ivy?’ Atticus says as he points to the ivy hanging just above mine and Nick’s heads.

‘Oh, yes it’s lovely,’ I say as I play with my scarf whilst not looking at Nick.

‘It’s from the front of my house, Ivy Cottage,’ Nick says before running his fingers along the edge of his shirt collar. His lips part and beads of sweat appear on his forehead. Atticus isn’t the only one acting odd.

‘Well, you have to kiss, that’s the tradition,’ Atticus nods and smirks. Is this man high on mushrooms again? He must have an idea of what’s gone on, he was here when Alastair turned up for goodness’ sake. They must have discussed it. Atticus practically props up the bar when he’s not working or walking in the hills; he would have probed Nick about it, I’m sure.

I want to run.

‘Ummm.’ Nick tilts his head and smiles again like he hasn’t been ignoring me for days. I feel a surge of hurt. What’s he playing at? I deserve to be acknowledged at least. Why all smiles and dimples now?

‘It’s mistletoe you kiss under, Atticus and anyway you can’t kiss on the job, can you?’ I smile a tight-lipped smile and nod curtly at Nick. ‘Microphone please.’ I hold my hand out in readiness. Nick opens his mouth to speak but closes it again. He pads over to get the microphone from the back of the bar

and passes it to me. Our fingers touch briefly, and an electrical jolt surges through me.

‘Ouch.’ I shake my hand while taking the microphone with the other one.

‘Sorry,’ Nick apologises as my eyes move to his. His eye contact is so intense that it almost makes me forget to take a breath. I can’t look away. Like a magnet, I’m still drawn to him. ‘Sorry...’

Chapter Thirty

‘Come on Demi,’ Evie interrupts. ‘It’s time for your speech.’ Evie swoops up our drinks then frogmarches me over to the stage. Everyone begins to clap and whoop as I near the front of the pub. The last thing I want to do now is a bloody speech. My mind is all over the place, but I can’t be a bloody martyr now. I stare at all the expectant faces. In Aunty Pat’s honour, the show must go on.

‘Hello everyone,’ I say into the microphone as it screeches with feedback and people cover their ears. I wince, looking to Nick to do something about it. He mouths *sorry* and plays with the faders until it starts to sound less ear bleeding. ‘It’s been a mad few weeks.’ I pause, holding my breath for bad mic feedback that fortunately doesn’t come. ‘Well, it’s certainly not been the Christmas I was expecting. I expected to sit on my bum and have Mum and Dad feed me mince pies and tea every day.’ A few people laugh and Mum shouts *not likely*. ‘But Pat and Mum had other plans for me and Evie, and although I really wasn’t keen at the time, I’m so grateful for that now. We’ve had our ups and downs, injury, arguments, and misplaced funds to name a few but we’ve pulled through and together as a team, as a community, we’ve raised a good chunk of money for the local hospice that cared for our much-loved Pat in her final weeks. But not only that, we’ve created a beautiful spectacle for Coolsbay to admire and I want to thank the team from the bottom of my heart, you know who you are.’

‘Name us then!’ Margaret shouts as Sandra shouts ‘Yeah!’ next to her. I grin as goosebumps begin to form on my neck.

‘So, a massive thank you to Margaret, Joan, Joyce, Sandra, Harmony, Destiny, Marco and Amber, you’ve worked so hard and without you this wouldn’t have been possible. I’ve made some new friends for life. Thank you also to the pub for hosting us and a special thanks to Nick who has been a constant support and a good friend.’ My throat closes up and I gulp it back open. I had to acknowledge him, even if he’s

acting odd with me, he has been there from day one with his funny clothes and dimples. ‘So,’ I continue, trying not to get distracted as I feel his eyes on me. ‘The final amount raised for the hospice is... drum roll please.’ I point to Evie, Mum, and Dad as they begin to bang on the table until the whole pub joins in. A loud rumbling vibration ensues and I revel in it for a while until I hold my hand up to stop them. I take a big shaky inhale then loudly say, ‘Five thousand and fifty-four pounds.’

There’s a huge round of applause. It’s a healthy donation but before I can invite the hospice representatives up to give them the cheque, I watch Mum trot up onto the stage. Before I can stop her, she grabs the mic out of my hand, and I’m left standing there like a spare part. This wasn’t discussed, and I look to Evie who looks as bemused as I am.

‘Umm, hello everyone,’ Mum says as she takes my hand for moral support. She isn’t a fan of public speaking at all, so I’m surprised that she’s even doing this. ‘For those of you that don’t know I’m Demi and Evie’s Mum and Pat’s sister. Umm just wanted to say a huge well done to my girls.’ She holds my arm up and ushers Evie up on stage who shakes her head profusely, never one to be the centre of attention, unlike me. ‘And a huge thank you and well done from the bottom of my heart from me and Tony to all who helped and got involved. It’s been lovely to keep Pat’s spirit alive just in the way she would have wanted us to and spread a bit of colour and positivity too.’ Mum nods towards Nick who points a remote at the stage; behind us a screen begins to slowly come down. Mum swiftly turns to face it then turns back again to the crowd before she hurriedly says. ‘From Pat.’ Mum literally drops the mic, causing Nick to come running after it as she takes my arm, dragging me back down to our seats.

The crowd begin to mumble and discuss before silence falls and Pat’s image appears on the screen. She’s wearing a different outfit to her last video and she’s now sporting a bright green mohawk. Her peacock earrings dangle by her neck and she looks thinner than the last video, her skin sallow. She was days away from death here. I remember Mum saying Pat dyed her hair green to give the people at the

morgue a smile as she assumed they were so used to seeing *miserable, bland looking dead people*.

You had to love her. Just as before, the image on the screen begins to move and figuratively speaking, Pat comes to life.

‘Hiya loves, bet you didn’t think you’d see me again! Nope they haven’t dug me up. I’m still dead. But I wanted to make one last appearance on screen before I say my final goodbye. As you’re watching this video, you’ll know that you’ve done a great thing, a fantastic thing and you should be very proud Coolsbayarians. Whether you’ve been involved in the yarn bombing in some way, knitting, crocheting, organising or you’ve donated or simply supported, it’s incredible what can be achieved when we all come together. I thank you and I hope it’s reminded you about the most important things that money simply cannot buy: connection, kindness, friendship and family. Oh and of course to always make an effort with your appearance. After all a decent outfit and hairdo goes a long way. It shows your inner self, which is why mine were always so bloody wacky and colourful. And finally, remember you know I love you all but don’t be bloody martyrs.’

The screen goes blank and through some very loud sniffles mainly coming from Mum, the crowd cheer and whoop. Next, something incredible happens, a single green feather floats down onto the stage. Some people gasp – okay most people gasp, it is Coolsbay and you’re odd if you don’t believe in signs from the afterlife. There are mumbles of good fortune and luck and who the feather is meant for. Then one by one, the crowd begin to stand up. Soon the whole room is a sea of standing, clapping cheering happy people. The energy is palpable. Through the roof. Pat and her legacy must continue every year because people need this. My hands are beginning to hurt from clapping but I’m enjoying the raised vibration that this event has left. Feeling all warm and fuzzy, my eyes float around the room, nodding and smiling at the people I’ve come to know, love, connect and re-connect with in my hometown. My eyes settle on little Neve who’s standing on a table with her huge backpack on. She waves and blows me a kiss. I grab it then blow a kiss back to her. She grabs my kiss, grinning, then leans down and gives it to Nick who is now standing

beside her. He holds my kiss in his hand, clutching it at his chest as our eyes lock.

‘Demi, Demi,’ Evie shouts over the crowd. ‘Do you have the cheque for the hospice? I’m going to give it to them now before someone loses it.’ She eyeballs my handbag, on edge about another wad of money going missing.

‘Don’t worry, it’s a cheque, it can be replaced.’ I laugh as Evie’s eyes widen, the stress creeping back onto her face.

‘I know but that wouldn’t look good, would it? We want to give it to them tonight, don’t we, sis?’ She smiles and lightly squeezes my shoulder, regaining her composure.

‘Yes, yes, good point.’ I fumble about in my handbag and eventually pull out the envelope with the cheque in. When I look up, he’s there.

‘Hey,’ Nick says, his hand still on his heart, holding my kiss like a precious jewel. Evie swipes the cheque out of my hand and runs off to find the hospice team, leaving us alone in the crowd.

‘Hey, shouldn’t you be working?’ I shout, as the noisy crowd immediately dies down, and people turn to stare.

‘It’s my break, I have half an hour. Can we talk somewhere?’ He looks nervous as his eyes shift from side to side. He seems jumpy but he’s not nervous when he’s up on that stage singing and playing the piano, I briefly think that it would have been a nice touch for him to perform tonight before I reply.

‘Sure, in the woolshed, it’s freezing outside.’

‘To the woolshed.’ He holds his arm out for me to take. I hesitate for a second then think bugger it. If we’re going to get through the crowd fast, then we need to work together. ‘Let’s go.’ Nick sweeps in and out of the sea of people and as we pass through them several people high five us and pat us on the back. Arms reaching out to us reminds me of the sea of extras from Atticus’s film. I’m just thinking this when I spot him at the bar. He tips his hat and mouths to us a Happy New Year. We arrive at the pub exit, I let go of Nick’s arm and we

run out of the building into the arctic air. I follow him round to the woolshed and he digs in his pocket to get the key for the door. We step inside. It's chaos. Wool everywhere. But it's warmer than outside.

'So,' Nick chews on the inside of his mouth. He surveys the room then looks at me.

'So,' I repeat. I could ask him what this is all about but this time, I don't. We stand there for a few moments just staring at the wool. Who would have thought that all the beautiful creations outside could just come from a ball of wool. It's quite amazing when you think about it. I wait patiently, studying the wool, quietly contemplating if I should take up crochet, until he speaks.

'I wanted to say thank you, regarding Neve,' Nick blurts out. He takes his glasses off and rubs his eyes before blinking back at me. For the first time today, I really study him. He sometimes has a bit of stubble but today it's much longer, almost a short beard and he has dark circles under his eyes. He looks tired. Have I been keeping him up at night?

'It's okay, you've already said thank you,' I murmur whilst fighting the urge to pull him towards me and touch his face. I want to hear what he has to say first.

'No. For keeping quiet about Neve and the money, most people would understand but you know what some are like. Sandra would have had her arrested.' He laughs lightly, and I smile.

'She told you? She really didn't want to disappoint brother Nick and I pinkie promised her. I never break a pinkie promise.' I hold out my little finger to make a point and he watches me waggle it for a moment.

'She could never disappoint me but no, it was in fact her doll that told me.'

'Ah.' I grin at the memory of Neve doing her best ventriloquist impersonation. She really is hilarious.

'So yeah, thank you. Thank you for everything with her. You've made her Christmas.'

‘Oh, it was really nothing.’ I wave it off because it wasn’t at all. ‘I enjoyed it all, she’s a very sweet girl, a credit to you all.’

‘Yes, she is.’

‘And sorry.’ His eyes darken as he frowns.

‘For what?’ I say hugging myself.

‘For not replying to your messages, I needed time to think but that was rude of me. I should have replied.’

‘A reply would have been nice.’ I nod.

‘I’m so sorry, Demi. I’ve been an ass.’ He takes my hand and I feel a jolt again. I’m sure he feels it too, but his hand stays there, riding the electric current that’s passed between us. ‘I just had to be sure. You see when we played Porky Pies that night, I might have told a white lie too and not been very forthcoming with the truth.’

‘Oh.’

‘I’m not allergic to tomatoes,’ he blurts. ‘In fact, I love them, and I’ve been avoiding eating them around you ever since I lied. You know it’s been absolute torture not eating pizzas,’ he says with a deadpan expression.

‘Is that it?’ I laugh, thinking we haven’t really eaten together apart from the buffet. Were there pizzas at the buffet? ‘It’s okay really, we all tell the odd white lie, I should know.’ I purse my lips together before we both burst out laughing but then Nick suddenly looks serious and once again, I fight the urge to touch his stubble. To get close and feel the warmth of his breath against my face.

‘And... my best friend, Martin McNulty, remember him? Well, he ran off with my ex.’ He pauses as I try to hide my shock. I knew he had an ex, but I didn’t know she was that much of a cow. And Martin McNulty always had shifty eyes and a dirty nose. Just thinking about the bogies dangling from his crusty nostrils makes me feel sick. My mouth drops open, as if anyone would choose snotty Martin over Nick.

‘I was broken, it was actually terrible and I kind of thought the gossips of Coolsbay would have told you anyway but the

more we've hung out, the more I've come to realise that they haven't. I should have had more faith in them and humanity, because you didn't know, and you weren't hanging out with me because you felt sorry for me or because our mums told you to. Perhaps you genuinely liked me for me.' His skin looks flushed and I'm suddenly hyper aware of my own body. With slightly wobbly knees, I step closer to him.

'Of course I like you,' I say gently as I finally touch his face, feeling his stubble against my palm. It's so satisfying. 'I love your weird, quirky clothes and your slightly awkward personality. I love your kind nature and the confidence you have to just be you. I love your dimples and glasses. I love how close you are to your family and how you look after them all. Despite everything you've been through with your mum, you still treat her like a queen. You're bloody good on the piano too. There're so many more things I could list. I think you're wonderful. Truly.'

'You love my dimples?' He grins then pauses. 'Wow. Well, I think you're wonderful too and a little birdy told me you're staying in Coolsbay for a while.' He looks at me hopeful, pushing his glasses further back onto his nose.

'Yes, yes I am,' I say, wondering if the little birdy is Evie. 'There's nothing for me in Edinburgh anymore,' I continue, pushing aside an image of Alastair's green Tesla speeding off down the road.

'Do you think there might be something here?' he asks.

'Maybe. Atticus has offered me work, so I'll see what that's about, but I'll be sticking around for a while at least. Mum and Dad have said it's okay to stay at theirs for a bit.'

Nick nods, searching my eyes as he takes my other hand and rubs his thumbs on mine, lightly tickling the outside of my hands with his fingers. 'Well, if you wanted to, we could hang out again?'

'Go walking in the hills?' I giggle as he steps closer, grinning.

‘I’m partial to a hike, yes.’ He laughs and his cheeks glow. Then he pulls me towards him, and we kiss under the ivy because mistletoe is overrated and Nick lives in Ivy Cottage which is a beautiful extension of this lovely man with a big heart and an even bigger imagination.

‘How much longer do you have left of your break?’ I say as I kick some balls of wool out of the way and perch myself on the edge of a beanbag. Nick stands, watching me with his arms by his side, his breathing visibly quickening along with mine. The sparks between us are turning to a heightened, heady energy. A charged atmosphere. I breathe heavily with anticipation. He continues to look at me with intense eyes before he drops down to my level and leans over me. I try hard to steady my breathing, holding my breath for a second as I watch his strong arms tense either side of my head. He twists his wrist to check the time on his watch then moves his eyes to mine with a glimmer of mischief.

‘Fifteen minutes exactly,’ he murmurs as his lips part just centimetres from mine. His breath teases and tickles my lips and we smile eagerly into each other’s faces.

‘Better make the most of that time then,’ I say as I pull him towards me.

Chapter Thirty-One

One Year Later

‘Come on, you. You best start getting ready or we’re going to be late.’ I gently shake Nick to wake him, but it does nothing. He continues to lightly snore on his back then frowns in his sleep as I trace my finger from his lips all the way down to his belly button. My man. He always sleeps like a log.

I say always because I’m living at Ivy Cottage now. Since last year’s yarn bombing event, we tried to take things slow but within three months of that steamy encounter in the woolshed we’ve been inseparable. I can’t quite believe it’s been a year to the day since we yarn bombed Coolsbay and in about an hour, we’re going to be doing it all over again but this year, the event is even bigger. I proceed to shake him, more vigorously this time until he eventually begins to stir and rolls over onto his side.

‘Come on sleepy, time to wake up.’

‘But it’s so warm in here,’ he croaks with his eyes still closed. ‘And so are you.’ He pulls me towards him, kissing me all over as I giggle, succumbing to his affections for a few moments.

‘No. Come on, I’m ready, you’ll damage my dress,’ I say, patting down my sequins. ‘I knew we shouldn’t have had that extra mulled wine last night, that stuff is lethal.’

‘Yeah? I’m glad we did, come here.’ We kiss again before I push him away once more.

‘Come on, there’s plenty of time for that later.’ I get off the bed, grinning and Nick groans, defeated.

He swings his legs out of the bed and pads to the bathroom. I watch him and his pert bum march off as I marvel at the fact it’s been a year. They say times flies when you’re having fun and we’ve certainly had a lot of that. My phone rings loudly, snapping me out of my wistful trance and I race over to answer it. Pressing the accept button, I watch a face distort and

jump about until it finally settles on a very tanned and relaxed looking Evie.

‘Evie, Happy New Year!’ I grin at my sister as she beams and waves back at me through the phone.

‘Happy New Year, sis! Just wanted to wish you good luck for today, you’ll smash it!’

‘Thank you, I know we will, I’m so glad the twins are talking again, that was a major issue. Did I tell you they ended up making two Matildas, all because they weren’t communicating? It was so stressful having to choose. I got Neve to choose in the end, you can’t be cross at a child for preferring one Matilda over another.’ We didn’t really have a theme last year as such. It was just English/Christmassy/Jesus in snazzy pants stuff but this year we decided that the theme would be Roald Dahl books and the masterpieces the dream team have created have surpassed all expectations. I’ve even crocheted a few pieces myself, although it took me way longer than the others but I’m glad I could contribute in that way this year.

‘Yeah, you did. Of course they sorted it out, they’re sisters. What did they fall out over?’

‘A man. They both fancied the new barman at the Mermaid’s Lair but turns out he has a girlfriend, thank God.’

‘Not Nick, was it?’ Evie laughs.

‘No, no. He isn’t working there anymore, he doesn’t need to now I’m living here. Plus, as nice as it was to work with him, I was starting to worry that it might be a bit much, that he might get sick of the sight of me.’

‘He could never get sick of you; he’s obsessed with you.’

‘True.’ I agree, because it is true. He is obsessed with me, and I love it. Not in a creepy, won’t leave me alone, sniffs my knickers when I go out kind of a way but in a thoughtful, considerate way. He cares, really cares and he does all the cooking because he knows I hate it but I love eating. If that’s not a sign of true love, then I don’t know what is.

‘How are you anyway? How’s Holland?’

‘I’m great, Holland’s great. They really know how to do Christmas here. It’s so pretty and everyone rides around on bikes even in this bitter weather. Marco and I also went to the sex museum in Amsterdam. Hilarious. I learnt a few things, let me tell you. He’s leaving for Italy in a couple of days, but I’ll be following him out there soon, just have a client to meet with first.’

‘Sounds like you’re having so much fun, you always wanted to travel.’

‘Yeah, I did, didn’t I? And it’s so nice to share it with Marco, we’re lucky our jobs allow us to do that. His scarves are doing so well, ever since *Taylor Swift* was papped wearing one of his scarves to the shops, his sales have gone through the roof.’

‘That’s so cool! He’s practically a famous designer! Make sure to tell everyone that he started out at Aunty Pat’s yarn bombing event.’

‘Oh, I will.’ She laughs. ‘How’s the flat doing?’

‘It’s good, the tenants have settled in well as far as I know although I haven’t heard a peep since before Christmas, I think they’ll be good tenants though, not like the last lot.’ I grimace, still feeling guilty about recommending them. Evie bought that flat we looked at last year. Then shortly after she decided to go travelling so ever since she left, I’ve been looking after the tenants and have been playing landlady. It’s been a learning curve to say the least, but it’s been an interesting one and handy to have a little extra regular income too. For work, I’m doing bits and pieces, my pub job as well as the odd acting job, it suits me. They do say variety is the spice of life. Even if I did get cast as an evil serial killer elf in Atticus’s friend’s comedy horror film, which sadly was a major flop. It wasn’t that much of a surprise though, and it was good fun. I’ve had a few acting jobs from it since as Atticus’s friend put me in touch with an agent. It feels fancy to say I have one of those. Demi Holly has an agent, and she lives in Ivy Cottage with her wonderful boyfriend Nick. What a life! One of my jobs was as an extra in *Bridgerton*. I say three sentences and wear a very

beautiful dress. I've basically made it. Much better than being an extra in *Casualty* which is what Alastair managed.

Speaking of Alastair, I didn't hear from him ever again, but I heard through a teacher friend that he left the school after rumours were spreading about him getting a bit too touchy-feely with a sixth former. Yuck.

'Yeah, well thank God we got rid of them before my flat turned into a bloody drugs den. Honestly.' Evie sighs.

'I was a very bad judge of character there, but they seemed so sweet and one of them was a friend of Joan's.'

'I know, don't worry, I don't blame you.'

'Thanks,' I say, still blaming myself but thankful that Evie doesn't. 'It's not the sort of thing you'd expect from two old ladies either. I'd feel sorry for them if they were victims of county lines or something, but they were basically running the show. Ten grand worth of cannabis in a grannie's cupboard amongst the flower pressings and the white fluffy towels. I'm so glad our gas man found it all.'

'Same but it's Coolsbay, the oldies have a lot more energy there and more time to get up to mischief.'

'That they do, must be something in the water,' I say, thinking of Joyce, Joan, Margaret and Sandra and their nighttime knitting escapades. One night Sandra had to be rescued by the fire brigade as she had decided to climb a tree and couldn't get down. I hope I'm still having that much fun when I'm old but perhaps not growing cannabis in my cupboard, that's perhaps a step too far. Joyce's health is steady, she still has the odd wandering off moment, but she now lives with Dawn and takes medication for Alzheimer's. The main thing is, she's happy and has people around her who love and support her.

'Speaking of oldies, how's mum and dad? I tried ringing them the other day, they're so hard to get hold of.'

'I know, they're so busy with the dog business. Love it don't they. Mum's chuffed she's lost a stone from all the dog walking and Dad just loves pottering about in his office

number crunching, booking clients and the like. Amber is a lot less stressed. It was such a good idea.'

'The three-way with A paid off.'

'It certainly did,' I say as Evie and I giggle at the silly memory of our mum's cryptic diary entry and my over-active imagination.

Nick comes back into the room with a towel wrapped around his waist. I watch him dry himself and select his clothes whilst I ask Evie for more tales on Amsterdam. As I laugh at her story of Marco having one too many puffs of marijuana in a coffee shop and being violently sick later in the night all over an angry man's shoes, Nick puts on a perfect fitting 1950s style suit before pulling a photo of his grandad out of the pocket. He pauses to look at the photo then tucks it back in. This suit is a replica of the one his grandad owned; he couldn't wear his grandad's suit as it was too short for him so as a Christmas present, I had this one made for him.

Today, at the yarn bombing event, he's going to entertain the crowds by playing the piano. A little thought I had last year has turned into reality today. I'm wearing the dress that Evie bought me last year, a sequin sparkly floor length number. Not ideal to go yarn bombing in but I wanted to match Nick's style. I say goodbye to Evie then go and stand by Nick in the bedroom mirror, wrapping my arms around his waist before stepping beside him, our fingers intertwining. We look the perfect classy, happy couple, a far cry from the dishevelled awkward spectacles who met again last Christmas. Me, in my crisp crumb covered, crinkled Worcester sauce smelling clothes, about to wee myself, and Nick, in a suit that looked like it had come out of children's dress up box. But it's not just our clothes that have changed.

'You look gorgeous,' Nick says as he pulls me in for a kiss. He studies my face. 'You okay?'

'Yeah, just thinking about how much can change in a year.'

'It's been the best year, though,' he says as he leans over to kiss me again.

‘Absolutely,’ I reply before kissing him back. ‘I’m so glad I came home last Christmas.’

THE END

Thank you for reading Christmas in Coolsbay, if you enjoyed this then you might enjoy You Grow Girl? Please see the first chapter below so that you can try before you buy.

You Grow Girl – Chapter 1

Events happened in very quick succession.

Like watching a set of dominoes come tumbling down. It took only one to fall and then everything else followed shortly after. Except watching dominoes is quite satisfying and this was more like watching your constipated dog strain for a poo then end up shitting out a pair of your best knickers. It was painful, a bit funny (if it wasn't happening to your dog) and shocking all at the same time and the worst thing was, I couldn't do anything to stop it.

The absolutely mortifying thing was, this was my life.

Brandon and I had been together for almost ten years, we had a house together in a trendy location in Coolsbay, well it was *his* house and I helped him pay the mortgage. His parents gave him a substantial deposit when we moved back home but made sure that my name wasn't on the mortgage or the deeds. I know, I still kick myself about this now.

He worked in TV, his dream job after studying at university and I think his parents persuaded him to buy a house here to stop us from moving to Bristol, where the TV company was based. Instead, he commuted an hour and a half each day but it didn't seem to bother him, said it gave him time to think. Maybe we should have moved to Bristol because his plentiful thinking time has led me to where I am today. On Fridays, Brandon and I would get a takeaway, usually Pizza, and on Saturdays we would often go out for a meal along the harbour at one of the fancy restaurants, then afterwards on to a bar for a few drinks. Well, often a few too many drinks which on occasion resulted in drunken fuelled arguments neither of us could much remember. Sometimes we met with friends, sometimes we didn't. It was nice. Life was good, comfortable and easy until it wasn't, well not for me anyway.



‘Do you think we’re a good match?’ he asked, with his back to me as he continued to wash up, not looking back.

‘Of course, the perfect match. Why do you ask?’ I tilted my head, letting my brown curly hair tickle the side of my face. I wondered why he still had his back turned to me? Why he didn’t look at me when he asked, or when I answered?

I stared at his muscled forearms as they continued to flex as he washed up in our/his Belfast ceramic sink. His cheek length dark hair which was once very long and wavy, swished in time to his movement. We were, at least I thought we were, a very good match.

We met at university in Manchester and we were both studying media, me music and him TV. Even though we were from the same town, we hadn’t properly met until then. I’d seen him about, of course, as Coolsbay is a very small town. He was very easy on the eye with full lips, thick, long surfer-dude hair, dark brown eyes and a strong, athletic build. I’d never had the guts to strike up a conversation with him here, so, when he came up to me in the student bar on the first night of university saying that he recognised me, I was ecstatic.

Within two weeks, after many a drunken, deep and meaningful conversation, and plenty of hungry student sex, we were a firm couple. There’s always that one couple that get together in freshers’ week and end up staying together forever. An unbreakable bond, fused by suddenly becoming a grownup and finding out that you want exactly the same things. You’ve definitely met your drinking match but also your soul mate. It was meant to be. That was us.

Or at least I thought it was.

‘Oh, I don’t know, just wondered. Forget I said anything, Pudding,’ he said.

‘Okay.’

But I couldn’t forget. For the next week I badgered him about it, probably a little too much. He kept saying it was nothing, I was being silly. Until one day, when he was drying the dishes, he said, ‘I’ve bought tickets for a round the world trip.’

My eyes fell to his forearms again and I watched as the muscles tensed and untense with each wipe of the cloth. My heart was in my mouth. He'd bought us tickets to travel the world together, could life get any better? But what about my job? I guess I'd have to tell my dickhead of a boss to do one, that wouldn't be so hard. Enjoyable even. I'm PA to the senior manager in one of the biggest banks in town and I loathe him. My mind started to wander, fantasising about the many countries we'd visit and the tasty cuisine and scenery we'd get to discover. This was perfect, just what we needed. A bit of adventure away from the boredom of our home town where we knew everyone and every place like the back of our hands. Yes, it would be nice to be strangers in a strange place.

'What? This is amazing, but how can we afford it? Did you get a summer bonus and not tell me?' I screeched with excitement as he turned around with his mouth open. Why had all the colour drained from his face? Why wasn't he excited like me? 'I knew that new TV series was going to take off,' I continued, still screeching. 'What's it called again? Will you be filming abroad then?' I asked, trying to make sense of it all, my voice trailing off as I noticed his contorted expression.

'Oh God, no,' he snapped. 'Look, I've taken a sabbatical. What I mean is, I've bought myself tickets. I'm going, Lottie. I need to go and see the world for a bit, experience new cultures, new people. Everything has gone a bit stagnant recently and I need to spread my wings, just for a while. I'm still so young.' He hung up the tea towel as my hand flew up to my mouth. He always did the washing *and* drying up, even if we both cooked, he was good like that. He was kind, respectful and apparently a huge selfish bastard too, despite the washing and drying up.

'What do you mean?' I whimpered as my throat began to throb.

'I'm going, alone, to see the big wide world.' He nodded as his eyebrows knitted together. I watched his dark hair bounce around on top of his head and I focussed on it, deciding it very much resembled a helmet as I tried to come to terms with what he was telling me.

‘But what about us? You and me?’ I squeaked, blinking back burning tears.

‘I need to do this alone,’ he said, agitated as he began to stack the plates, the posh ones that his mum gave us. His pride and joy. I hated them. They were twee with little birds on, fragile and expensive and we only got them out every Sunday, like an old married couple. I guess he was right, we were a bit stagnant.

‘But, but, but when? How long?’ A strangled voice managed to escape me. He looked at me with something in his eyes I hadn’t seen before in the entire time we had been together, pity. It was pity.

‘Next week. I leave in a week’s time and I’ll be gone for at least six months. I’m sorry.’

‘No, you’re not.’ I shook my head and looked away, a throbbing painful lump now fully formed in my throat.

‘You can stay here until the end of July but then you’ll need to find somewhere else as I’ll be renting it out via an estate agent, Mum and Dad have strongly advised I do this so I’m afraid my hands are tied.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, last night we went to our favourite restaurant then met with a friend for drinks. Then after eating a very nice roast cooked by me, he told me he’s going on an around-the-world trip and not only is he leaving me behind, he’s leaving me homeless. Never have I kicked myself so hard for not putting more pressure on him to add me to the mortgage. I deserved to be on the mortgage and the deeds; I’ve contributed for the entire time he’s owned this house, which is almost nine years. But what hurts more is that he’s had this all planned out. But for how long?

‘So that’s it then? You’re breaking up with me and bugging off on a year’s holiday without me,’ I croaked.

‘A minimum of six months,’ he corrected. ‘I need to go and see what else is out there, you get that don’t you, Lottie?’ He looked at me with a grimace, pleadingly almost. He wanted

fresh, he wanted fun and apparently, I wasn't giving that to him anymore.

'Oh yeah, I get it alright,' I mumbled to the back of his head, as he retreated into the living room to call his parents and report back to them that he'd done the deed. I bet they were most pleased because they never did like me. I've been called grumpy and tempestuous over the years by his father on many occasions just because I didn't laugh at his awful, sexist jokes. They really didn't want me as a daughter-in-law. I wouldn't be surprised if this is all their suggestion.

Brandon can be easily led.



The next few hours, weeks and days were a bit of a blur. I remember the twee plates smashing and Brandon shouting and screaming that his toe was cut but I don't remember exactly how it happened. I assume it was me, it had to be but I just can't remember the how. For the next few days, I phoned in sick to work and when I eventually returned my boss was there waiting for me with a face like thunder. There was no, are you okay? No concern, just a bombardment of orders that I was expected to follow as his PA/servant/dogsbody.

'Lottie, finally you're back.' My boss boomed. He stood way too close to me with his foul coffee breath and cheese and onion smelling armpits. 'I'm completely snowed under, I need a conference organising asap, flowers sending and minutes taking in a meeting in five minutes. Not to mention the amount of filing and other general admin that has piled up all because you fancied taking a few days off due to your MENTAL HEALTH.' His voice got louder and higher at the end of the sentence. He was so unfit that the long sentence and effort of speaking loudly had left him visibly panting. I took a few steps back away from his attempt at belittling me and the smell of his deep-fried armpits.

'That's nice,' I said sarcastically, with a forced smile that felt like it was taking over my entire face. I flicked my hair behind my shoulders and grinned again but this time it was genuine. It was almost as if I was auditioning for the main

character in a film and this was her moment to finally be true to herself.

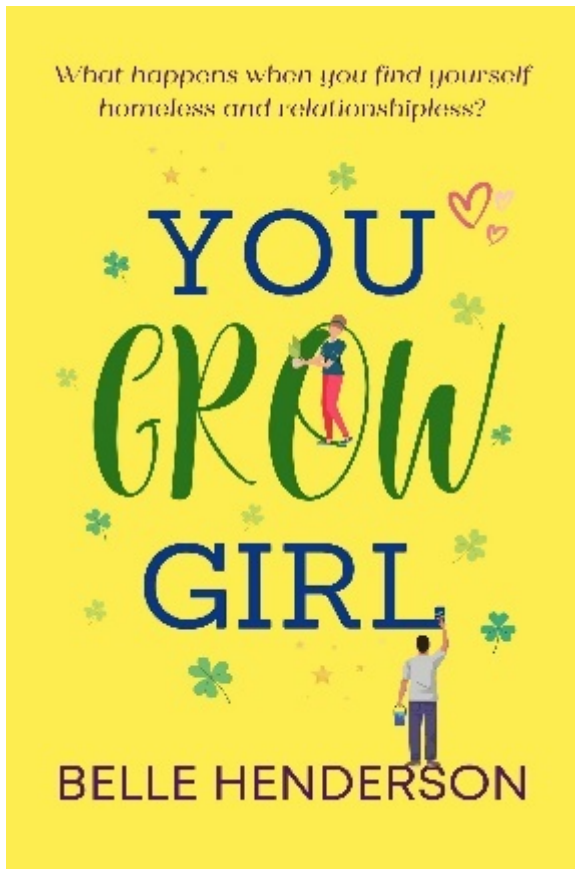
‘Excuse me?’ he said, as his already ham coloured face turned a deeper shade of puce and steam visibly left his ears – or at least that’s how it seemed to me.

‘That’s nice because it’s nice to be busy, isn’t it?’ I leant forward slightly to flick his tie. ‘I hope you enjoy your tasks because there’ll be plenty of them, oh and by the way you smell of crisps and not the nice flavours,’ I continued as I watched his jaw and fists clench in unison. ‘I’ll be off then, bye.’ And with that, I stupidly and manically skipped out of the building.

Relationshipless, homeless and now jobless.

To continue reading *You Grow Girl* click on the link <https://mybook.to/yougrowgirl> Available on Amazon and Free with Kindle Unlimited

Other books by Belle



Lottie's just been dumped, or at least she thinks she has.

With a university reunion looming she has nothing to show for the past ten years except a part-time job in her friend's plant shop and a jar of pickled gherkins. To console herself Lottie seeks solace in her favourite corner of the internet, a mysterious level-up life guru who preaches words of wisdom from the comfort of stunning exotic locations, and it's definitely cheaper than spending money on tarot readings.

With her big dick energy ex off travelling the world in search of the perfect veneers, Lottie finds herself sleeping in her brother's spare room until his chirpy Irish best friend shows up and she's forced to move out.

A tarot card reading steers her in the direction of an absurd panic purchase to impress her university peers.

Will Lottie learn to listen to herself instead of seeking validation from elsewhere? Or will she continue to plod along

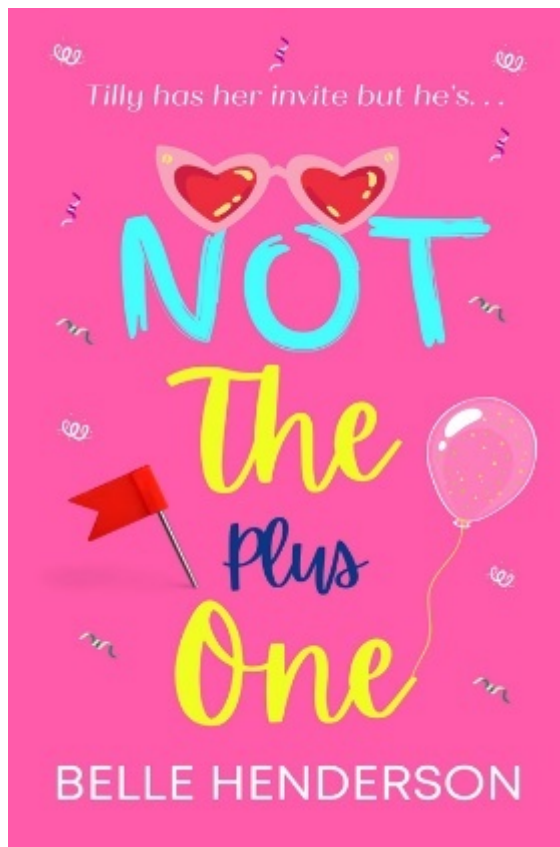
in a grumpy self-sabotaging haze forever? Will she learn to get along with her brother's best friend even though he's pinched her bed?

Let the spiral of events commence.

If you're a fan of Sophie Kinsella, Portia MacIntosh or Sophie Rinald, don't miss Lottie's witty, uplifting and poignant, feel-good journey.

Available on Amazon now (Free with Kindle Unlimited)

<http://mybook.to/yougrowgirl>



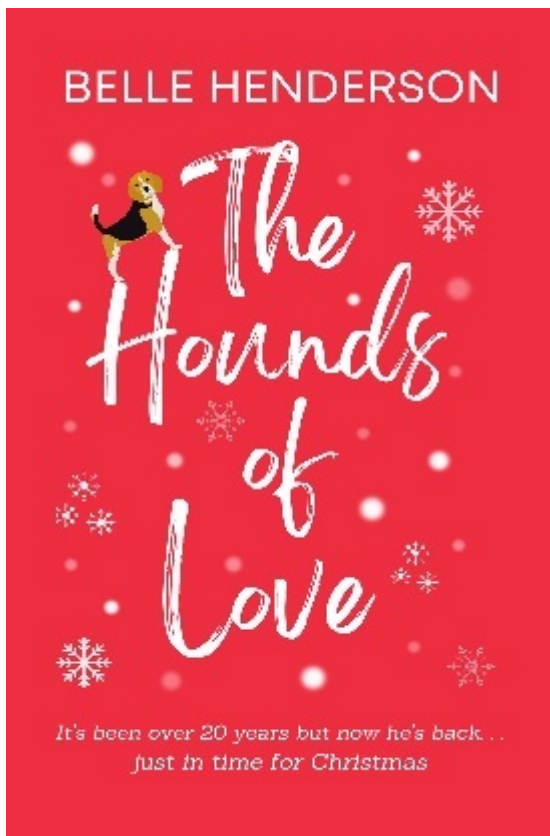
Tilly's got her invite, now this single mum needs a plus one.

But she's far too busy parenting her little girl, stopping her mum from over injecting her face with filler, and playing happy families with her pompous coffee-fuelled ex. Oh yeah, and there's the new guy at work who is gunning for her job. So Tilly really doesn't have time for any of the grief that relationships can bring. She just wants the fun, not the red flags. And it just so happens that a nice-looking man has recently caught her eye. He'll do... for now... just perfect.

Except he's a little elusive. After a wild hen do including a very ropey boat trip, a gobby gate crasher and a dodgy male stripper, a series of dating disasters leaves Tilly feeling disheartened. When that familiar gorgeous face pops up on the dating website, she thinks all of her Christmases have come at once. Could he be the plus one?

Tilly's too nice and she really needs to set some boundaries if she wants to be happy. Is there such a thing as the perfect plus one? Will her mother's obsession with tweakments ever stop? Can Tilly compete with the sexy but infuriating new guy at work?

Available on Amazon now (Free with Kindle Unlimited)
<http://getbook.at/nottheplusone>



Dogs never bite me, just humans.

Amber's fab at almost forty. She has the perfect family life including cheeky beagle Olive, much to the annoyance of nosey, school mum, Jayne. But appearances can be deceptive and when an old boyfriend unexpectedly comes back into her life, it brings back all the feels.

Delilah's an aspiring dancer, she's completed dance school and now what? After a few failed dance auditions, she's tempted to try riskier means to make ends meet. Anything would be better than working for mega micro manager, Miriam and her need to say that everything is fandabedose.

A frightening event throws Amber and Delilah together, making them both re-evaluate their lives. Is Amber truly happy in her seemingly perfect home with her perfectionist husband? Can Delilah overcome her anxiety and all the uncertainty that comes with being in your twenties? Is the grass always greener or merely just a different shade?

Can puppy love last the test of time?

A witty and heart-warming story about self-acceptance, love and having the courage to live your best life.

Fans of Dawn O'Porter, Marian Keyes and Mhari McFarlane will love this humorous and poignant story.

Available on Amazon now and Free with Kindle Unlimited
<http://getbook.at/houndsoflove>



She's starting over. Again. It's time to finally stop taking crap from others.

Felicity Frost is fed up. Her vacuous Barbie doll housemate is stealing her food while her vile, lecherous colleague has started a hate campaign against her. To top it all off 'he' won't stop calling, all she wants is for that grim memory to go away.

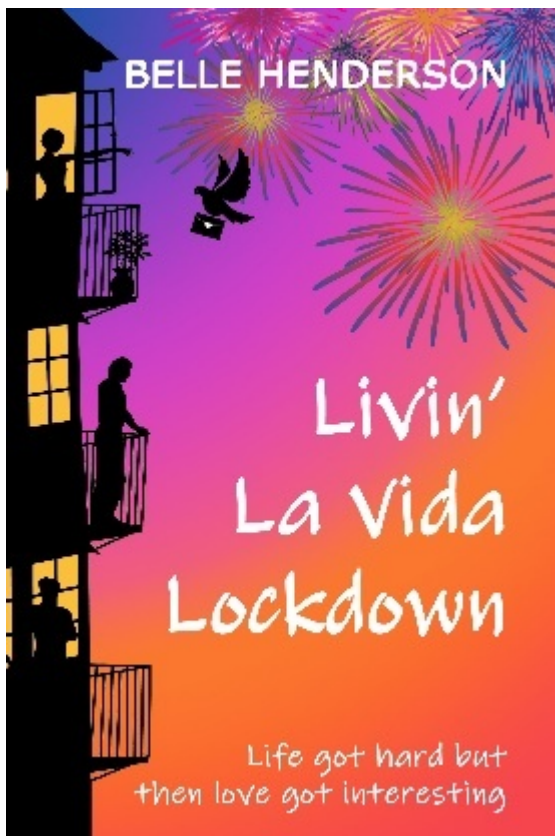
When Felicity moves house, she meets the sexy Silver Fox at the Mermaid's Lair and joins the local pub quiz team to win his affections and her share of the grand prize. If only her new housemates including man-child, Leo, and his grumpy black cat were as charming.

Join Felicity on her journey of first impressions, love and forgiveness.

Does karma always find a way or will Felicity have to take matters into her own hands?

Will she answer that phone call before it's too late? Will she know when she's found her people?

Available on Amazon now and Free with Kindle Unlimited
<http://getbook.at/FelicityFrost>



Alannah Robertson is winning at life; she's doing just fine.

She has a good job in fashion retail, a lovely boyfriend, great friends and a gorgeous flat by the sea in her home town of Coolsbay. Life is great. Until the world is hit by a pandemic, swiftly followed by a lockdown. The unthinkable has happened in the twenty-first century and Alannah soon finds herself in the world of risqué Zoom calls, talk of job losses and strained relationships.

But she's happy enough stuck in lockdown with boyfriend Jake, it's a chance to truly bond, discuss the future, marriage, a baby? Maybe both, even if Jake is turning into a lazy, zombie obsessed slob.

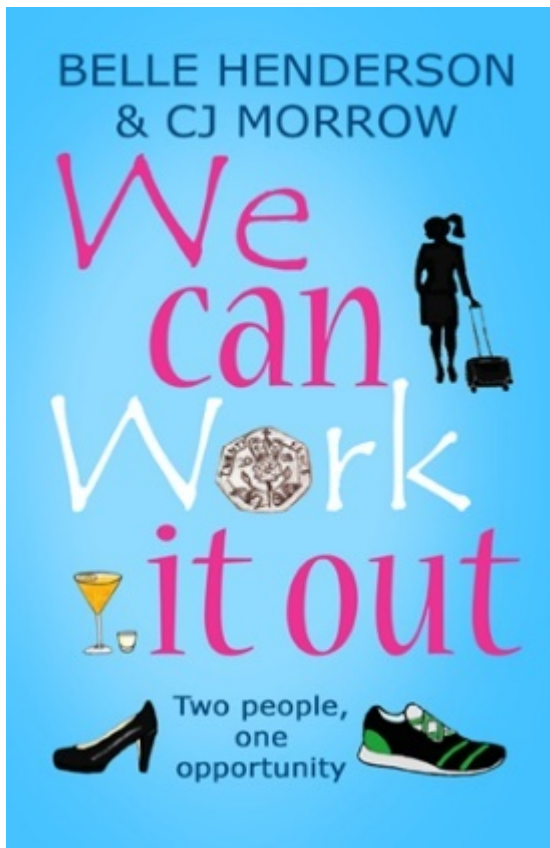
The pandemic is about to unlock a whole lot of possibilities for Alannah, the question is, will she take them? Or will she stay as she is, just content instead of Livin' La Vida Lockdown.

People cope in different ways during a time of crisis. Will Alannah be surprised at the ways some of her loved ones are acting?

Are they the people she thought they were?

Were they ever?

Available on Amazon now (Free with Kindle Unlimited)
<http://getbook.at/livinlaveda>



Never lick a 20p coin!

When single mum, Emily, encounters bumbling Jamie licking a 20p coin to get the parking meter to accept it, she feels sorry for him. On her way to an interview for the best opportunity of her career, she certainly doesn't expect to see him again, much less for him to be her rival.

When Jamie sees sassy Emily trundling her wheelie case across the car park, he assumes she's a sales rep. He doesn't expect to be pitted against her for a career making job.

It's up to Dirk Whittaker, their Greek godlike boss, to choose between them. Can Emily secure the position without succumbing to Dirk's amorous advances, or will Jamie resist the temptation to punch him, and win the day?

Will the rivals stay rivals? Or will they work it out?

Available on Amazon now (Free with Kindle Unlimited)
<http://getbook.at/wecanworkitout>

From the author

Thank you so much for reading my book, I really do appreciate it. I'm an Indie Author, part of a small family run imprint (Tamarillas Press) and not backed by a big publishing company. Every time a reader buys one of my books, I'm genuinely thrilled.

If you've enjoyed my book then please feel free to post your review on goodreads, Amazon or both. I cherish every rating and review, they really do make my day and encourage other potential readers to try my books.

We've worked hard to eliminate typos and errors but if you spot any please let us know. TamarillasPress@outlook.com

Belle Henderson

Belle Henderson

Belle Henderson loves to read and write. She lives with her family and her rambunctious beagle in Wiltshire. She absolutely loves hearing from readers so please feel free to connect with her via email or on social media.

Email: bellehendersonauthor@gmail.com

Instagram: [Instagram.com/bellehendersonauthor/](https://www.instagram.com/bellehendersonauthor/)

Facebook: [facebook.com/bellehendersonauthor/](https://www.facebook.com/bellehendersonauthor/)

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18999602.Belle_Henderson

Tiktok: <https://vm.tiktok/ZMesW9RQA>