

SAMPHIRE SHORES



Annie Dyer

Sapphire Shores

PUFFIN BAY

ANNIE DYER

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 Created with Vellum

Also by Annie Dyer

The Callaghan Green Series

In Suggested Reading order (can be read as stand-alones)

Engagement Rate

What happens when a hook up leaves you hooked? Jackson Callaghan is the broody workaholic who isn't looking for love until he meets his new marketing executive? Meet the Callaghans in this first-in-series, steamy office romance.

White Knight

If you're in the mood for a second chance romance with an older brother's best friend twist, then look no further. Claire Callaghan guards her heart as well as her secrets, but Killian O'Hara may just be the man to take her heart for himself.

Compromising Agreements

Grumpy, bossy Maxwell Callaghan meets his match in this steamy enemies-lovers story. Mistaking Victoria Davies as being a quiet secretary is only Max's first mistake, but can she be the one to make this brooding Callaghan brother smile?

Between Cases

*Could there be anything better than a book boyfriend who owns a bookstore? Payton Callaghan isn't sure; although giving up relationships when she might've just met *The One* is a dilemma she's facing in *BETWEEN CASES*, a meet-cute that'll have you swooning over Owen Anders.*

Changing Spaces

Love a best friend's younger sister romance? Meet Eli, partner in the Callaghan Green law firm and Ava's Callaghan's steamy one-night stand that she just can't seem to keep as just one night. Independent, strong-willed and intelligent, can Eli be the man Ava wants?

Heat

*Feeling hungry? Get a taste of this single dad, hot chef romance in *HEAT*. Simone Wood is a restaurant owner who loves to dance, she's just never found the right partner until her head chef Jack starts to teach her his rhythm. Problem is, someone's not happy with Simone, and their dance could be over before they've learned the steps.*

Mythical Creatures

The enigmatic Callum Callaghan heads to Africa with the only woman who came close to taming his heart, in this steamy second-chance romance. Contains a beautifully broken alpha and some divinely gorgeous scenery in this tale that will make you both cry and laugh. HEA guaranteed.

Melted Hearts

Hot rock star? Enemies to lovers? Fake engagement? All of these ingredients are in this Callaghan Green novel. Sophie Slater is a businesswoman through and through but makes a pact with the devil – also known as Liam Rossi, newly retired Rockstar – to get the property she wants - one that just happens to be in Iceland. Northern lights, a Callaghan bachelor party, and a quickly picked engagement ring are key notes in this hot springs heated romance.

Evergreen

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any presents, and that's what's going to happen if Seph Callaghan doesn't get his act together. The Callaghan clan are together for Christmas, along with a positive pregnancy test from someone and several more surprises!

The Partnership

Seph Callaghan finally gets his HEA in this office romance. Babies, exes and a whole lot of smoulder!

The English Gent Romances

The Wedding Agreement

Imogen Green doesn't do anything without thinking it through, and that includes offering to marry her old - very attractive - school friend, Noah Soames, who needs a wedding. The only problem is, their fauxmance might not be so fake, after all...

The Atelier Assignment

Dealing with musty paintings is Catrin Green's job. Dealing with a hot Lord who happens to be grumpy AF isn't. But that's what she's stuck with for three months. Zeke's daughter is the only light in her days, until she finds a way to make Zeke smile. Only this wasn't part of the assignment.

The Romance Rehearsal

Maven Green has managed to avoid her childhood sweetheart for more than a decade, but now he's cast as her leading man in the play she's directing. Anthony was the boy who had all her firsts; will he be her last as well?

The Imperfect Proposal

Shay Green doesn't expect his new colleague to walk in on him when he's mid-kiss in a stockroom. He also doesn't expect his new colleague to be his wife. The wife he married over a decade ago in Vegas and hasn't seen since

Puffin Bay Series

Puffin Bay

Amelie started a new life on a small Welsh island, finding peace and new beginnings. What wasn't in the plan was the man buying the building over the road. She was used to dealing with arrogant tourists, but this city boy was enough to have her want to put her hands around his neck, on his chest, and maybe somewhere else too...

Wild Tides

Being a runaway bride and escaping her wedding wasn't what Fleur intended when she said yes to the dress. That dress is now sodden in the water of the Menai Strait and she needs saving - by none other than lighthouse keeper Thane. She needs a man to get under to get over the one she left at the altar - but that might come with a little surprise in a few months time...

Lovers Heights

Serious gin distiller Finn Holland needs a distraction from what he's trying to leave behind in the city. That distraction comes in the form of Ruby, who's moved to the island to escape drama of her own. Neither planned on a fake relationship, especially one that led to a marriage that might not be that fake at all...

Manchester Athletic FC

Penalty Kiss

Manchester Athletic's bad boy needs taming, else his football career could be on the line. Pitched with women's football's role model pin up, he has pre-season to sort out his game - on and off the field.

Hollywood Ball

One night. It didn't matter who she was, or who he was, because tomorrow they'd both go back to their lives. Only hers wasn't that ordinary.

What she didn't know, was neither was his.

Heart Keeper

Single dad. Recent widow. Star goal keeper.

Manchester Athletic's physio should keep her hands to herself outside of her treatment room, but that's proving tough. What else is tough is finding two lines on that pregnancy test...

Target Man

Jesse Sullivan is Manchester Athletic's Captain Marvel. He keeps his private life handcuffed to his bed, locked behind a non-disclosure agreement. Jesse doesn't do relationships – not until he meets his teammate's – and best friend's – sister.

Red Heart Card

She wants a baby. He's offering. The trouble is, he's soccer's golden boy and he's ten years younger. The last time they tried this, she broke his heart. Will hearts be left intact this time around?

Severton Search and Rescue

Sleighed

Have a change of scenery and take a trip to a small town. Visit Severton, in Sleighed; this friends-to-lovers romantic suspense will capture your heart as much as Sorrell Slater steals Zack Maynard's.

Stirred

If enemies-to-lovers is your manna, then you'll want to stay in Severton for Stirred. Keren Leigh and Scott Maynard have been at daggers drawn for years, until their one-night ceasefire changes the course of their lives forever.

Smoldered

Want to be saved by a hot firefighter? Rayah Maynard's lusted over Jonny Graham ever since she came back to town. Jonny's prioritised his three children over his own love life since his wife died, but now Rayah's teaching more than just his daughter – she's teaching him just how hot their flames can burn.

Shaken

Abby Walker doesn't exist. Hiding from a gang she suspects is involved in the disappearance of her sister, Severton is where she's taken refuge. Along with her secrets, she's hiding her huge crush on local cop, Alex Maynard. But she isn't the only one with secrets. Alex can keep her safe, but can he also take care of her heart?

Sweetened

Enemies? Friends? Could be lovers? All Jake Maynard knows is that Lainey Green is driving him mad, and he really doesn't like that she managed to buy the farm he

coveted from under his nose. All's fair in love and war, until events in Severton take a sinister turn.

Standalone Romance

Love Rises

Two broken souls, one hot summer. Anya returns to her childhood island home after experiencing a painful loss. Gabe escapes to the same place, needing to leave his life behind, drowning in guilt. Neither are planning on meeting the other, but when they do, from their grief, love rises. Only can it be more than a summer long?

Bartender

The White Island, home of hedonism, heat and holidays. Jameson returns to her family's holiday home on Ibiza, but doesn't expect to be charmed by a bartender, a man with an agenda other than just seduction.

Tarnished Crowns Trilogy

Lovers. Liars. Traitors. Thieves. We were all of these. Political intrigue, suspense and seduction mingle together in this intricate and steamy royal romance trilogy.

Chandelier

Grenade

Emeralds

Crime Fiction

We Were Never Alone

How Far Away the Stars (Novella)

*For my editor and most of all my friend, Beth.
For you and your family. I am in awe of you strength,
resilience and kindness.*

Hugs.

SAMPHIRE
SHORES

Annie Dyer

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Roe



The first thing I noticed was the smell.

If this was one of my twin's crime novels, the smell would be described as *fetid* or that *the stench of decaying matter cloyed the air* or something like that, but this wasn't one of Gulliver Holland's novels; this was my life, which was currently at the scene where I moved into my new rental property with a housemate who I didn't imagine liked to burn incense near doorways.

I put my suitcase down on the wooden floor and looked around, knowing that the frown on my face would add to the trenches that were starting to form on my forehead. Trenches my twin didn't have yet and ones he liked to point out on a regular basis.

"Lionel?" I called out. Clearly someone was in. I could hear music being played and judging by the breeze coming through the house, the back door was open.

This scene, however, was not what I expected of Lionel, who happened to be six foot two, five feet wide, and owned a construction company. He was also my temporary housemate until the property I'd decided in a fit of stupidity to buy was ready to be inhabited. I didn't take Lionel for being into incense and crystals, but you never knew. He'd looked like he'd inhaled five beers and three bacon butties before kick off on a Saturday – and that was the midday football game. Not the three o'clock ones.

Still, I could be stereotyping, and incense and crystals were part of his good luck routine for match days. I shouted for him again, slightly worried about what else I'd find further back in the house.

No response came, so I braced myself for what I might see and walked down the hallway and into the kitchen, the door propped open, leading through to a garden that led directly onto a beach at the bottom, a rickety fence demarcating the boundary.

It wasn't the view that drew my eye though. It was a woman; long wheat blonde hair dripping down her back as she held herself in a position that defied gravity. One hand was on a mat on the ground, the rest of her body bent into a pose that should've been impossible.

She moved deliberately, placing her other hand onto the mat, then her body curved round again, flicking her hair out of her face before she moved once more, holding the pose for just a few seconds before moving into another, one that made my hips feel slightly stiffer and made me want to crack my back.

I spent most of my days, and too fucking much of my evenings, sat at my computer, solving the coding queries of entrepreneurs and CEO's, occasionally taking a short walk into the life of a penetration tester, which was nowhere near as dirty as it sounded.

That meant my vertebrae were pretty much fused together, compounded by my long-lasting love affair with lifting heavy things in my older brother Finn's barn.

The thought of contorting my body into the shapes she was managing was making me ache in places I thought didn't exist anymore. I hadn't been that flexible since I'd had to be bent double in my mother's womb – Gully had always been a space hog.

The blonde-headed bendy woman stopped, her head turning towards me, eyes wide. She looked nervous, her body which had been moving so freely now frozen.

“I’m Rowan. I’m moving in here today. Are you a friend of Lionel’s?”

She reached for a sweater that was in a pile near her yoga mat and pulled it on, shaking her head.

“I thought Leda was moving in. This can’t be right.” Her eyes were wider than that of a rabbit caught in headlights.

“I thought Lionel was living here. Unless you’re living with Lionel. I don’t know him personally – this arrangement was made through a friend. Kind of a friend.” I was rambling. I was also pushing my fingers through my hair because this level of interacting with someone I didn’t know, without someone else present, was making me feel itchy. “I’ve only met him once.”

The woman folded her arms. “I was told Leda was staying here because Lionel had gone to Thailand on a retreat.”

“Lionel? On a retreat?” I scratched my head and frowned. “A beer retreat?”

She was frowning too. “No. A vegan, yoga retreat.” She shook her head, her hair cascading over her shoulders. She looked about the same age as me, somewhere at the start of her thirties. She was tall, maybe five foot ten, and slender, the sort of slender my mam would use as an excuse to bake, or try to bake. It wasn’t always successful but luckily the pubs local to where both she and I lived did decent food.

“Lionel’s gone on a vegan yoga retreat?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You really shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.”

I wasn’t keen on this. I was being judged. By her.

“The last time I saw Lionel he had a pint of bitter in one hand and bacon bap in the other.” To be fair it was the only time I’d seen Lionel. “And he didn’t mention anything about a retreat. I was expecting him to be here today when I moved in.” And I needed to move in.

There were other options. I could beg at my older brother’s doorway, but his wife had just moved in and they were still in

the honeymoon period of having sex everywhere. I didn't need to see Finn's arse bobbing up and down or hear Ruby yelling his name another time. Once had scarred me. Twice had turned me to drink. The third time had me sleeping on Clover's – one of Ruby's friends – sofas, which showed my desperation as Clover had been my identical twin's number three fan and I'd been slightly concerned I might wake up unable to escape.

My twin was now living in a lighthouse. He'd recently moved in and I could beg a room off him, only he'd just lost his best friend and had other mates coming to stay. He was grieving and yes, I was there for him whenever, only we had to have some space.

I both loved and hated being an identical twin, sometimes at the same time. It could be the best thing, having someone who could read your mind, who knew exactly what you were thinking or feeling. It could be the worst thing for exactly the same reason.

And vice versa.

Gully had gone through a tough time which I couldn't fix. There was no bad actor to hunt down online and sabotage, no one to rough up in a bar. He'd lost someone he was kind of close to, in a way I knew he'd never understood, and that grief couldn't be fixed.

That was hard to deal with for everyone.

The blonde blinked at me and bent down to roll up her mat. I tried not to look at her arse, which was too well showed off in her yoga pants. My jaw clenched a little tighter.

“How do I know you're not a murderer? Or a scam artist? Or here for some other nefarious reason?” She held the rolled up yoga mat like it was a weapon.

“I should be saying the same about you.” My jaw unclenched and I pulled my phone out of my pocket. “Let's phone Lionel.” Because if this was one of my female cousins – of which I had far too many – I'd be telling them to phone the police right now.

The phone rang, the sound definitely not one of a number that was currently abroad. I clicked it to loudspeaker so my “maybe” housemate could hear.

“Yo, man! How’s my gaff?” Lionel answered with words that were a little slurred.

“Not seen much of it yet. I’m here with - ” I looked at my companion.

“Freya. He’s here with Freya. Where’s Leda?” Freya’s voice had risen in pitch.

It was obvious she was uncomfortable. I didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.

“Leda?” Lionel had definitely been drinking. “Oh Leda! Yeah, she’s in Thailand. Or Goa. She let me down on the room. Soz about that.”

“So you’ve let the house to me and Freya?” I figured the best course of action was to get to the point.

“Yeah, yeah. Figured you’d be cool with that.” A cheer erupted in the background.

“Where are you? I thought you were going on a retreat in Thailand?” Freya sounded on either the verge of tears or murder.

Lionel laughed. “Do you really see me on a retreat? Nah, babe, I’m in Bristol. Got offered a contract down here and couldn’t turn it down. You two’ll be cool sharing right? Roe’s a good guy, Frey. He’ll just be on his computer all the time.”

Freya looked at me, her expression the opposite of the serene one she’d been wearing when I’d seen her doing her yoga flow. She looked scared.

“I can find somewhere else to stay if you’re uncomfortable.” I was many things, but an arse wasn’t one of them. I wasn’t going to be the cause of a woman being frightened. I’d rather eat my own arm.

She looked at me with even more worry on her face. “I can’t afford the full rent, unless you can give me a discount, Lionel.”

“Sorry, babe. I’m only charging you enough to cover the mortgage. Up to you two what you do as long as I get the rent.” There was another cheer. “I’m off-ski. It’s time for shots! Toodles, peeps!” He hung up, leaving the air weirdly quiet.

Freya stared at the ground for a moment before looking at me. “I can’t afford to live here on my own.”

I nodded, thinking of how this could be solved. “If you can find someone to take my room, I’ll sleep on one of my brother’s sofas. I’m not paying my half of the rent and not staying here though.” I was many things, but a mug wasn’t one.

She nodded then laughed, but the sound was empty. “I don’t know anyone here. Like, I don’t even know anyone’s name.”

“I’m Rowan. Everyone calls me Roe.” I held out my hand.

She took it tentatively. “Freya. Only people I’m close to have rights to call me Frey.”

“Noted.” Her hand was slender and warm, her skin smooth. “Why’ve you moved to the island?”

She put the mat down and sat down on one of the garden chairs. “I’ve always wanted to live here. It fits in with what I believe in.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged, looking embarrassed. “It’s an ancient place and it has a certain energy. I had the opportunity to move and I chose here.”

“Sounds interesting. What’s do you do for work?” I had a feeling I wasn’t asking the right questions.

“I’m opening up a holistic therapies centre. I’m a Reiki master and counsellor. I teach yoga as well, so a little of everything.” Her smile wasn’t strong but it was real.

I nodded, knowing that what she did for a living was completely out of my realm of understanding. My family was full of entrepreneurs and lawyers, and a veterinarian. Throw in

the odd theatre director, an author and an art curator, and that summed us up.

“Cool. Where’s your centre? Have you rented somewhere?”

She looked cagey.

I braced myself for what was about to happen.

“I’m planning on seeing Reiki and counselling clients from here in the spare room for a couple of months. Leda had said she was okay with that.” Freya bit her lips together. “I guess you’ll be at work though so it shouldn’t get in your way.”

As a kid with two brothers who were both full-on personalities, I’d learned to ignore the little ball of red anger that sometimes bubbled in my chest. I imagined it popping over one of their heads, knowing that karma was a bitch who served revenge cold.

I used that same technique now.

“I work from home. I’d agreed with Lionel I could use the spare room to work from. In fact, I agreed an additional payment every month on my rent for it.”

“Oh.” She looked at the ground.

“Oh indeed.” I kept on looking at her. I had agreed on the extra rent with Lionel, this wasn’t something that was negotiable.

Eventually her eyes travelled back up to mine.

They were big and brown, the sort of colour that reminded me of autumn and hot chocolate.

The sort of eyes that were probably used to getting what they wanted.

“How about we set times and share it?” Her smile was hopeful, but there was a flicker of doubt there.

I shook my head. “I work weird hours. I can work for twenty-four hours straight sometimes. And what I do is confidential a lot of the time. If I could work in the lounge or kitchen I’d say yes, set a timetable, but that won’t work.”

“I need to get my business off the ground. I already have clients booked in.” Her eyes were lit with fire now.

“Can you rent a room somewhere? In the community centre maybe?” I knew the community centre’s manager and could probably swing a favour.

I’d have been better saving my breath. Freya tossed her hair and stormed straight into the house, muttering what were probably curses under breath.

I shrugged, looked up to the sky in case it was offering any answers – it wasn’t – so I got on with moving in the rest of my stuff, the atmosphere portentous at best, and downright murderous at worst.

It took me two hours to unpack and set up the tiny spare room into an office that involved a desk and several cables, plus three desktop computers. Freya had set up a massage table in there, which I shifted into the lounge – she could use that for all I cared. I wouldn’t be spending much, if any, time in there. This place was just for me to sleep, work and sometimes eat while the property I’d put an offer in on was restored into an inhabitable state.

Freya had been nowhere to be seen. I’d figured she was sulking in her room, so I’d left her to it, pinning a note to the now office door explaining that I’d had to put a lock on it because of the nature of my job, and that Lionel had said it was okay.

I’d then opened my bedroom window and headed out to the Puffin Inn, the local pub which the community, including my brothers, used as the unspoken meeting space.

Finn was there with Ruby, both of them sitting at one of the picnic tables in the beer garden that looked out onto Puffin Bay. They were both reading; Ruby had her e-reader out and Finn was oblivious to everything apart from his book, which was actually Gully’s debut crime novel.

He’d finally given in and read it.

“Enjoying that?” I sat down next to him.

Finn startled, his eyes widening. Ruby laughed, almost knocking over her glass of wine.

“You do not have the stealth skills of a normal person.” He shook his head and put the book on the table face down. “All moved in?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Was Lionel there?”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Let’s not talk about it.” Because I didn’t want to. It would come out in the end, how my housemate was tall and pretty and rather scary, but I didn’t need or want either of my brothers’ comments right now.

“I feel bad making you move out.” Finn pulled a face that would go down well on Halloween. “Have you seen anything else to buy?”

“Nope. Still waiting for probate and the family can put it up for sale.” I’d seen a house I’d fallen for. It was empty, the elderly man who’d lived there having passed away at the age of ninety-eight. His will wasn’t straightforward, and had ended up in probate with all of his kids staking a claim. Until that was settled, it couldn’t go on the market. “I might spend a couple of weeks at mum’s.” There was no might about this. Our mother, may the goddess of gin bless her, had finally started a relationship with a bloke who’d passed all our tests, including mine. He was also involved in online security and some of the penetration testing I did was for him, when he had something he didn’t want his employees to work on. We were due to meet in a few weeks and I knew our mother would be keen to have one of us at home for a few days.

Finn nodded. “We might go for a weekend. Ruby’s never been to Ireland.” He glanced over at his wife, still looking at her like she’d hung every one of the stars and been solely responsible for the design of the rest of the universe.

“I have been to Ireland. I just don’t remember it.” She frowned at Finn and shot me a smile straight after. “It was a hen do. A messy one.”

“Are there any other types?” I grinned at her. “You’ll love our village. Have either of you seen Gully today? I haven’t heard from him.” I didn’t like not hearing from him at the moment.

Finn nodded. “He was round at breakfast.

“You mean he broke into our kitchen and stole his breakfast.” Ruby shook her head.

“He does have a key.” Finn looked thoughtful. “Which avoids him causing damage when he breaks in. He’s had another writer friend turn up today, so he’ll be showing off somewhere.”

“That’s good.” I still wasn’t sure that my twin was okay. His friend Ivy, who was also a crime writer, had died in a motorbike accident a few months ago. We knew Gully had felt more for her than just friendship, but she’d wanted things to be platonic. Her death had hit him hard and for a few weeks he’d lost his Gully-ness.

Most of it had returned. He was back to being his confident, irritating self, but there were times when the façade crumbled just a little and he remembered too much. Felt too much.

“Who’s the author?”

Finn shrugged. “A woman who has the same publicist as Gully. She’s staying for a few days – I think they’re coming here for dinner.”

“We know he won’t have anything in the fridge.” I shook my head, knowing that I was in exactly the same position. I hadn’t even opened the fridge. I wasn’t sure I would, given that it could be full of strange foods and weird shit that tasted like soil. “Are you eating here?”

“We are.” Ruby put her e-reader in her bag. “Want a drink?”

“I’ll get them. Same again?”

There were nods which made life easy. I timed it badly though, Gully and his friend coming through the door at the

same time as I went to the bar.

“Rowan!” Gully’s arm wrapped round my shoulders like an octopus stretching out its tentacles.

“Gulliver.” I eyed him partly as a warning to not be too much of a dick, but also a way of checking that he looked okay. “And your friend.”

A tiny woman probably about the same ages as us stood with her arms folded, looking amused and glancing from me to my twin.

“I’m Lydia. You really are identical – but so different.”

We were used to this, being stared at like we were caged in a zoo. There was no way to tell us apart, unless our hair was styled differently, or we were wearing different clothes. Everything was absolutely identical, even the small mole we both had on the side of our necks.

“You’ll never really know who you’re speaking too.” Gully flashed a grin that oozed charm and there lay one of the differences.

Gulliver Holland could charm snakes just by smiling. I scared them with my glare. As much as we were the same, our personalities were as different as the Sahara was from the sea. He had all the sunshine and I had all the shade.

“Oh, I think I will.” She gave me a sly grin. “Gully’s like a puppy. You’re growly.”

I felt my back stiffen, shooting a look at my brother that translated to *get me the fuck out of here*. I knew damn well that *growly* was a compliment, or at least meant to be.

“Your round, Gulliver. Finn and Ruby are on their usual.” Me offering to get these drinks would be a suggestion that I was buying a drink for Lydia.

He grinned and nodded, the silent twin dialogue registering just fine. “IPA for you and Finn, a large Merlot for Ruby, lime and soda for me and what do you want, Lydia?” He spoke to Alys, the bar manager who’d grown up in Puffin Bay and

knew pretty much everything about the town and what was happening there.

“A gin and tonic – the gin made by Gully’s brother. Thank you.” Lydia looked over at me again. “You’re the brother who works in cyber security though, aren’t you?”

“Kind of.” The red flags were still waving. “I mainly design apps.” Which was still, for some reason, considered a sexy profession. It was also a really good front for the cyber security stuff that I did do, which was mainly a bit of hacking here and there, all for the good. “You write crime fiction like Gulliver, don’t you?”

She nodded, toying with a dangling strand of hair. “I do. Cosy crime with a smidgeon of romance. I’m staying with Gully while I finish the last part of the current book – I’ve had writer’s block.”

I nodded, not sure of what to say, or where this was leading.

Gully passed a pint of IPA over to me. “Lydia’s stuck more with the romance part. She needs some inspiration.”

I lifted my chin and hoped my twin was receiving my thoughts on that very clearly.

“Not sure you’ll find it in Puffin Bay.” I took a sip of the pint and savoured the flavour.

“Hmmm.” Lydia inched closer to me. “I think I might actually. Lots of inspiration around here.”

Another sip. Then a gulp.

“I’ll take these out to Finn and Ruby.” Alys had put their drinks on a tray. “See you out there.”

Gully raised his brows and looked far too entertained.

I decided not to say anything or even think it. This day had been a sack of shit already – there was no way I was digging myself into another hole.

It wasn't digging I needed to do when I got back to the house three pints and a portion of fish and chips later.

It was a ladder.

Curtains were closed. The lights were off. The door was bolted. The back door was locked.

Doors didn't need to be bolted in Puffin Bay. They didn't even need to be locked. True, Freya might not know that yet about the place, but the house being in darkness when it wasn't even dark outside was a hint that she was still pissed off.

I put my key in the lock, hearing it click, but the door didn't open.

Definitely bolted.

I sighed. For the last couple of hours I'd dodged Lydia's attempts to flirt, half hoping it would start raining so I could make an excuse and leave earlier. At the same time, I'd suffered Gully's amusement at my discomfort, but I hadn't minded that. There were more and more glimmers of his old self which was worth the discomfort.

I walked round to the back of the house, looking up at the window of my bedroom. It was open still. Freya hadn't gone in there at least.

I just needed to work out how to get up there.

Ten minutes and a set of ladders later (ladders that definitely wouldn't be signed off as safe in a health and safety audit) and I was scrambling through the window, fighting with a curtain that had been on trend about two decades ago.

Remembering the last time I'd scrambled in – or out – through a bedroom window, I opened my bedroom door and walked straight into the woman who'd tried to imprison me outside of my house.

Freya frowned.

“Wondering how I got in?”

Her face morphed into the picture of innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You locked me out.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry? I did what?”

“You bolted the front door and locked the back so I couldn’t get in.”

“Really? I must’ve done it automatically. I’m so sorry, Rowan. How on earth did you get in?”

“Ladders and an open window. Good job I didn’t fall and break my neck.”

“A very good job. Would’ve hated you to have been injured in that very dark garden.” Her smile was the sort of sweet that was meant to kill you, mixed with arsenic. “So sorry you were locked out.”

I folded my arms, noticing her eyes flicker to my biceps that were definitely on show.

Freya, it seemed, liked a bit of bicep porn.

Good to know.

“Apology accepted.” I said no more, waiting for her next move.

Her faux confidence turned to awkwardness.

Silence weighed heavily.

“Well, I’m going to make a drink.” She spun round on the ball of her foot, almost losing her grip on the banister.

I chuckled, noticing that her hair looked different. Lighter maybe. Maybe it was just the light in the house which wasn’t great.

“Sleep well, Freya.”

Her head snapped round and for a moment I saw something that looked like fear.

“I’ll just head out and put the ladder away. Do you think you can manage to remember not to lock me out while I’m doing that.”

Fear turned to annoyance.

“I’ll try. Want a hot drink?”

“Will it kill me?”

She shot me a death glare that could’ve written the obituary too.

“Make it. I might not drink it though.”

“That’ll be a waste,” she pouted.

I shrugged. “You look like a hot drink will have weird ingredients like grass or dandelions or something.”

“You shouldn’t make assumptions based on how someone looks.”

She did look like she wanted to kill me.

“And how they make their house smell.” Incense still clung everywhere.

“I had to sage the place. Get rid of the bad vibes you bring.”

I shook my head. I could banter like this for days; two brothers and a very sharp mother meant that I’d had professional level training in exchanging insults.

“I would love to try your hot drink.” That sounded bad. “Not a euphemism.”

I almost saw the start of a smile.

“Then we have a thirty-minute truce. I won’t lock you out. Or kill you.” She almost looked sincere.

“Appreciated.”

We both tried to start walking down the stairs at the same time, my hip colliding against her.

She stumbled. I reached to stop her from falling. Her hand stretched out.

And grabbed my crotch.

“Shit!” Little Miss Freya swore.

I froze. So did she. Her hand stayed in place.

Slowly, like she was about to release a feral animal, she moved her hand away.

“Sorry.”

That apology was definitely genuine.

“Let’s never speak of that again.” I mumbled the words, letting her head down the stairs first.

“Agreed.”

At least that was one thing we could agree on.

Freya



I didn't add anything to the mug of chai I made for Rowan. There was always something you could pop in that would, let's say, help to evacuate the bowel, but the house had just the one bathroom so any side effects would definitely impact on me.

I knew he thought I was being awkward with the situation, and I was, but maybe not as deliberately as he thought. My plan had been to share the house with Leda, a friend of Lionel's. We'd chatted online and exchanged a few messages; she'd been cool with me using the little bedroom as a treatment room and our schedules would've worked okay in terms of the house being small.

I was picky about who I shared my space with. I had a right to be picky after sharing my space with someone who wasn't anywhere near nice.

He'd been a fucking idiot and he'd made me into one too.

"Here's your drink." I handed the mug to the solid wall of muscle that entered the kitchen, hair damp which meant it must've started raining.

Rowan looked at it as if a piranha was about to jump out of the liquid and bite him.

"It's safe. And it's good for helping you sleep." I took a sip of my own drink.

He gave his a good sniff. "What's in it?"

“It’s a blend of cinnamon, cloves, cardamon and a couple of other spices. I make the blend myself.” It was becoming a strong seller in my little online store. I’d been experimenting with other blends, going back to my grandmother’s notes about uses of different herbs and spices, and I was hoping that I’d be able to forage my own ingredients while living on the island.

Rowan sipped it tentatively. “It’s nice.” He was still looking at me as if I was about to poison him.

I shook my head. “Look at me. I might be tall, but I have zero muscle strength and the co-ordination of a newly born foal. There’s no way I could dispose of your body.”

A body that was annoyingly attractive.

I hadn’t noticed him at first, not in that way. I’d been too bothered by having an unplanned man in my space.

“There are ways.” He sounded far too relaxed about it. “Not that I’ve tried.”

“You’ve never murdered anyone? Good to know.” I was trying to sound as relaxed as he did, but even I heard the note of *something* in my voice.

He lifted his head and dropped the hand that was holding the mug away from his face. “I can promise that I’ve never harmed a single soul. Not physically, anyway. Financially, maybe, but they were the bad guys.”

“And you’re a good guy?” I’d fallen for someone who told me they were a good guy, fallen too easily and found they were the opposite.

Rowan shrugged. “Most of the time. You’re safe with me in the house, though. If you want references, you can speak to anyone in the town and they’ll tell you what I’m like.”

“What would they say?”

He frowned. I’d noticed that he frowned a lot, and I hadn’t seen him smile yet, although me locking him out might be a key reason why a smile had been missing. I should’ve felt

more guilty, bolting the door but I knew he had relatives in the town he could've stayed with.

“They'd tell you I'm grumpy. Really fucking grumpy.” He started to drink the chai again. “And I can go days without speaking to anyone because I work too much.”

“Would they tell me about any redeemable features?” I tipped my head to one side to study him.

He was beautiful behind the scowl. High cheekbones, deep brown eyes, a strong nose and lips that were full. He would've been a really pretty kid, the sort that posed in catalogues wearing carefully curated outfits and looking pristine. That kid now had dark stubble over his jaw, his hair in need of a trim, but he wasn't much different now.

“I don't cause any drama and I'm good at solving problems. I'm kind to animals and children and I'm always on time.” He put the mug down on the kitchen worktop and folded his arms, his biceps bulging again. “Amelie, the landlady at the Puffin Inn, can write you character reference if you ask nicely.”

“Ex-girlfriend? Or wannabe girlfriend?”

He laughed, his face cracking into a smile that was as warm as coal on a lit fire. “Neither. She's engaged to Roman – one letter different from my name. He owns the hotel that's going to be open soon. But she's known me and my family for years so she can tell you most of my bad deeds.” He frowned a little deeper. “I won't do anything to make you uncomfortable, Freya. You'll hardly see me – but I do need that spare room for my work.”

I was going to find this Amelie and see what she had to tell me about Rowan. I put my own mug down and folded my arms.

“I need that room too.”

He nodded, which surprised me. I expected him to argue and get heated. “I was thinking about that. How about you have the living room? You can bring your clients in through the front door. I can come and go through the back door, and

with the stairs being in the kitchen, I don't need to come in there."

It was my turn to frown. "But where are you going to sit and watch TV or play whatever stupid games you have on your computer console thing?"

He laughed again, this time at me. My shoulders tensed. My arms folded tighter.

"Honey, I don't have time for TV and computer games. When I said you won't see much of me, I meant it." He rubbed at his face. "I'm going to Ireland for a couple of weeks too, so I'll be out of your way."

"Oh. Okay." I was surprised by his offer of the living room. "What is it you do?"

"Cyber security and some app design. I freelance." He glanced at the kitchen shelves where my jars of herbs and spices were lined up. "What is it you do exactly?"

"Holistic therapies and psychotherapy, Reiki and some massage. I have a little online shop where I sell teas and tinctures too." I raised my chin higher, proud of what I did although some people had belittled it in the past.

If Rowan thought my career was stupid or pathetic he didn't give it away.

"So the living room gives you space? And privacy?"

I nodded. "If we're agreed, and then you can have the small bedroom."

"Done." He rinsed his mug out and put it straight in the dishwasher. "I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe."

"Sleep well."

He shot me a grin and I wished I had my phone on me to take a photo, as I had a feeling that was one of the few I'd see. It made him prettier, the loss of the scowl making him look younger, although the stubble gave him an air of pirate.

But there wouldn't have been time to take anything, because Rowan turned around and headed up the stairs,

leaving me with the view of his very nice arse.

He was right. I didn't see him for the next couple of days. When I went downstairs the following day, he'd already left, the shower still a little steamy. The day after was the same – he'd been back, but I had no idea what time.

It felt like I could be living with a ghost.

Which was no bad thing. Ideally, I'd wanted to live on my own, but I couldn't afford it. I couldn't afford much. My online business gave me a little income and I'd managed to pick up a couple of clients and three yoga classes a week, but I was having to top up with the small savings I had to pay the rent Lionel was charging, even though it wasn't very much.

I spent my mornings walking down the garden to the shore, taking in the tide and the sands, my yoga mat finding a home on the beach. I went through my sun salutations and my favourite warrior sequence, reminding myself that I was strong, and I could do this, before heading back home to shower and change and start the hustle of drumming up business.

Puffin Bay had been home to a yoga teacher for years. Joselin had run yoga retreats and classes for at least a decade, giving advice on an online forum we were both members of. We'd become friends; she'd been one of the people I'd confided in when my life turned upside down, and then suggested I come to Anglesey and take over from her when she left to live with her daughter in New Zealand.

It was going to be the perfect place to be.

I just needed to find my equilibrium and settle in here. The scenery was beautiful, the beaches wild and untamed and the language reminded me of my grandma, whose first language was Welsh and she'd spoken it frequently, even though no one had understood her, which was definitely the point. She'd been saltier than the sea when she felt like it, although she'd nearly always been sweet for me.

I'd journaled about my goals for the week, setting myself small but achievable targets so I'd feel like I was moving forward. Today I planned to head to the Puffin Inn and have a coffee there, meet Amelie who Rowan had mentioned and maybe start to make a friend.

I had no idea whether Amelie was old or young or somewhere in between, whether she'd be friendly to newcomers to the town or keep her distance.

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach as I approached the Inn, not used to meeting strangers on my own unless it was to do with work. I'd been uncomfortably shy as a kid, preferring to daydream or run through the woods that the back end of our town fell into. The friends I'd made had been friends for life, partly because we'd clicked in that weird way that meant we'd always be part of each other's jigsaw, but also because it meant I could avoid situations like this.

The exterior of the pub was painted in a bright white, the name painted onto the blue background of a wooden sign. It was the last building before the beach, and I expected that the beer garden led down to the sand. The door was open, a dog lying languidly just outside, standing up when I drew closer and wagging its tail lazily.

I bent down to give him a stroke, remembering what I'd left behind because I'd had no choice. I'd had a dog, Sooty, a black poodle. My ex had claimed ownership and I hadn't been in a position to argue. Sooty was the one thing I wished I had with me from that part of my past. I knew he was okay – one of my friends saw him in the park with my ex's new girlfriend, who was apparently nice enough, but it wasn't the same.

Voices were audible from inside the pub. The female's voice was melodic, although her accent was English rather than Welsh. The answering voice was English as well.

"I thought we agreed that you wouldn't book a holiday until you'd let me pay you for the last one." There was frustration in her tone. "Roman, you have to stop doing this."

"If you can give me a good reason why, I'll think about it." There was an element of calm that made me smile.

“I would like to pay my way.”

“You can buy the drinks.”

Her voice rose. “It’s all inclusive!”

His laugh was close by the door. If he came through it, he’d think I’d been eavesdropping, which I had.

I pushed it open first, entering a storm porch with the door into the bar already open. A tiny woman with blonde curly hair, the tips coloured a bright pink, was leaning against the bar glaring at a tall man who was wearing suit trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the collar undone.

Their attention fell straight on me, making me feel as if as I was under a spotlight that was hot enough to burn.

“Hi, do you do coffee?” I heard the quiver in my voice and hated myself for it.

The tiny woman’s lips curved up and her arms opened up. “We do, sugar. Coffee, tea, champagne, whisky and everything in between, and you timed that perfectly and saved this man from the earbashing he deserves.” She moved behind the bar, sending a glare the man’s way.

No one else was in the pub, but then it was before midday and had probably just opened. I went to the bar and stood awkwardly there, not sure what to say or how to say it.

“Are you here on holiday or have you moved here?” The woman paused while the coffee machine woke up.

“I’ve just moved here. I’m Freya.” I managed to get my name out.

She sent another beam my way. “I’m Amelie. I moved here a few years ago. Where are you living?” She took out a second cup and placed it next to the first one she had ready.

“In one of the houses past the lighthouse. I’m renting for the moment while I get myself sorted.” I had no idea what ‘getting myself sorted’ would look like. Any money I’d had before was gone. It was going to take a hell of a long time before I had a deposit for anything bigger than a shed.

The coffee machine whirred again, the scent of freshly ground beans filling the air. I loved the smell; it reminded me of lazy Sunday mornings which was when I'd usually allow myself just one cup, two if it had already been a long morning following a restless night.

"I know the place. What do you do?"

I gave her the rundown, answering her questions which in turn made me feel more enthusiastic.

"Roman's installing a yoga room at the hotel." She put my coffee down in front of me and then pointed to the man who was now sitting at a table, fixated on his laptop. "He's my fiancé and he's responsible for the monstrosity that you can see up the road."

"It isn't a monstrosity." Roman's words were low and deep. He didn't look up from his computer. "Ignore her."

Amelie just laughed and shook her head. "If you have any printed adverts, you can put them up in here and at the community centre across the road. Where are you based?"

"From home at the moment. I need to build a big enough clientele so I can afford to rent." Which posed its own problems. People didn't always like going to someone's home for a therapy session or massage, so I could lose potential clients. It was a *Catch-Twenty-two* situation.

"There might be something coming up in the community centre. I'll have a word with the owner." She gave me a wink. "How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks."

She looked at me curiously. "You've been here three weeks and this is the first time I've seen you – not that I know everything about everyone in Puffin Bay - "

Roman interrupted. "She prides herself on knowing everything about everyone in Puffin Bay, so don't let her fool you."

"I thought you had very important work to do?" She was sending daggers his way.

“Nothing is more important than spending time in your presence, Salty.” He closed his laptop and grinned evilly at her.

A stab of longing pained me. I wanted that playful relationship, someone I could banter with, someone who knew me well enough to know how to make me feel alive. I wanted someone who looked at me the way Roman looked at Amelie.

“Aren’t you picking Caleb up from Bangor?” Amelie put her hands on her hips.

“I am. So you get to miss me for an hour.” He tucked his laptop under his arm and came over to the bar, leaning across it and pressing a kiss against her head. “See you for lunch.” His eyebrows wriggled and I wondered exactly what he meant by lunch.

I could guess. Something else I was missing.

“Get gone. You’re going to make Freya wish she’d never moved to Puffin Bay and escaped to Benllech instead.” She swiped his arm, then blew him a kiss as he exited out of the front door.

“Do you know anyone in Puffin Bay?” Amelie walked around the bar and took the seat next to me.

Another woman had appeared, starting to restock the fridges where bottles were kept. I wasn’t the only person in the bar anymore. Two older ladies had come in and were studying the menu but the new woman was seeing to them.

I shook my head at Amelie’s question. “No. I know Joselin, the yoga teacher who lives in Rhosneigr, but she’s moving to New Zealand in a couple of weeks.”

Amelie nodded as if she understood. “I moved here not knowing anyone. I lived in London before and ran a café that turned into a speakeasy in the evenings. I loved it, but needed a change and this was a change. Big city to small town, but it was the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“That’s good to hear.” I searched for more questions to ask. As a therapist, when I was in a session, words would come easy. They were practised and purposeful, the subject

and the topic nothing to do with me. I wanted to ask about Rowan, but if I did and it got back to him he'd probably think I was digging for information on him, or looked like I was interested in him. "Was everyone friendly?"

"Almost." She sounded like there was a story to tell. "I think they were worried about what I'd do to the inn, even though it was a wreck at the time. But I settled in quickly, thinking back. I can't see myself living anywhere else."

"You wouldn't go back to London?"

She shook her head. "No, sugar, not to live. I have friends who live there still, so I visit every so often, and I still have my other business there too, but it isn't my home anymore."

"Why did you move here?" I felt more comfortable now we were focused on her. "Did you have a tie to the place, or did you move here for Roman?"

She laughed and shook her head again. "I visited here on a holiday and saw the inn. I was looking for a new start somewhere and this felt right. It was right. I met Roman after I'd been here about three years, and he decided to stick around. Puffin Bay's been good to us." She drained her coffee. "So why have you come here?"

My heart sped up a notch. "The island. There's a lot here in terms of ancient monuments and places which intrigue me – I like the energy."

She gave a nod and studied me. "But why now? What's the reason for the start over?"

From anyone else the question would've seemed nosy, but Amelie had a warmth to her that would've made her a good therapist.

"Do people always tell you everything?"

She laughed, the sound reminding me of bells tinkling. "I run a bar. They buy my drinks, I provide them with free therapy. You don't need to answer me, I'm just curious – Roman would say nosy. But I am good at keeping secrets. Another coffee?"

“Thank you. Then that’s my limit for the day.” It was good coffee. I could happily have half a dozen of them.

“I have a limit on coffee.” She went back round the bar to the machine. “It’s when the coffee runs out.”

She spoke with the other woman behind the bar while she made the drinks, the two of them having an easy familiarity which I missed; I’d not seen my schoolfriends for a couple of months now, which was far too long especially after recent events.

“Freya, this is Alys who’s my bar manager. Freya teaches yoga.” Amelie spoke easily, putting two more coffees on the bar for us.

“Really?” Alys’ accent was Welsh. “That’s amazing. I miss having yoga classes. The woman who used to take the classes here has had to stop and since then there’s not been anything close enough.”

“Oh – where was she teaching her classes?” I sat up a little straighter.

“In the community centre on the top floor. There’s one big room up there so it works well. Amelie, has anyone booked it out?” Alys looked over at her boss.

I frowned. Amelie had already said she’d have a word with the person who managed the community centre.

“Not off the top of my head.” Amelie gave me another smile. “I wasn’t completely honest – I manage the community centre but I didn’t want to promise anything. I’ll check if I have a unit free – I think there is a small one coming up next week when Melinda moves her beauty salon into the bigger spaces she’s been doing up. Will you be in later?”

“I – I’m not sure. I’ve got some work to do this afternoon and I don’t know how long it’ll take.” The work was mixing up the tinctures and poultices that had been ordered recently. I’d been featured in a women’s wellbeing magazine two days ago and I’d had a surge of orders since – a relief given my finances.

Amelie nodded, but I was pretty sure she could tell I was also trying to hide away.

“Tomorrow then? I do think the room will be available so if you can come by here at the same time I can show it to you and you can see if it’ll work. If it isn’t, I don’t want to waste your time so let me have your number.” She busied herself while talking, polishing a couple of glasses, her coffee untouched.

I routed in my bag and found my business cards, neatly tucked away in a case. They were new because I’d needed to change my number. “Here. You can check my business out too and see I’m legit.”

Amelie’s smile was knowing. “I already knew you were legit, sugar. Let me see if I can help, and if I can, maybe you’ll tell me one day why you came to Puffin Bay.”

Rowan was back when I got home, cooking something in the kitchen that smelled good, enough to make me hungry.

He didn’t notice I was there at first, humming something to himself while he tossed ingredients in a frying pan. He turned round, startled when he caught sight of me.

“For fuck’s sake! Did you click your heels and just transport yourself there?” The pan wobbled on the stove, Rowan catching the handle and steadying it.

“Sorry.” I actually was sorry. “I didn’t mean to.”

He shook his head, turning off the hob. “Want some?”

“If you have enough.” I wasn’t going to say no.

“There’s enough.” He seemed grumpy about it. “What’s the weird smell in here?”

“What weird smell?”

His frown got a little deeper. “Like bad cooking – and don’t say it’s this because this smells like heaven.” He sniffed a few times, reminding me of a dog.

“I think it might be what I’m making for my shop.” It was definitely what I was making for my shop.

He started looking like he was searching for plates. I figured this was the first time he’d cooked here, dispelling any myths that we’d been ships that passed in the night – or day, because he had no idea where things were.

“Plates are in the second cupboard to your left.” I had to put him out of his misery.

“Thanks.” He squatted down, the movement making me notice the broadness of his shoulders and his backside again.

“How come you’ve made so much?” He really had made enough to feed me for about three days.

“Habit.”

Clearly we were getting one word answers.

“A habit because of what?”

This time I got a glare. “I’ve lived with my brothers recently and I’m the only one who knows how to turn an oven on. I’m still cooking for three.”

“Three hundred or - ”

“Three blokes the size of me.”

“Oh. Do your brothers live on the island too?” He definitely wanted me to stop asking questions which I wasn’t going to do. I could tell he was trying to keep his patience.

“Yes. Is that smell going to happen again?”

“Yes.” I could do one word answers too.

“For fuck’s sake.” He shook his head. “Is there any way you can cook them somewhere else? What are you actually making? Stink bombs?” He scooped out the food from the pan onto plates.

“I make poultices and tinctures using different herbs. I have to heat some of the ingredients to melt them. I batch make them so probably once or twice a week and if I could make them elsewhere, I would. I don’t think they smell that

bad though.” I had been making tinctures with a couple of ingredients that had stunk a bit. Maybe more than a bit, but I wasn’t admitting that.

I stood up a little taller, pulling my shoulders back. My self-confidence had taken a beating when I realised how I’d been treated, how I’d let myself be treated. My ex had hated my online business, criticising it and me and I’d do my best to conceal anything to do with it, even making up my stock in my friend’s kitchen.

“They smell terrible. Do you make better smelling ones?” His frown lessened as he put the plates down on the small dining table and then reached over for the forks.

I nodded. “I’ve made a massage oil that smells gorgeous today too. You know, I should’ve made that after the tinctures, then the house would’ve smelled better.” I could be considerate and not a walkover. The two weren’t mutually exclusive.

He frowned again, forking food into his mouth like he’d not eaten properly in days. “Massage oil?”

“Hmmm, this is good.” It was tasty, a hash of chorizo, peppers, onions and potatoes with a good amount of spice. “I do massages as well as being a psychotherapist. I make my own oils and I sell some too.”

“That sounds cool.” He carried on shovelling food into his mouth.

“Thanks.” The silence started to hang uncomfortably in between us. “Have you stayed here the last couple of nights?”

He shook his head. “I had to go away with work.”

“I thought most of it was online?”

He nodded. “Usually it is. This was an in-person thing. I’ll leave a note next time so you know you can bolt the door.” He devoured another forkful. “It is really safe around here though.”

I nodded. “I know. But where I was before wasn’t like that so it’s habit.”

“Want me to install a security system?”

I sat up a little straighter. I shouldn't want that to happen because it was safe around here, but at the same time there was still fear there.

“I can't afford it.” Which was the truth.

He shrugged, his plate already empty. “I can. They're not expensive anyway.”

“If you're sure, that would be great. Thank you.”

He nodded, the frown almost completely gone now. “I'll get it sorted. I'm going to be in the office for the next day or two and I meant to say, I'll cover the electricity bill. I have a lot plugged in.”

I wasn't going to turn that down. “I won't disturb you.”

“Thanks.”

He didn't say anything else, just tidied up, stacking the dishwasher before heading upstairs without so much as another word.

Roe



The problem was living with someone who was a stranger after years of living on my own or with my brothers.

Another problem was the lack of space: the house was only ever meant to be temporary, and when I thought I was sharing with Lionel I knew he'd be either at work or in a pub. Or on a stag do. Which meant there'd have been more space, more time without the quiet footfalls of someone else moving around.

There was also the smell of incense or things being made in the kitchen that weren't edible. Don't get me wrong – I could totally understand why the hand soaps she made were selling quicker than tickets for some pop princess because they were like silk on skin and smelled really good – but some of it was just potently bad.

The problem was also Freya.

She was everywhere.

We'd found some compromise; I stayed away from the living room, which was now her massage therapy room. She kept away from the first floor. The kitchen and bathroom were shared territory. But her scent floated into every room, her laughter could be heard no matter where she was in the house and I could tell the rooms where she'd been recently because it felt different.

I heard she was looking to rent a room off Amelie in the community centre, but I avoided asking her about it. I avoided

her.

Avoiding someone could be easy in Puffin Bay. So far, Freya had extended to Beaumaris where she was teaching a few yoga classes each week, and over in Holyhead. She had a few friends from her yoga coven thing, which meant she wasn't heading into Puffin Bay, leaving it clear for me to escape there, knowing it would be Freya-free. I'd also been looking for somewhere else I could stay – which was no easy task given every holiday let in the area was booked up until October and the few houses that were available were either too difficult to secure or just not where I needed them to be.

By the chatter coming from the living room, Freya had someone over, and I needed a break from the programme I was coding, so I headed out of the house and over to the distillery and my elder brother's house.

Finn and Ruby were finding their honeymoon period after months of pretending it was fake, so I had no idea what I was going to interrupt. I was hoping I'd be interrupting someone cooking.

I was wrong. If they were cooking something, it wasn't food. It was more likely to be a baby judging from the sounds that were filling the otherwise quiet house. I caught the sight of Finn carrying Ruby into the bathroom and deleted the scene from my head, knowing I'd seen worse and probably would do in the future.

I made myself busy in the kitchen, brewing a pot of coffee and putting on the radio. Eventually they appeared, both dishevelled, Finn looking far too pleased with himself.

“Fucking hell, are you two powered by mains electricity? I thought you were never going to finish.”

Ruby stared at Finn. Hard.

“You told me you'd locked the door.”

I tried to hide my laughter. She was horrified. Finn looked guilty.

“I lied. Sorry.”

She looked at me. “How long have you been here?”

“I looked away when he carried you to the bathroom. There are some things a brother never needs to see.” I lifted my empty coffee cup. “I’ll have another one. Help me get over the shock.”

Finn smacked me across the back of the head. “I hate you.”

“I have news that’ll cheer you up in that case.” I folded the newspaper I’d bought from the post office. “I can’t find anywhere else to live.”

Finn sat down at the table and frowned. “To rent or buy?”

“Rent. I can’t stay in that house with her. I need something quick.” He smiled at me. “Any chance - ” It was worth a try.

“Not before hell freezes over. We’ve just got married. That thing you almost saw? Yeah, that’s carrying on. We don’t want an audience.” He flicked a switch on the coffee machine. “Stay with Gully. He’s got a spare room.”

“He’s got visitors pretty much all summer. Fleur’s renovating Ruby’s old cottage, Puffin Inn is booked out, the holiday lets are all booked up – I have nothing. I can put an offer in to buy somewhere, but the place I want isn’t on the market yet – the owners have had to go to probate – and that’d still take at least twelve weeks.” I could hear the desperation in my voice.

Ruby took a coffee from me. “It can’t be that bad living with her – what’s she called?”

“Freya. Should’ve been Athena.” They both looked blank. Clearly neither of them had any idea of mythology.

“Athena was the goddess of war. Freya’s the goddess of lust, love and fertility. Do neither of you read?” I took the coffee Finn passed me.

“Not Greek mythology.” Ruby glared at me. “Or Roman or Norse – I have no idea which part Freya and Athena fit into.”

“Freya should fit right into Hades.” I sipped my coffee which was the perfect temperature. I couldn’t stand tepid drinks that were meant to be hot.

Finn took his own drink and sat down next to Ruby, who shifted a bit closer to my brother, not pissed off with him anymore.

“She can’t be that bad to live with?” Ruby repeated, trying to sound sympathetic. “You lived with Gully.”

I shook my head. “She has the heating on. She makes a fire in the evening because she’s cold. The house is full of plants, so it feels like I’m living in some indoor jungle experiment. She can’t work without listening to music - ”

“What music?”

I shook my head. “Boy band shit. And she watches rom coms. She has a mug that says some fictional man is her book boyfriend and she just is - ” I made a noise I figured summed up Freya’s insanity.

Finn looked like he was trying not to die laughing. “Right,” he patted my shoulder in a totally condescending way. “We’ll get dressed and let’s go to the Puffin Inn. I’ll text Gully and tell him where we are. He can meet us there.”

He stood up, taking his coffee. Then he bent down to Ruby, and whispered in her ear loud enough so I could hear. “If we keep the noise down, we can make it three-times lucky.”

“I’m definitely never moving back in here!” I kept hold of my coffee and walked out of the kitchen into what would be the garden when Finn had landscaped it. Our lives here were still a work in progress.

I heard them both laughing, totally at my expense, but what else did I expect? If Finn had done anything differently, I’d have been worried.

It ended up being a gathering at the Puffin Inn. Fleur and Thane turned up with the babies, my twin, Clover, Amelie,

Roman and some of the lifeboat crew who'd been doing some practice runs with Roman's son, Caleb, who turned eighteen in two months so would be old enough to volunteer, all ended up in the beer garden too, the weather perfect for a summer's afternoon in a beer garden, overlooking the sea.

Gully was laughing and joking around, more like his old self than he had been for months. I'd seen him fall quiet at times, his eyes looking for something too faraway to see when he remembered Ivy. But those moments were shorter now, and I no longer felt he was faking his smiles. In another week some of our cousins were visiting, staying at Amelie's for a few days to get away from London and deposit their children on a beach.

My mood changed when two women took a table near to ours, putting a bottle of white wine and a cooler down on it. One I didn't recognise; her hair was short and wavy, her skin pale. The other woman was too familiar.

"Why's she here?"

Gully looked at me and then looked at them, amused. His expression was interested, becoming too amused when his gaze returned to me.

"Is that your housemate?" Ruby smirked, her expression screaming *trouble*.

"Yep." I watched Ruby stand up. "Where are you going?"

We all watched Ruby, closely followed by Clover, head over to the table where Freya was sat, sipping her wine, her hair full of daisies.

"Hi, I'm Ruby. Which one of you is Freya?" she asked with unnecessary volume.

I smothered a groan with my beer. I did not want my sister-in-law making friends with the enemy.

I looked at Gully and Finn, who were looking far too amused with this.

"I'm Freya. I think you're Ruby, my housemate's sister-in-law. Am I right?"

I really wanted it to start raining right now and Freya would run off somewhere that wasn't here to stop her hair from getting wet.

"You are. How are you finding Puffin Bay?" Ruby sat herself down, Fleur leaving the twins to Thane and heading over there too, followed by Clover and then Amelie. The women had abandoned us and I knew this was because they totally got that this was going to piss me right off.

We were now two separate tables. Men who were staring at the women, and the women, who were completely ignoring the men.

It stayed like that until Finn decided to really wind me up and go over there himself, taking them another couple of bottles of wine to make sure he was in their good graces.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? Going into enemy territory?" I put a hand on his bicep, pulling him back.

He yanked it free and grinned.

I shook my head. "No. You're meant to be on my team."

Finn tapped his chest. "Married man."

"Which translates as 'he's owned'." Roman grinned wickedly. "He signed away all his free will with that marriage certificate."

Finn snapped his head round. "Says the man who can't talk his fiancée into walking down the aisle."

Roman shrugged, totally un-fucking-bothered by the dig. We all knew that he wanted to marry Amelie, only she was very happy being unmarried. He'd gotten used to the fact and seemed to enjoy trying to persuade her every few days. "Just saying. You're deliberately pissing off your brother by taking wine over there."

Finn shook his head slowly. "Someone's got to keep the peace. And Roe needs a spy in the enemy camp."

"Don't act like you're doing this for me, and you're not just scared of Ruby." I frowned at him, knowing exactly what he was aiming for.

Staying in Ruby's good graces.

And winding me the fuck up.

Finn's expression was the image of innocence. "I'm being welcoming to a newcomer to the town. Just as we were lucky enough to have."

"Jesus." I watched him head over to their table, putting down the bottles of wine. Of course, the dickwad had to sit down with them and accept a glass, talking animatedly to Freya.

He turned around and pointed at me.

I glared.

Freya laughed.

"She's pretty." Gulliver shifted next to me. "In a really different way."

I shot him a glare. I was good at doing that today.

"She's a terrible housemate."

"Does she leave pubic hair in the bathroom sink?"

"No, but - "

"Does she play heavy metal or eighties pop at stupid o'clock?"

"No." I accepted that this wasn't going to stop.

"Does she put her toenail clippings on the kitchen worktops?"

"No, because she's not you, Gulliver. You are the worst person to live with, as in you should come with a health warning." To be fair to him, he'd improved from when we were twenty-five and living in London. Gully had managed a number one bestseller with his debut crime novel and considered himself untouchable and therefore couldn't possibly clean where he lived. His bedroom became a cesspit of dirty clothes, pots and post-it notes, and I eventually gave up and stopped tidying up after him.

Our mother had turned up unexpectedly when I'd been in Moscow, and had preceded to tear Gully a new one and made him spend two days deep cleaning the entire place. Finn and I'd received photographs of our brother decked out in marigolds which had definitely made their way onto his social media accounts. There was nothing like a good hack to get revenge on someone who'd never rinsed the bathroom sink out after brushing their teeth.

“So why do you dislike her so much? For the last couple of weeks, all I've heard is how she's irritating and stuff about sage and wax and cards and all sorts of random mutterings. She looks perfectly nice.” He looked over at Freya again, who was laughing along with Ruby and Clover, probably at Clover, or something random that she'd said.

Gully was right; Freya did look perfectly nice, if a bit like something thrown up from the sixties.

“She reads tarot cards. She moves her hands around people without touching them and they pay her for it. She's nearly always smiling.”

The key word there was nearly. There'd been some times when she was definitely not smiling. I could've sworn I heard her crying one night.

I wanted to knock on her bedroom door and check she was okay, because I fucking hated anyone being upset, but we had a fragile truce and I sensed that she might interpret any concern as interference.

I'd lay there and tried to ignore the sound, until it'd gotten too much so I'd reverted to type and switched my laptop on, doing some research on my unplanned for roomie.

“There's nothing wrong with someone being smiley.” Gully shook his head at me. “Not everyone's a fucking grumpy shit like you.”

I'd take that. I was grumpy.

“I don't trust people who smile most of the time. I've never seen her angry unless it's at me.”

“What’ve you done to make her angry?” He looked concerned now.

“Nothing on purpose. But she doesn’t like my music.” Which had made me play it all the more. “And she doesn’t like how I park my car.”

“How are you parking your car?”

I shrugged. “She says it makes it hard to get hers off the drive.”

“So be more fucking considerate.”

“She should take a driving refresher class or something.” It wasn’t my problem.

“What else?”

Another shrug. “My trainers get in her way. And I put meat on the top shelf in the fridge.”

“Is she veggie?”

I nodded. “Yep. How did you guess.”

“Are you doing these things deliberately?” He eyed me which told me he didn’t need to ask that question to know the answer.

“Never. I wouldn’t do that.” I shook my head rigorously.

“Are you trying to make her move out?”

“No. If she could afford to she would.”

“But she can’t afford to?” Gully narrowed his eyes at me. “You’ve checked her background?”

“Of course. I haven’t done too much digging. She told me anyway that she can’t afford much right now.” I’d checked her credit score, but stopped at hacking into her financials. I had no issues with the white hat work I liked to take on, but there was a line where you could know too much about someone and I was careful not to cross it.

“Any idea why?”

“Not sure. She’s becoming busy with clients and her online shop’s doing really well if the stench from the kitchen’s

anything to go by. I don't know why she's here either." I was more intrigued than I wanted to be too.

"Ask her."

I shook my head. "We don't have conversations like that."

I stopped talking while Ruby, Amelie, Clover and Fleur headed back over, glasses in hand.

Ruby made a point to sit next to me.

"Freya's lovely. She's going to have me over for a Reiki session." Her hand tapped my forearm. "She said she's happy to do a session for you too. For free. She thinks you're unbalanced."

"I think that's you putting words in her mouth."

Ruby's smile was demonically gleeful. "Not at all. I mentioned how much you hate Christmas too, that you're the Grinch in disguise. Freya loves Christmas."

"Of course she does. But I bet she sees it as a pagan festival."

"A celebration. If you're still living together by then, I'm sure she'll decorate the house beautifully." Ruby took another mouthful of her wine. "She seems really nice. I don't understand why you don't like her."

"It's not that I don't like her - " I paused, trying to find the words to explain it. "She's just irritating."

Something changed in the air, like a thunderstorm was moving in from the sea. Ruby didn't say anything back, her gaze shifting to something behind me.

Or someone.

Fuck.

"So I'm irritating, am I?" There was a sharp edge to tone.

I swung around. There was no making this better. "Yes. I find you irritating. I'm pretty sure you find me irritating too."

Her eyes blazed. "You're the most irritating person I've ever met. You have no idea how much time I waste sweeping

up after you've trampled sand everywhere; you never empty the dishwasher; you never fill the dishwasher and you talk in your sleep! I pity the woman who ends up with you! Plus you're grumpy and moody and you never, ever smile even though you don't have a reason not to!"

I swallowed a couple of times, wondering if this was the right time to retreat or whether I needed to rearm myself for another battle. A battle that had an audience that were far too intrigued.

"Thank you for your assessment of my character. Much appreciated. I'd like to enjoy my pint in peace now." I turned away, letting her see the width of my very broad back.

There was a huff and the sound of footsteps. The air cleared. My brothers joined me and someone started up a conversation about which teams were going to be challenging for the Premier League trophy this season.

I half listened while my blood simmered down. I didn't talk in my sleep. She was making it up. And it was Gully who was the untidy one.

I was fine.

I got home later, staying out for a barbecue at Thane and Fleur's. Thane was Ruby's brother, and Fleur was friends with Clover and Amelie. Thane was also the lighthouse keeper, and Gully's landlord. Before his twins were born, he'd moved out of Puffin Bay's lighthouse into two converted cottages, converting them into one big house near the lighthouse that had a garden and were safer for his girls as they grew up. He was as grumpy as I was, but a lot quieter with it, which was handy as Fleur did most of the talking for them.

Freya had hung around for another couple of hours, deliberately ignoring me which suited me well, before heading off with her friend into Benllech to meet up with someone – I didn't care enough to find out who.

She was already in when I got home, in a better mood before as I'd won both the hands of crib we'd played at

Thane's. The kitchen light was on, but I didn't expect her to still be up.

She was though. Sitting at the table, her head in her hands and a laptop in front of her. I could tell she was crying as soon as I walked in, and her wiping madly at her eyes wasn't going to fool anyone.

I took a seat at the table. "What's up?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"Please don't bullshit me. You're crying, so something's up." A glance at her laptop gave me a clue as to what was the matter. There was a message on the screen, the rest of which was frozen.

"It's fine."

"It really isn't." She'd been hacked, and by the looks of things, malware had been installed and she needed to pay a fee to get the use of her computer back. "I can fix that."

She whipped her head round to look at me. "What?"

"Sweetheart, what do you think I do for a job?"

Her pretty face frowned. "You design programs."

"I code. I do some cyber security too." Which was probably putting it mildly, but Freya didn't need to know that.

"You can fix this?"

I nodded. "More than likely."

She took in my face, as if she was doing a visual assessment of how trustworthy I was. Another tear ran down her cheek. "I've got nothing to lose. I'm fucked if I can't get back into my website." She pushed the computer over to me then hid her head back in her hands, her elbows on the table.

It took me just over six minutes to crack back into the machine, using my laptop to then return the hack and break into the server of where it had been set up. Another fifteen minutes later and her laptop was restored and I'd added an extra layer or two of security. Her laptop just about took that,

given it could've been in a museum and really needed replacing.

“Here you go. Sorted.” I pushed it back to her.

She was back at the table, having fluttered around the kitchen, boiling one of her concoctions which didn't smell as repulsive as usual.

Her hand shook when she reached for it.

I might've had a couple of beers but that didn't stop a couple of jigsaw pieces clicking together.

“Freya, what's happened?” She was thirty, she was clearly bright and knew how to run a business, even though it was on the bizarre side, and her clients loved her. She shouldn't be counting pennies and jumping like a startled deer at the slightest thing.

“I must've clicked a link.”

She hadn't just clicked a link. She was lying.

“Was it in an email?”

Freya nodded.

“Was it from someone you know?”

She stilled.

I was onto something.

“Okay, you might be irritating but you're not stupid, so you know I'm not either. I work in cyber security. I fix computers. I fix a few threats as well. If someone's targeting you, tell me. We live in the same house so if you have a security issue, I do too.” I didn't use the same internet server as Freya – hers wouldn't have been secure enough – but I doubted she knew this.

“It was an email from my ex. There was an attachment which I opened without thinking about it – that set my computer off.” She shrugged. “I'm not techy. But I need to work online.”

“Is your ex the reason why you're here?”

She was silent, staring at a picture on the wall of an eye. I knew the symbol – four concentric circles, different shades of blue with black in the centre. It was meant to ward off evil.

Even techies were superstitious.

“Yes.” Her response lacked her usual detail.

“Is he the reason why you’ve no money?”

She was quiet again, staring at that evil eye.

“Freya, is he a problem?”

Still no response.

I leaned out of my seat and reached into a nearby cupboard, pulling out a bottle of whisky that Finn had distilled. It was just about ready to be drunk, and tonight felt like the right time to sample a couple of fingers.

“Want some?” I poured a small measure into a cut crystal glass that had come with the house.

She nodded, which surprised me.

A second glass was poured and I passed it to her. There were a few more minutes of silence while we took that first taste.

I wasn’t a big drinker. A few pints every so often and the odd nip of whisky was enough. We’d always messed around with brewing and distilling, mainly because in the small Irish town where we’d spent each summer there wasn’t that much else to do, and we made a profit off it which went towards new computers or servers or other bits of tech that I was into. Finn bought more brewing equipment. Gully saved it so he didn’t need to get another job when he started writing full time.

“That’s good.”

I nodded at her compliment. “It’s one of Finn’s. Freya, is your ex a problem? Is he trying to get at you?”

I saw her exhale, the air pushed out of her lungs.

“Yes. To an extent. He’s not near me, so it’s better than it was.” She tapped at the glass five times. “He didn’t want me

to leave.”

“Did you want to leave?”

She nodded. “I had to. He was controlling. I was with him for seven years and I let him have control of me.” Her head then shook, soft curls dropping round her face with the force.

“What happened to your finances?”

She shrugged and stared at the table. “I’m only telling you this because I’ve had wine and whisky and I’m really freaked about my laptop. Thank you for fixing it.”

“Consider it penance for bringing sand into the house.”

That earned a smile.

“Did he empty your bank account?” I figured I was on the right path. I did some work for my cousin Claire’s husband, Killian O’Hara, who had his own private security firm. He needed white hats and penetration testers, and online trackers, who could do some very discreet work for him. Occasionally, when I needed something more adrenaline fuelled than making apps for blue chip companies, I took on some work. I’d done even more of it since my mother had gotten herself a new boyfriend who worked with Killian’s company also.

“He did. I guess you think I’m pretty stupid, don’t you?”

“Not at all. How about your house? Did you own it?”

Another nod. “He transferred it into his own name. Fraudulently, but I can’t prove it and I can’t afford to pay someone to look into it.”

I took another sip of my whisky.

It looked like I had something else to add to my to do list.

“How often is he getting in touch with you?”

She took a fierce, deep breath. “Sometimes multiple times a day, sometimes he’ll go weeks. I’ve changed my phone number three times, but he keeps getting hold of it – I don’t know who through. He’s tried to negatively review my business, but I’ve managed to have those comments taken down and he’s done what he can to make me lose money. If I

ignore any messages from him, something happens. He phoned a couple of days ago and left a message, telling me I needed to call him. I didn't – I couldn't, I just can't speak to him – so he emailed that the dog had been poorly, and he'd attached the vet's bill. I opened the attachment." She shrugged. "I bet you feel sorry for him, don't you? You think I'm irritating so you probably sympathise with him." Her hands rubbed at her face.

"No, I don't think that. And to clarify, I find you irritating, but I do *like* you. You're just very different from me and it's been a sea change living with someone different." I felt like an absolute turd now. "I haven't lived with a girl before."

Her laugh sounded hollow.

"Thank you for calling me a girl. I feel about seventy right now though and I'm not exactly a girl anymore." She pulled her hair back into a ponytail with her hand.

"No, you're not a girl. But you're hardly an old hag. Your ex will be pissed that he doesn't have you anymore." I was shit at giving compliments.

"My ex can be pissed all he wants. He made my life a misery." She groaned into her hands. "He's still making my life a misery."

"What's his name?"

Her head snapped round so she could look at me. "Why?"

"I'm going to make sure he can't hack into your financials or anything like that. It's my job and I'm pretty good at things like that." I was a fucking damn genius but now wasn't the time to brag.

"Marc Charles. Marc with a c at the end." She gave the information easily, clearly too tired to fight. "I just want him to stop so I can move on with my life."

"How much did he take from you?"

"A few hundred grand. The house was mine. I bought most of it with an inheritance from my great uncle, and then paid off a small mortgage. He's forged a load of stuff to get it in his

name. He emptied my personal account and my business account too and I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

I finished off the rest of my whisky.

"My mum used to say that a problem shared was a problem halved. I asked her if that meant we could share Gully with the neighbours next door who didn't have any kids. Apparently, that wasn't what she meant."

I got a smile.

"I like your twin. He's relaxed and funny. You're really both different even though you're identical." She laughed, thankfully. "That sounds really mixed up."

"So you prefer my twin to me?"

Freya frowned and looked a touch embarrassed.

"No, I didn't mean that - "

"Don't worry; he's always the one people like best." I grinned because this had never bothered me in the slightest. People had always warmed to my brother. He was friendlier, charismatic and *liked* people. I preferred to leave him to that and for me to get on with what I wanted – which wasn't peopling.

Freya looked concerned. "That must be hard sometimes though. And people don't like him better – they might like him faster, but - "

"It's fine, Freya. I'm going to head up to bed. I'll see you tomorrow, probably." I stood up and stretched, noticing her eyes on my abs as my T-shirt rode high. "If anything weird comes up on your laptop, let me know." I didn't think it would, but her ex seemed to know his way round technology, so he might try a few other tricks if he worked out what had been put in place.

"Will do. And thank you." Her smile was pretty.

"No problem." I headed up to bed, almost tripping over her shoes, but I decided not to say anything about it.

Not tonight, anyway.

Freya



Roe disappeared for a few days. The house suddenly felt quieter, even though he wasn't noisy to begin with.

There was a stillness that bothered me, an emptiness of his energy. I'd bumped into his twin a couple of times when I was in Puffin Bay, transforming my new studio into a haven from where I could practice and see my clients. Gully was always moving, usually with his hands and always with his expressions. He greeted me like a long-lost friend, with a hug and a grin, then asked me a dozen questions that somehow had me laughing. He was gorgeous in a way that hinted of a potent mix of strength and vulnerability, being one of those people that people were drawn to, and he automatically put them at ease.

I almost told Gully about my little retreat, even though it had no name yet and I was having only a little amount of time there each day to get it ready. Until I had everything ready, I needed it to be just mine so no one could sabotage it and I didn't tempt fate.

But I didn't. I had a quick lunch with him at the Puffin Inn, which he paid for, shrugging off my attempts to go half and agreeing I could pay next time. It was during that lunch when it was confirmed that Roe had gone to London for a few days. I hadn't been imagining the lack of him in the house.

I'd told Gully about Roe sorting out my tech issues and he'd laughed, launching into a story about how Roe had tracked down an internet troll who'd been leaving Gully one star reviews on his books, the same person but using different

handles. It turned out that Roe had found him, then taken sweet revenge, gifting him profiles on various dating sites and opening him up to being trolled himself.

“He’s a good guy, my brother.” Gully had looked towards the sea when he said it, as if there was a memory box of stories there that weren’t for that day.

When I got home after that, I met the postman, a man called Dylan who did the rounds with his dog, who was big enough to give donkey rides on the beach.

“Freya Kahan?” He pronounced my surname wrong like most people did at first. “I’ve got a delivery for you.”

He handed me a wide box. I wasn’t expecting anything so fear started to ricochet up my spine and my stomach clenched tight. I saw the sender’s name, neatly printed in black marker.

Rowan Holland.

The address was the same address it’d been sent to, which made perfect but weird sense.

My heart rate simmered back down, not quite to a normal pace, and my breathing settled, the world feeling less fuzzy.

I signed Dylan’s device with my finger and took the box inside, opening it on the kitchen table.

It was a new laptop. A note was stuck to the top of the box.

Freya, your laptop is a security hazard. Please stop using it. This has been set up with everything you need. I’ll sort out your old laptop when I get back.

Roe.

I read it twice then opened the laptop box, finding the laptop with enough charge to power it on. It demanded a password, which flummoxed me momentarily until I keyed in the one from my old laptop.

It worked. I wasn’t surprised.

Every programme I used was on there, along with easy access to my online store and website, which also looked tidier.

A message pinged up on the screen.

It's Rowan. I've installed software so I can monitor any hacking attempts. I won't be looking at your search history, so if you've been watching any porn, I'll never know.

I frowned, wondering if he knew I was online and whether his message was sent real time. I clicked the reply button.

Are you sending that message now or was it timed? I feel so stupid right now.

I really did. I wasn't competent with technology or computers. I could just about use them for what I needed and I stumbled over that. I was much better at peopling.

I'm online now. There were some bugs in your website; someone was phishing to intercept part payments – everything's secure now.

My eyes smarted. I wasn't used to someone doing something so kind for me. My friends had always been there, even if it had been from a distance when I was with Marc. He didn't like them, he never wanted to hang out with them and he was grumpy when I did choose to go out with them. I got it now; separating me from them was a way of controlling me; I would grow distant from them and not listen to any concerns they had; I'd become dependent on Marc.

Thank you. I need to pay you back for this as soon as I can.

His reply was instant.

We'll sort something out. Gully said he saw you today. Is he okay?

That had been quick work from Gully.

He was good. Chatty.

It took a few minutes for Roe to respond.

Good. His friend Ivy died a few months ago. They've decided to publish the last two books she wrote posthumously and one's out this week.

Shucks. I hadn't known about the book. I'd heard about Ivy; Roe had actually mentioned it, and Amelie had referred to it. The town still mourned her, you could feel it in the air some days, or in the breeze when you walked along the path at Lovers Heights.

He seemed okay. Do you want me to check in on him?

Roe's response came immediately this time.

Finn's keeping an eye on him too. The publishing house wanted him to be in London for the release but we persuaded

him not to go. It felt like they were trying to use Ivy's death as marketing material if he went. If you see him tomorrow, let me know how he is. I'm back the day after.

I swallowed, taking in the laptop, the security and Zeus knew what else he'd done to make this machine work. There was a paranoid niggles that he might be trying to do something to upend me, some sort of revenge for it being me living here and how I'd been purposely annoying when he'd moved in.

But I didn't think that was Rowan Holland.

We hadn't spent much time together, even though the house was small. He would work upstairs during the day, and often at night too. I used the living room as a treatment room for clients, teaching yoga in a couple of gyms on the island, so the only times we passed were when we both needed to use the kitchen.

But I'd found out a lot about him.

Amelie had known the twins and Finn since they were toddlers, their aunt living next door to her family in Oxfordshire, where Amelie had grown up. I'd learned in the last few weeks that Amelie kept her council about people, focusing on the positives, unless it was about her fiancé, Roman, who she happily critiqued in front of him. She'd said a lot of nice things about Rowan and Gulliver and Finn, and their cousins who were going to stay at the Puffin Inn this weekend.

Others had spoken well of him too. Mavis, the town's unofficial mayor and official busybody, had been overheard praising him in the greengrocers, telling anyone who'd listen how he'd redesigned the town's website and upskilled her so that she was now an 'internet whizz'. Roman's relation, who didn't live in Puffin Bay but spent a lot of time there delivering unexplained packages and tending the floral displays around town with his girlfriend, also waxed poetical about Roe's skills, only these were with carpentry, which was something I hadn't known.

Before Marcus, I'd been trusting. I'd taken people at face value, risk assessing the possibility of being hurt as small compared to the benefits of getting to know someone, but now I was bruised. Sore.

I didn't think Roe would've done anything to deliberately harm my business or me, but that small paranoid streak was still there.

I saw Gully the following day, walking just ahead of me on the narrow road towards Lovers Heights, a guitar case over his shoulder and his pace that of a determined man.

"Want company or not?" The words were out before I thought about it. I had some context, figured he might want to be alone, but there was also a possibility that he wanted company but didn't want to say.

He stopped and turned around, giving me a lopsided smile. "You might not want my company. I was going to head down to the arch and just play a few songs." His second smile was hollow.

"I'm just heading to Ddin Caer. Just for a walk." Actually, I had the crystals I used for healing and a deck of tarot cards, but I wasn't going to share that with him. I'd had a multitude of responses to what I did: the psychotherapy was accepted mainly, as was the massage. When I mentioned Reiki, a few people would flinch, and I could tell they thought I was mad. If I talked about crystal energy and tarot cards, I could be ostracised.

"I've been there a few times." He'd turned now and looked out to sea. "It's got a mad energy about it. I was freaked out once when I was there by myself."

"It does have a lot going on." I wanted to introduce a woman's circle to the area and Ddin Caer would be the ideal for the first location. "This place does too."

He nodded. "You know this is where Ivy came off her motorbike."

I'd known it was roundabout here, just not exactly where.
"Here?"

"The skid marks from her wheels were just about where we're standing. She was wild sometimes. She shouldn't have been out on her bike that night when we had a flood warning. She skidded here and went over the side." His tone was level but it was forced to be. There was an edge to it that was unusual compared with the other times I'd spoken to him.

Now wasn't the time for him to be on his own.

"So we're walking down there?" I pointed down the steep steps. I hadn't been to the beach there before and I'd only seen pictures of the archway that led from the path onto the beach.

"Yes. I don't know if it's worse walking down or up."

I followed him down, glad I was wearing walking boots rather than my trainers as it had rained recently and was a bit slippery. Bracken and evergreens lined the steps, some of them cut from rocks, some of them crudely put there by people past.

The path levelled out onto pebbles, larger, rockier ones near to the marram grass before smoother, smaller ones that we walked over before the sand started and we saw the arch.

It was wooden, a low gate in its centre, weathered fencing at either side. The arch was carved with symbols, the wood treated to preserve it and I wondered whether this was the first incarnation of it, or whether there had been other arches before.

Ivy was growing up either side, ivy that I suspected had been planted by Gully or one of his brothers.

A cluster of large rocks on the other side of the arch looked smoothed and polished. I followed Gully towards them, sitting down on one of them after pulling myself up. The tide was on its way out, the cry of seabirds the only sound apart from the rushing of the wind through the plants and shrubs and the everlasting beat of the tide.

"I'm surprised you come down here." We had to discuss Ivy. Gully had come here to think about her, remember. Not to entertain.

He shrugged, taking out his guitar and starting to strum a few chords. “Ivy and I used to come down here when we were trying to put off writing. Sometimes we’d bring our laptops and write until the batteries died or just sit here and talk.”

“Do you think – people talk – is it possibly she came off the bike on purpose?” I knew that had been one theory. I heard that was what Gully had thought for a time.

He shook his head. “She wouldn’t have done it here. She would’ve known I’d have been left with the memories, so I think it was an accident. And stupidity.” The strumming turned into a song, *The Manchester Rambler*, an English folk song I’d learned from my grandfather.

I started to sing. I had a decent voice, and I could hold a tune well enough. Before Marc, I’d been in a couple of choirs, one a show choir and another that would sing a lot of traditional songs.

Gully smiled at me as I carried on the songs, this smile less brittle. The beach was in a small cove, tall cliffs surrounded us and that seemed to help the music to carry.

The tune ended. Gully looked at me questioning.

“Do you know this one?”

I nodded. *I’m a Man You Don’t Meet Everyday* was one of my favourites.

Gully sung it with me, our voices mixing like we’d done this many times before, my eyes shining with tears. One song bled into another, a couple I didn’t know so Gully sang them until I’d picked up the refrain.

“Do you play too?” He tapped the guitar before putting it down then fishing a bottle of water out of his backpack.

“A little.” I picked the guitar up. “Not as well as you.”

I played *I’d Never Dream You’d Leave in Summer*, surprised when Gully didn’t join in, just as surprised at how he watched me as I sung.

“We could make a living playing gigs at the Puffin Inn.” He handed me the water when I finished.

“That might not be a bad idea, although I’m not sure I’d be bringing much to the party.” Gully was one of those people who didn’t need any supporting act, and I definitely wasn’t one to perform in public.

He studied me, not even trying to hide it. “Don’t put yourself down.”

Words weren’t available for me to respond. I’d heard that from my friends before, but I’d figured they were saying it because they had to say it, that it was part of conversation.

From Gully it felt different.

“Roe mentioned your ex is a dickhead.” He strummed at his guitar, playing a random rhythm. “But he doesn’t even have to be your ex anymore. He’s just something that happened in your past.”

I nodded. “I know. I actually counsel people through things like this, which is what’s made it so ridiculous.” I laughed, but there was no humour in it. “I was in a toxic relationship and I didn’t recognise it until it was almost over.”

“But you’re out of it – isn’t that the only thing that matters?” He was still strumming. I didn’t recognise the tune; maybe it was something Gully had made up himself, but it was a good distraction.

“It is. But I’m still questioning how I ended up in such a mess of a relationship.”

He shrugged, putting down his guitar. “Wouldn’t it be better to accept what happened, be thankful that you’re out of it and look at how you move on?” His gaze drifted out to the sea. “Beating yourself up over how you didn’t notice key things isn’t going to change anything.”

“You’re right.” It wasn’t a difficult thing to say. Or do.

Gully nodded. “I wish I hadn’t gone out the night Ivy died, because if I’d stayed with her until she’d finished the book I’d have stopped her from going out on her bike.”

“Why didn’t you stay?”

“Because she said she needed space to finish. I get that – when you have just a few thousand words to go and the end’s in sight you just want to pull everything together and then you can breath again. So I left her to it.” He stretched his arms above his head, his T-shirt rising, exposing his abs.

He wasn’t as big as Roe, wiry rather than muscular. The fact I noticed bothered me.

“There’s no way you’d have done anything differently.” I knew he didn’t need me to reinforce the point.

“No. There isn’t. I understood where she was at. I also know the high once you’ve finished a book; the relief. I get why she went out on her bike because at that point she’d have felt infallible.” He offered me a soft smile. “So I have to accept it. Ivy died. I’m still here. I miss her but she isn’t here anymore. That’s not going to change.”

“Have you seen a therapist?”

Gully nodded. “The day after her funeral I had my first session, and every week since. The therapist told me that they wouldn’t do grief counselling until three months after the death, but I managed to get him to agree to start it earlier.” He folded his arms. “So why did you end up in Puffin Bay living with my twin?”

I laughed, understanding that Gully wanted to go no further talking about Ivy. “Another yoga instructor told me about the island and the ancient relics, and I knew there were some classes I could take over. I literally had nothing left – Marc, my ex, drained my account and moved my house into joint names – and I didn’t have the strength to fight him. He’s run up loans in my name too so basically I’m financially screwed.”

Gully picked up his guitar again. “Karma.” It was one word, said so positively, before he started singing a sea shanty that even the seagulls seemed to join in with.

It was late in the afternoon when we walked back to Puffin Bay. We’d left Lovers Heights, the climb back up reminding

me that I wasn't as fit as I wanted to be, and we'd headed to Ddin Caer, the remainders of a Neolithic settlement with its tall imposing stones that were left over from an ancient time, a burial chamber in the next field. I had crystals in my backpack which I used when I was practicing Reiki that I wanted to charge in the sunlight.

Gully hadn't commented when I took them out and laid them on a piece of material in the sunlight. He'd looked curious, but hadn't said anything, taking photos instead and leaving me to spend twenty minutes meditating in the sunshine, the call of gulls now further away.

We'd then walked back to Puffin Bay, taking a path I hadn't known existed, through fields and thickets, and an area that housed some rather curious cows that was a bit nerve wracking.

Somehow, we ended up back at the inn. I was beginning to realise that all roads led back here, although I suspected it was because of Amelie rather than the building itself.

"Your brothers are both outside." Amelie greeted Gully while carrying a tray of glasses that was definitely overfull.

He stepped in and grabbed a tower of pint pots that was about to topple over. "Both brothers?"

"Both." Amelie nodded. "They're in the beer garden with Thane and Roman and – hi, Mavis? What's the matter?" Amelie put the tray down and headed over to the little old woman I knew commanded most of the village.

Mavis was carrying what looked like a tree.

"I think this is an invasive species!" She looked fit to burst with anger. "This could stop our -"

"It's elder." Roman's grandfather rose from his seat where he'd been having lunch. "The council agreed to plant them at the last meeting. The one you weren't at."

Gully took hold of my wrist, his grip light rather than forceful. "Let's head outside before this turns nasty."

He still had hold of my wrist when we went outside, the sun cascading over the beer garden that merged into the beach.

I felt Roe's eyes on me before I saw him. Felt the skin where Gully's fingers were start to burn.

"You're back early," Gully said when were just a few feet away from the table where Roe was sat, along with Roman, Thane, Fleur, Finn and Ruby. He released my arm.

I touched the spot where his fingers had been. I liked Gully, but there was absolutely no spark of attraction between us, just some sort of understanding that I imagined Gully had with most people.

"I tried calling you to let you know, but your phone was off." Roe shook his head, standing up and walking round to us. "Where've you been?" He looked from Gully to me.

"Lovers Heights and the beach, then onto Ddin Caer so Freya could do her mystic thing. How's Mum?" He slapped Roe on the back. "I'm good though. Did you know Frey here can sing?"

Roe tossed me a look that was sheer anger.

"Can't say I know much about her."

I wanted to argue; he'd clearly had full access to my laptop which contained most of my life and I'm sure he'd had a look.

"Well she *can* sing. We're going to start a band." Gully's grin contained a high amount of shit.

"Of course you are." Roe shook his head. "When are the cousins getting here?"

He sat back down. Gully took the seat next to him and gestured to me to sit opposite.

I paused for a second, not sure whether I should be there or not. These weren't my friends, and while I figured I was becoming friends with Gully, everyone else was either related to my housemate or friends with him.

And that housemate looked cross at me right now.

“So what were you two doing at Lovers Heights?” Roe looked from me to Gully. He sounded irritated. Heightened.

I hadn’t heard that tone of voice from him before; not just annoyed – there was something more to it.

“I was talking to Freya about Ivy.”

The table fell silent.

I looked from Gully to Finn and then briefly to Roe.

Roe was looking at Gully. “Good.” His tone was softer. “Ivy should be talked about.”

Gully nodded. “She should. We talked about the night she died.” His gaze returned to me, and he gave me the briefest of nods. “Then we sang and played guitar. I know you’ve been worried about me, all of you, but you don’t need to be. I am okay.”

Roe kept his eyes on his twin. “We worry about you because we care.”

“I know. But you really don’t need to worry.” He stood up, looking at the woman with dark curly hair who was walking towards us, a bottle of prosecco in one hand and four glasses in the other. “It’s my friendly local stalker. Clover!”

I’d met Clover a few times in the last week or two. She was in Puffin Bay a lot, chatting to locals and tourists alike. I knew that she was an editor for a publishing company and sometimes went to London, but it seemed like her main job was to be the welcoming committee for the town.

“Go away, Gully, you’re a menace.” She sat down next to me, causing us all to scoot up a few inches. “When are you opening your little unit, Freya? I’ve had at least six people asking me about it since yesterday.”

I felt all eyes land on me.

I coughed, hoping that Gully would fall off his seat or something, anything to cause a distraction.

“Next week. I just need to move my massage table over there and let my clients know.” I couldn’t help but look at Roe.

“The lounge can be a lounge again.”

I hoped it would erase the grumpy look off his face.

It didn't.

“I don't have time to use it anyway.” He shrugged. “I can help you move the massage table though.”

“Thank you. Everything's just about ready. I've painted the room and laid it out like I want.” It was a gift really. The room was perfect with a view over the sea. The only adjoining room was a craft supplies shop run by Vera, a grandmother of seven who clearly wanted more grandchildren judging how she'd been with me. “And Amelie's been amazing with the rent.”

Roe's expression stayed frozen while he stared at me. “How long's the contract for?”

“She was really good with that too. It's for six months – I'll have an idea by that time if it's going to take off as a business here.” I felt it was. All the omens pointed towards it being a success. This week I'd taken over twenty online enquiries, and booked another nine clients in for either a counselling session or massage on top of that. I'd also read my tarot cards for the first time in months, finally feeling safe enough to take some guidance. Things were starting to look better there.

“Good.” Roe folded his arms. “I'm due a beer. Another round everyone?”

I ended up walking back home with Rowan when everyone dispersed. A storm was hovering on the horizon, the sky every pretty colour, but even I, as new to living by the coast as I was, could tell that the weather was about to change.

We walked along the beach, both of us barefoot on the sand, saying nothing for at least ten minutes.

“When do you want me to move your table?” His question was abrupt.

“Erm, Saturday? I finish Friday for the weekend, apart from the shift I'm working at the Puffin Inn Saturday night.”

Amelie had mentioned she was short staffed so I'd offered to help, figuring I owed her more than a few favours and the extra wages would help at the moment.

"Why are you working at the pub?"

There was that grumpy look again.

"Amelie was short staffed and I needed the money."

He lifted his chin and said nothing else for a few minutes.

"If it's too much trouble, I can ask someone else." I didn't want him to feel obligated.

"It's fine."

"Seriously, I can ask Gully, I'm sure he'll help."

Roe's eyes were as dark as the impending storm. "You don't need to ask Gully. I've said I'll do it."

"Okay. If you're sure. At least you get the living room back."

"I don't give a shit about the living room."

"Okay. I need to sort out a payment plan for the laptop too. And your time." I couldn't accept it as a gift.

"You don't."

"Okay. But I'd feel better if I could repay you in some way. How about if I did the cooking and cleaning for the next few months – until you can move out. Would that be okay?"

He stopped walking. A growl of thunder broke the almost silence.

"Stop saying okay."

"Sorry – I'm just, sorry - "

He stayed standing there, arms folded, his impressive biceps stretching the material of his T-shirt.

"And you don't need to apologise. I have money, Freya, so buying you a decent laptop isn't going to make me go hungry." His face was still stony.

“It probably would’ve made me go hungry.” This was sadly true.

Roe looked at the cliff instead of me. “Yeah, but that isn’t your fault. So accept the gift.”

“Thank you.” I could manage that successfully. “I’m sorry I irritated you when you moved in. I was upset I was back living with another man.”

He shook his head again and looked up at the sky. “For fuck’s sake, stop apologising. I get why you were hostile when I turned up. Just accept the laptop without any strings and the help to get your table in your new place.”

His eyes returned to mine. They were deep blue, so blue they were almost black and at the moment they looked as stormy as the sky.

Another crack of thunder broke the look.

“We need to get back. I’m on call so I might head over to the lifeboat station.” He glanced at his watch. “Are you okay with storms?”

I nodded. “I’m good with all weather. What do you mean, ‘on call’?”

“Lifeboat – I’m part of the crew.” He looked up at the sky which was darkening now. “There are a lot of fishing trips out and some crews that aren’t experienced – Thane mentioned it before. This storm wasn’t forecast this morning, so we could end up with a boat in trouble.” He started to walk again, picking up speed along the beach. “I’ll grab my stuff and head to the station.”

By the time Roe left in his car, the storm had hit land, rolling across the bay and giving a lighting show worthy of an Oscar.

I liked storms. I liked the force of them, how nature showed who really held the power. I’d only had a couple of drinks at the Puffin Inn, so I felt clear headed enough to set up a circle with the crystals I’d charged and my cards.

I set out a couple of spreads for myself; The High Priestess reversed, Page of Pentacles Reversed, eight of swords – they all set out my recent past.

The present was more interesting. There was the Fool of course, The Magician, Three of Swords reversed and then the Lovers and the Two of Cups.

That threw me. Lightning illuminated the sky when I turned over the Lovers, the most unexpected of cards.

They hadn't shown up in the last reading I'd done. These were new. I thought about Ddin Caer today and the feeling around the stones, the aged wisdom and the sense of the souls who'd been there through time.

Maybe this reading wasn't about me.

Maybe it was about Gully.

I was so lost in thought I didn't realise someone was standing behind me. Roe's voice made me jump, my hand knocked the cards, and a noise come out of me that I hadn't heard before.

His laugh was gruff.

“Sorry, didn't mean to disturb your witchy moment.”

I turned around. “I didn't know you were back.” He was drenched, water dripping off him onto the wooden floor. How long had I been reading the cards?

I glanced at the clock and saw it was nearly midnight. It shouldn't surprise me; I could lose hours when I was in the midst of a reading – it'd just been so long since I'd been deep enough for it to happen.

“Was everything okay?”

Rowan nodded. “Two call outs. Everyone was okay and we got them back to shore safely. The storm's still not blown itself out though.”

I could still hear the wind. “Will you need to go out again?”

“No. We’ve checked in with the crews that are still out there and they’re all good – set for the night. It was a couple of inexperienced crews who called us.” He shifted his feet. “I’m going to get a shower. Just wanted to check you were okay with you still being up.”

“I’m good.” This felt awkward. “You knew I read the Tarot, didn’t you? Some people can find it uncomfortable.”

Roe chuckled, his face lighting up. “My grannie allegedly had the gift. She read from a pack of playing cards and made a nice little income from it that fed her gin habit. She passed the gin habit onto my mam and Aunt Marie, but not the gift. They pretend they can see the future sometimes.” He shook his head. “Fucking nightmare, the pair of them. No, I’ve got no issue with your cards.”

I wanted to ask him if he was a sceptic, but he was standing there soaking wet. “You get showered. I’ll make you a tea.” I stood up, the Lovers card still in my hand.

His eyes went to it and his expression changed. “Yeah, before I flood the place. I’ll be twenty minutes.”

He was less, coming downstairs in sweats and a T-shirt, his hair still wet. He put his big body into one of the chairs and sighed, sipping on the tea without asking what was in it. Rain battered against the window and I heard thunder in the distance, still rolling around across the sea.

“How long do these storms usually last for?”

“A few hours. This’ll be gone by morning. Want to go to the beach and watch it?”

I did. “You’ve just dried off.”

“It’s easing off. I’ve got a waterproof I can throw on. Do you?”

Five minutes later we were walking down to the bottom of the garden and onto the beach, the tide almost all the way in and battering against the cliffs and rocks. Lightning cracked

across the sky, lighting up the scene and showing nature at her most powerful.

We stood there for a minute, watching, saying nothing, before running back inside when the rain stepped up its game.

“I’m glad I live here.” I said when we got back into the kitchen.

“Yeah, me too.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant he was glad I lived here, or that he did.

Maybe he meant both.

Roe



I knew the moment when Freya checked her bank account.
“What the fudging hell?”

Her yell came from the front room and I was tucked away in my cave, buried in reams of code that had one slight bug that was being a bastard at being found.

“What on earth? How – what? Rowan!” Her yell was closer now. Her feet banging against the stairs as she stomped up.

She’d never been in my cave, not once. Most of the time I was working on shit like this, designing apps for too-rich businessmen, but occasionally I was doing something that would do no good for the likes of Freya to see it.

She banged on the door.

I grinned. Even at her most mad, she wouldn’t go against what someone had said. I’d figured how mad she’d been the night I’d moved in to lock me out. It would’ve taken a lot for her to decide to do that.

I opened the door.

“Morning, sunshine.”

Her hand slapped against my chest.

“What have you done?”

“I’m sorry, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” I had absolutely all the ideas what she was talking about.

“Money. My money. Eleven thousand, two hundred and forty-eight pounds and fifty-two pence. It’s in my account.” She slapped the other hand to my chest and left it there.

“Excellent news. Marcus the Moron has clearly developed a conscience. Now, I’m in the middle of something - ”

“Marcus would not pay me this money back, Rowan Holland.”

She was full naming me. Only my mam and eldest cousin, Claire O’Hara, ever did that. And Aunt Marie, but before she did it, I was already a hundred metres away, having broken a few land-speed records. No one wanted to be caught by Aunt Marie if they’d fucked something up that they shouldn’t.

“Maybe he saw the light and wanted to clear his conscience.” I pressed the lock key on my computer, although if she saw what was on the screen she wouldn’t understand it anyway.

“Marcus doesn’t have a conscience, unless it suits him. He’s a narcissist.” She shook her head, her hand leaving my chest.

My skin felt cold where her touch had been.

“Maybe he developed one.”

She shook her head at me, curls flying everywhere. “No. He’s incapable. He wanted that money and my house so he had a hold over me even when I wouldn’t speak to him. What. Did. You. Do?”

“What makes you think I did anything?” Denial was a good, quick first defence.

“Hmm, let me think: you’re some mad computer genius who can hack into anything? You’re one of the only people who knows what that dickhead did? You’re the only person who knows what he did who has the skills to hack his bank account or whatever computer magic you performed.” She leaned against the door that was now closed.

I hadn’t actually done that much computer wizardry beyond telling our mam’s boyfriend what needed to be done.

His team of white hats had done the banking magic, with Marcus' permission.

His permission was granted while he might've been under a little bit of duress, and he had seemed a little too afraid of Jonesey and his toys. He'd been even more afraid of what Seamus Gallagher – who sounded Irish but was actually from Birmingham – knew about his tax returns.

It'd been a pleasant afternoon. The plane trip back to Ireland afterwards hadn't been as pleasant, as the turbulence had been shocking, but we'd been more than happy with the outcome.

There was nothing like spending a Sunday afternoon righting a few wrongs.

“Marcus won't bother you again. The house is back in your name as well, but it is in the process of being sold. I don't know if you want to live in it again – if you do, you'll need to pull out of the sale.” I doubted Freya'd noticed that the account showing her mortgage was back in her online banking app. “The estate agent and solicitor are aware it's your property. Now.”

She paled, which was interesting as she was usually only one shade away from ghost-like.

“Rowan, what did you do?”

“It wasn't just me.” I moved away from leaning on my desk and opened the door once she'd moved off it. “Let's go outside.”

Freya followed me down the stairs, through the kitchen and outside into the garden. The storm had subsided in the early hours of the morning, leaving a day that was going to be gorgeous.

My cousins were arriving later and this was the sort of weather they'd be hoping for, mainly because they could let their children go feral on the beach while they caught up with everyone somewhere they couldn't be distracted.

“What have you done?” She repeated her question.

I shrugged. “What Marcus did was illegal. It was fraudulent. The loan he took out in your name is now paid back and closed. Your house is back in your name and the money he cleared from your account is back in it. He knows this has been done so he’s not going to wonder what happened and he isn’t going to get in touch with you or mess with your website – he couldn’t if he tried.”

She looked even paler. “Rowan, is he *alive*?”

I laughed. “He’s alive. He might wish he wasn’t, but he’s alive and well, unharmed. For now.”

“What did you do to him?”

I frowned. “Seriously, you’re worried about him?”

“No, not at all.” She shook her head furiously. “He deserves everything he gets. I just don’t want you to get in any trouble.”

“There’s no chance of that.” There really wasn’t. Marcus Charles was not a very law-abiding person. There was a lot of unpaid tax, a few additional fraudulent scams involving old ladies who no longer had their life savings and what looked to be a nice pile of laundered money. On the surface, he was a legitimate businessman who appeared so clean you could eat your dinner off him, but only a slight bit of digging had produced the rest. Seamus had spent an hour or so on Saturday afternoon producing a visual which displayed the various misdemeanours he’d committed, along with an affair he’d been having with the wife of a gang member that no one would want to piss off.

Marcus’ face when Seamus had delivered his presentation had been priceless. By the end of it, he’d pressed the various keys on the computer himself to transfer back to Freya what she was owed.

It had been a satisfactory transaction.

She looked at me, jaw clenched, shoulders tensed. I braced myself for what she was about to say next. This was something Mam’s fella did on the regular. His white hatting and penetration testing weren’t limited to what they were

contracted to do, there was a bit of pro bono stuff thrown in, with payment of the knowledge that we'd prevented someone from making lives a misery.

Marcus would be very, very careful for a while now. At some point, he'd take a chance again, but soon after that, he'd receive another visit.

From the police.

They owed Mam's boyfriend a few favours.

I braced myself for what would likely happen next. I didn't know what to do with crying females and that was starting now.

Freya's eyes were glossy, her bottom lip was trembling. I knew she wasn't upset that she had her money back and the deeds to her house were back in her name. I knew she wouldn't be pissed that we'd been a bit nasty to that dickwad of an ex. This was gratitude.

I didn't do well with gratitude. Gully was better with that – he thrived off it, and even Finn managed thank yous better than me.

“Why did you do this for me?”

I stiffened. “I didn't do it for you as such. You wouldn't be the last person your dickhead ex ripped off and defrauded. You weren't the last person. He's not going to repeat that any time soon and you have back what's yours. It was the right thing to do.”

She nodded, the tears not falling. “Thank you. You cannot believe what this has done for me.”

“What about the house? You can pull out of the sale.” I knew that it was a young family buying it, the woman was pregnant and this would be their first family home. Marcus had wanted shut of it quick, so it was going for slightly less than market value. I wasn't going to explain that to Freya right now though.

She shook her head. “I wouldn't live in it. I won't move back there. I'm here now and I know this is where I'm meant

to be, so the sale can go through. I hope whoever's buying it has a happier time there than I was."

"You could get more for it if you re-listed." I had to be honest.

"No." She shook her head more emphatically this time. "Let the sale go through. I need to move on – this is life changing though. That loan was costing me hundreds a month – without those savings I had –"

"Pretty much nothing. I saw that."

Her expression shadowed. "I hate that you know that."

I shrugged. "I won't tell anyone. The only people who know are the team I work with occasionally and they'll have forgotten about you by now. They won't forget Marcus – he's on their shit list because he's been up to other stuff as well – you don't need know about that right now. Trust me." Because I knew she'd beat herself up about not realising and doing something about it. Another time. Not now. "Your credit rating's fixed as well, just so you know." That had been fucked. It was no wonder she'd ended up renting here as no credit checks would've been requested. Anywhere that used a letting agency would've said no straightaway when they'd seen her credit score.

"How did you do all that?"

I shook my head. "You don't need to know. No one's going to get in trouble for it anyway so you don't have anything to worry about. If you're not going to use the money straightaway – when the house is sold – I can help you invest it so you're getting a decent return."

"That'd be good. I'm not great at stuff like that. I don't overspend, so it's not that I fritter money away but it's never high on my to do list." She still looked shaken. "And I'm not focusing on buying a house yet. I need to work on my business. I've had another six enquiries for counselling sessions this morning – I've no idea how people are finding me."

I knew exactly how they were finding her but she didn't need to know. She'd just thank me again, and that was becoming tiring. I'd sorted it so that when people searched online for a therapist in north Wales or Anglesey or one of the relevant areas, she was the first that came up. That was all it took sometimes.

"Seems like everything's going well."

Freya nodded. "It is. It's amazing. Thank you."

I shrugged, accepting the thanks this time. "It's no big deal." I frowned, hearing a whistle that was annoyingly familiar. "Why's Gulliver here?"

"Oh," she pushed her hair away from her face. "He's dropping off some books he thought I'd like."

Of course he was.

I glowered at him as he walked through the house, using the spare key I'd given him for emergencies only.

This wasn't an emergency.

"Top of the morning to you." He mock saluted me when he got to the garden. "Ready for the rabble to arrive?"

"Ready as ever. Who's staying with you?" Gulliver lived in the lighthouse, which had a couple of spare bedrooms. Most of the Callaghan clan were staying at the Puffin Inn, but there hadn't been enough rooms.

"Well, slight amendment to plans." He smiled one sidedly. "Mam and Aunt Marie are coming, so they're staying with Finn and Ruby. I've now got Claire and Killian and their twenty gazillion kids at the lighthouse, so can I stay here?" He looked at Freya for an answer rather than me.

She looked at me. "I'm okay with it, but it's up to Rowan." Her hand patted my bicep. "Thank you again. I'll let you both have a chat about sleeping arrangements."

She left, walking back into the house, Gully watching her ass sway in one of the long skirts she liked to wear.

“No.” I shook my head. “You’re not trying anything on with my housemate.”

Gully had a grin that I’d never been able to master. It was one characteristic that made it easy for our mam to tell us apart.

He used that grin now.

“She’s really hot. And nice. You know she’s not going to turn into some mad stalker or move in with you after two weeks.” His looked back in the direction Freya had gone in.

“She’s not your type.” Freya really wasn’t. Gully liked super confident women who could hold their own against him. Freya was quietly confident and I imagined she could teach my twin a thing or two, but ultimately, he’d piss her off.

“Maybe she is. We got on really well when we were at Lovers Heights. We don’t have a no housemates rule, so there’s no reason why I can’t ask her out.” Gully looked back at me and grinned, not one of his *I’m joking* grins either.

“Don’t ask her out. I don’t want you being a dick and then her blaming me when we have to live together for a few more months.” Which was what would happen.

Gully had once broken up with a girl who’d thought she was in love with him. Personally, I’d thought she was only with him because he was the new big thing in crime fiction but they’d stayed together for a couple of months before he’d called it quits. She’d been pissed off and Gully had been in New York, so she’d sought me out and badgered me for three or four days, either venting about what a dick he’d been, asking how they could get back together, or coming on to me.

I didn’t need my housemate throwing something similar.

And she didn’t need Gully parading through her life right now.

“I might be looking to settle down.”

I eyed him, waiting for the punchline.

None came.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

He shrugged. “When’s the last time you saw me with a random woman?”

He had a point.

“Freya’s been through a lot.”

Gully nodded. “I know. We talk. Don’t worry, I’m not going to rush her. If something happens, something happens. I’m not going to magic something up that’s not there.”

“Good.” I walked away, but I felt him watch me walk away and I wished that silent channel of communication we had could be turned off.

My family was large, the sort of family that made most people double check their contraception was in date and working, or drop a sample in for the second time to make sure their vasectomy had definitely worked.

Our mam, Bernadette, had just the three of us. Gully and I had ended any hopes she had of a daughter, given the complication at our birth. It was probably a blessing, as our dad had done a runner afterwards and we were semi-wild as kids, although Mam had always been law.

Her sister Marie had inherited a family of four children when she’d married Grant Callaghan after a whirlwind romance. They’d had three more kids, another set of twins, Seph and Payton, and Ava. Marie and Bernadette were two of seven children themselves, part of an Irish – American family that didn’t understand the concept of small. Their brother, Aiden, went on to have four kids, meaning that I had eleven cousins who were based in the UK, as well as my two brothers.

We saw most of each other about four times a year, sometimes more depending where we were and what we were doing. Gully saw the Callaghan sibs and some of the Greens more frequently because he was in London about twice a month. I saw more of Killian, Claire Callaghan’s husband, as

his security firm was one I freelanced for, which meant I saw more of Claire.

For the next week, Puffin Bay was being infiltrated with Callaghan and Green spawn, which was potentially going to result in a meltdown of infrastructure.

Or sanity.

I wandered over to the Puffin Inn, finding Amelie sitting at a table outside with a coffee, reading some gossipy magazine.

“All set?”

She’d grown up with the Callaghan kids, the same age as Claire or thereabouts.

“As much as I’ll ever be. I still have no idea who’s coming when and for how long. I don’t think they know who’s coming when. But I have extra bed linen and I’m staying at Roman’s.”

“Is that strategic or so someone can use your rooms?”

“Both.” Her eyes glimmered. “Max and Victoria and their kids are staying in the flat. Seph and Georgia have got the annex suite, so Max and Seph have got some distance from each other. There’s a fishing trip planned one afternoon, so they’ll probably try to drown the other if they don’t have some space.”

“And Roman can try to make you live there permanently.”

Amelie laughed at that.

They’d been engaged for almost a couple of years, but Amelie still refused to move in with him, claiming she was too used to her space, which was probably true.

“Is Gully staying with you?” She closed her magazine. “He said he’d crash on your sofa so Claire and Killian could have the lighthouse for the week.”

“He asked. That was before he told me he might ask Freya out.”

Amelie laughed loudly and long. “And you believed him?”

I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because he’s yanking your chain. Freya isn’t his type and they’re friends. But he thinks you like her.” She smiled, amused at my expense.

“She’s my housemate and she’s irritating.” Although she hadn’t irritated me for a while. The tea she’d made last night had been weird but nice and while I didn’t spend much time with her, I liked knowing she was about.

“Hmmm, maybe it’s just his sixth sense.” Amelie looked far too fucking amused.

“No, he’s just being a wind-up merchant.” I sighed, cursing Gully for the gazillionth time since we’d been born. “Freya’s had a hard time and I don’t want him messing her about.”

Amelie rested her chin in her hand. “She’s tougher than you think.”

“I suppose so. What’s she told you about what happened?” I didn’t want to spill secrets that weren’t mine.

“Very little at first. She was really wary. To be honest with you, I wasn’t sure I did the right thing with offering her the unit because she gave nothing away and I couldn’t tell whether she was putting on an act – it was my gut that said she needed a break. Since she started doing the unit up, she’s started to relax some.” Amelie watched a seagull land nearby, eyeing up the remainder of someone’s snack.

“She’s in a better position now, financially.” I could give that much away.

Amelie nodded. “I know. She told me what you did this morning and then told me she was transferring the rent for the unit from when she’d moved in.”

“You didn’t accept, did you?” I was too quick to ask the question.

“No. I didn’t. She’s making the suggested donation to the Puffin Bay fund like all the other business owners.” Amelie shrugged. “Is her ex going to be a problem?”

“Not if he’s got any sense. I mean, he obviously hasn’t, but I think there’s half a brain cell working there. He’s done a really dodgy scheme where people can sign over their savings – he targets older people who’re basically susceptible to a charming smile and someone who can sound like he’s selling a good product. He knows we – not me as such – know about it and have enough info to pass it onto the police.” Which begged the question why we didn’t do that anyway. “If we did that now, it probably wouldn’t do Freya any favours, and he’s mixed in with some bigger players who Sam and Vinny are interested in.”

She shrugged, not surprised with anything she was hearing. “Vinny warned me off a supplier I’d reached out to a few weeks ago.”

“Duttons?”

“That’s the one. I didn’t ask any questions, just took his advice. Sometimes you don’t need the fine print.” She stretched up. “I like Freya. I don’t think she’s as delicate as you think. If she was, she wouldn’t be here. Don’t make the assumption that because she was involved in an abusive relationship she’s feeble and naïve. It takes a fuck ton of strength to survive that situation and a reserve of seven armies to walk away from it, knowing you’re leaving with nothing.”

I gritted my jaw. “I know. I know you kind of did the same.”

Amelie nodded gently. “I did. From my whole family. But I had the Callaghans so I wasn’t alone, and I know Freya has some friends, but she hasn’t been close to them because that’s what happens in abusive relationships – there’s purposeful isolation. The only voice the controlling party wants to be heard is their own.” She sighed and shook her head. “My father was that person, hence I didn’t stick around. But Freya’s had it worse than me, Roe. She’s really going to struggle to trust people because she’ll second guess herself so much. She’s not looking for a knight in shining armour, because I guess that’s how the ex came across; she’ll just be looking for a friend.”

“Which Gully’s being.”

Amelie nodded. “And he needs a friend too. Especially one who didn’t know Ivy. He needs someone who can just accept what happened from his side.”

“When did you get so wise?” I knew Amelie was the confidante for most of my family. Probably for most people who knew her.

She laughed. “When I started waiting tables. It’s always amazed me what strangers will tell you.”

“Strangers rarely tell me anything until they find out I can do things on computers. Then I hear all their tech woes.” Which was half the way I liked it.

“Tell them you do something different, or just snarl at them for a little longer and they don’t ask you anything.” Her phone started to vibrate on the table. “And so the onslaught of Puffin Bay begins. Jackson and family are on the island.”

“Do you think I should ask Freya to come out with us?” I had absolutely no idea what I was meant to do with my housemate in this situation. “I mean, she doesn’t really know anyone and the cousins aren’t staying around. Plus they can be too much.”

“Gully’s already asked her. And there’s no way your mum won’t want to meet your housemate.” Amelie grinned. “She’s already texted me about her.”

“Let me guess, she’s trying to work out whether or not she can marry me or Gully off to her.” My mother was not difficult to work out.

“Yep.” Amelie nodded. “One hundred percent. She wants grandbabies.”

“She can ask Finn and Ruby for them.” I shook my head and looked up at the sky.

“I don’t think that’s happening any time soon. Your Aunt Marie keeps on bragging about how many grandbabies she’s got now on purpose to annoy your mum. I think she’s even claimed Caleb as one of her grandchildren.”

“How does Caleb feel about that?” Caleb was Amelie’s kind of stepson, Roman’s almost eighteen-year-old from a very old relationship. He’d only found out about Caleb when Caleb was fourteen and needed a kidney.

“Caleb seems to find it amusing. He’s too laid back to find it annoying.” She typed something into her phone. “Anyway, I need to get to the kitchen and start baking.” She stood up. “Be here for five this evening and make sure you come ready to barbecue. You’re the only one who’s guaranteed not to cinder the steaks.”

The influx of my cousins to Puffin Bay was slow, a boon for the rest of the people here and the wildlife, in case they hadn’t found a place to take shelter yet. Being one of three boys had been fun, a little wild. A lot feral.

The Callaghans were seven, although there was a decade or slightly more from eldest to youngest.

Jackson, the second eldest, arrived first with his wife, Vanessa, and their two kids. He beat Claire, the third eldest and oldest female, by an hour. Killian, Claire’s husband, and my sometimes colleague, arrived at the inn just as I got there, his four daughters hanging off him.

He was a man mountain, the same age as Max, the eldest Callaghan, and ex-military. I’d never seen him stressed or panicked, which when he was married to Claire, meant he was due for a sainthood.

“How’s your housemate?” Killian asked, ridding his three eldest daughters onto their Uncle Jackson. The youngest, still a baby, was in his arms.

“Good. You might meet her – I think she’s heading over with Gully.” I looked at the tiny person who was looking at me. “How’s this one?”

“The sanest one of the bunch. I think the mad gene’s been watered down with each one. Don’t tell their mother I said that.” He glanced over at where Claire was sitting, a glass of wine in hand and her niece on her lap.

“I avoid talking to Claire. She asks difficult questions.” A lot of them. Usually ones I didn’t have an answer to either.

“I avoid talking to her. That’s how we ended up with four kids.” He fixed on one of them. “Eliza, what did I say about that?”

Eliza was about to stick something to her Uncle Jackson’s back.

“But Mamma said - ”

He shook his head. “Claire, you need to call your daughter off.”

Jackson stared at his sister. “Seriously? You were trying to get her to stick a target on my back?”

Killian sat down at one of the picnic tables. “I’m so opening that boarding school for girls.”

“If you carry on, you’ll be able to fill it.” I watched him settle with the baby with ease.

“No. No more. Four is plenty. I don’t need a son or anything like that, I just need an adults-only retreat somewhere sunny where the word ‘daddy’ doesn’t exist.” He shook his head with resolution.

“You don’t mind it when I call you daddy.” His wife sat down next to him, a child that wasn’t hers in her arms.

Killian stared at her. “For the record, you have never called me that and for the love of all things holy, please don’t.”

“We’ll stick with ‘sir’ then.” Claire smiled evilly at him.

Killian shook his head.

We were joined by Jackson and Vanessa, then Amelie and Roman, and Finn and Ruby, another picnic table pulled over to make more space. The words spilled, children ran around, babies were passed around for people to coo over, or to let someone have a glass of wine or a beer. Ava, the youngest Callaghan sib, and her husband, Eli, arrived with their baby, who was passed over to Claire.

I heard Claire mention something about missing having a small baby, which Killian just ignored, focusing on savouring his pint.

There was no sign of my twin. This bothered me because Gully was usually the first at a gathering, enjoying being with people especially when it was our family. He knew that Jackson had arrived and would've known about Claire getting there as she was taking over the lighthouse for the week. So where was he?

“Where’s your doppelgänger?” Jackson tapped the table. “Or are you Gully and you’ve switched in so Roe can hack into the government or something?”

I laughed, because there was a small percentage chance that would happen. “No, I’m definitely Roe. I’ve no idea where he is – speak of the devil.”

The devil was walking over to us with Freya, her hair a golden halo of curls that looked wilder than normal. She was in her yoga gear, a yoga mat carried over her shoulder and Gully’s arm around her shoulders.

“It’s good to see him looking so happy.” Vanessa stood up and stepped over the bench seat. “Gulliver! Gran says hi!”

I watched, which was my usual activity during things like this. Gully greeted everyone, introducing them to Freya who was smiling like I hadn’t seen her before. I’d expected her to be shy, maybe, or unsure because this was a hell of a lot of new people who all knew each other, but she was friendly and happy.

It annoyed me.

The barbecue was powered up, Amelie’s chef stepping in to help, although as usual I ended up cooking too. I liked barbecuing because it wasn’t an exact science; you could input all the data you had – temperature outside, type of barbecue, what the meats were, what the marinade was - but you still couldn’t set an exact amount of time it would take.

A slim hand tapped me on the shoulder once everything had been cooked.

“Why are you so grumpy?”

I turned around and looked at the fairy. That was what she reminded me of; she had the day I’d first met her and every day since.

“I’m not. This is how I usually am.” That was a lie.

“I agree. You’re always grumpy, but this is a whole new level. Would you rather I wasn’t here?” Her shoulders slumped.

I felt like an utter shite.

“I’m good with you being here.” More people were here now. Clover, Fleur, Thane, Caleb, Roman’s grandad and his partner. There were some of the regulars around too. “Enjoy yourself. They’re good people.”

Freya nodded. “They are. You are too.” Her hand reached to grab mine. “Come and speak to them.”

My hand tingled.

My first instinct was to pull it away. Freya and I had very limited physical contact, usually accidental. I wasn’t a hugger at the best of times – I left that to Gully.

My hand carried on tingling. I didn’t pull it away, but I wasn’t sure why.

I wasn’t sure why I followed her either.

Freya



Roel was socially awkward, but in a way that made women – and probably some men – want to be the one to tame him. I felt like a proud parent leading him to family members and friends to talk to them, stopping him from hiding round the barbecue like he had been doing.

Socially awkward men weren't my catnip. Marc had been a charmer, gifted with enticing people into conversation and making them feel like they were the centre of all his attention. A little like Gully, he'd held the attention of a crowd and never become drained with it.

I wasn't used to dealing with Mr Grumpy-Pants, who was quite happy to ask a few questions and listen but did not want to answer any himself. He didn't get that his family really did want to know how he was, and weren't interested only in Gully.

I helped by injuring him.

A pinch when he needed to carry on talking. A clumsy foot pressing down on his. An elbow to his ribs – that was my favourite – all trying to encourage him to say a bit more.

We were asked how it was to be housemates, which gave me a chance to elbow him in a more metaphorical way, listing how he left a trail of destruction in his wake, which he denied. He shot back about the smells that came from the kitchen, and about the teas, then about not knowing what things in the fridge were edible. For an hour, we were a double act.

“You got Roe away from the barbecue grill.” Gully wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into him.

I smiled, feeling myself relax a little. He’d had an emergency this afternoon, coming off his bicycle when he was riding along part of the coastal path. Phoning Roe or Finn hadn’t been an answer, as he’d not wanted to panic them, so he’d called me. He had a scraped knee and would have a whopping bruise on his ass and side later, but he was okay.

“Sometimes I think he’s half android.” I was actually thinking he was a cyborg clone of Gully.

“It’s a good theory, but I remember him as a kid and he’s definitely human.” Gully chuckled, squeezing my shoulder. “Plus, if you were going to have an AI robot, you wouldn’t programme him to sulk like he’s doing now.”

I looked over at Roe and saw exactly what Gully was referring to. Roe was watching us, his eyes had narrowed and the half smile that he’d worn before was gone.

He was still completely and utterly mouth-wateringly beautiful.

“He’s pissed off with me.” Gully turned his head so he could whisper to me. “He’s jealous.”

“He’s not jealous. Unless he’s jealous of me standing with you. Maybe he wants some quality twin time.” I knew the two were close, as they both were with Finn. Roe and Gully didn’t need to be based on the island for their work, but they’d chosen to be so they were close by. Yet they didn’t spend every minute of every day together. I knew they messaged regularly, but I saw more of both of them separately than they did of each other.

Gully shook his head. “No, he’s jealous I’m talking to you.”

“Roe doesn’t want to talk to me. Especially after I’ve spent the last hour needling him so he talked more. He usually wants the house to himself and me as far away from it as possible.” When we occasionally saw each other at home, he’d ask if I’d be there much and would try to hide the look of relief when I

said I'd be at the community centre or doing a shift behind the bar for Amelie.

"Is that what you think?" Gully sounded amused.

"Absolutely. I'm Rowan's worst nightmare."

Gully laughed quietly. "I think you're probably right, but not in the way you think. I think he likes you."

I spun around, aware that one of Gully's cousins was watching us. "I think you hit your head when you came off that bike."

He shrugged. "I didn't, but you think that if it makes you feel better. Roe!" He shouted over to his brother.

I cringed, wondering what he was going to come out with.

Roe walked over, hands in his pockets, watching me as if he was trying to work something out.

"Good news for you both – I'm staying at the lighthouse. I won't need to take over your house and cramp your style." His arms around my shoulders loosened.

Roe frowned. "I didn't think you had room."

Gully shook his head. "Neither did I. But the three eldest girls are sleeping in the lounge on a blow-up mattress, so all is well. I thought they'd need more space, but they don't." He shrugged. "The weather forecast is good too, so Claire thinks they'll be out most of the time."

"Good." Roe nodded, his expression hiding far too much. "That means I'll have the house to myself then."

Gully looked at him and frowned, then looked at me. "You still have your housemate."

Roe shrugged. "She's with you most of the time." He turned around and walked off, leaving an atmosphere hanging that felt rough and abrasive.

I took a step back from Gully. "He thinks we're *together* together."

I wanted to scrub the smirk that crossed Gully's too-pretty mouth. "He does."

"This is bad. He already hates me."

"If he hated you, he wouldn't have sorted out all that shit with your ex. He doesn't hate you. He just doesn't know what to do with you." Gully's smirk turned into a smile. "Just ask him what he's playing at when you get home."

I left the group before Roe did, saying my goodbyes before the sunset, wanting to give them time together without new people being around. Initially, I hadn't wanted to go this evening, making every excuse under the sun to Gully, who was having none of them. I was still raw from Marc, not sure how to act with a big group of people when I'd been used to being Marc's shadow, his side-kick. Picking up a few shifts for Amelie at the Inn had helped; there had been a bit of flirty banter as there often was in pubs, and Gully hadn't let me become any more of a shrinking violet. Tonight I'd played a part for Roe, sensing his awkwardness. I wasn't his therapist, but I understood some of how he felt.

"Freya, wait up."

I turned around, knowing that the voice wasn't Gully's.

Rowan was hot footing it behind me, trying to catch up without running.

"I'm trying to not act like a stalker here."

"If you were a stalker, you'd be a damn site less noisy." Something scuttled in the nearby bush.

The sun was setting, the sky a palette of oranges, reds and night blues.

"I wanted to check you were okay – you just disappeared -
"

I shook my head. "Amelie or Ruby sent you, didn't they?" Because I did not share Gully's theory that Roe didn't dislike me. I didn't think he hated me – that was a little extreme – but I definitely received the keep away vibes. "I'm okay. You

didn't need to leave your family." He'd finally caught me up. "Unless I was a good excuse." I eyeballed him, daring him to admit to this.

"Claire and Killian have taken the girls back to the lighthouse already. They left just after you did. And no one sent me after you."

I almost believed him. "Not even Gully?"

He fell quiet, not saying anything until I'd unlocked the front door and disabled the alarm.

"I get you like Gully – he's a good guy even if he can be a dick sometimes, but - "

I started to laugh. "I'm not interested in your brother. He's not my type." Even if gregarious, charismatic men were still my type, Gully just didn't ring that particular bell.

He didn't make my stomach flutter, or my heart ping that little bit faster.

No, it was his brother who did that.

"You're not seeing each other?" Rowan sounded shocked.

"No, we are not."

Rowan's forehead creased. "But where were you today?"

I wasn't lying to cover Gully's arse. "Gully came off his mountain bike and buckled the wheel. He needed a lift back so he called me."

Another frown. "Why didn't he call me or Finn?"

"Because he didn't want to worry you – and he probably didn't want you to take the mickey out of him, which you would've done." I'd worked out it was a combination of the two things, with a large dollop of pride.

"Oh. I thought - "

He didn't finish that sentence off.

I turned around, dropping my bag on the sofa, keys landing on top. I saw confusion and panic on his face. "You thought

we were getting some afternoon delight?” My lips curved. This was funny.

Roe pushed his fingers through his hair, mussing it up. “Yeah, well, Gully. Yeah.” He stopped that sentence, clearly knowing what was good for him. “So you’re not? Seeing each other?”

“Why would it matter if we were? You don’t dislike me enough to think I’d make your brother’s life a misery, do you?” I got that Roe and I were chalk and cheese, but I wasn’t a horrible person. Naïve, maybe, and possibly a touch gullible, but I didn’t think I was a horrible person.

“No.” He messed with his hair again. “No, it’s not that. Gully’s just not in the right place at the moment and he can be needy and I’d be worried – oh, fuck it.” His hand left his hair, both of his large palms landing gently on my shoulders.

I didn’t move, the warmth of his hands heating up my veins, my heart picking up speed like it did when he was near.

My chin tilted up and I looked into his eyes, the deep blue that reminded me of the sky just before night turned it to black. They were fierce with *something*, and that *something* made my pulse race, a feeling I’d forgotten I could have.

Rowan Holland was going to kiss me.

I put my hands on his chest, feeling the wall of solid muscle there, slid them up to his shoulders and around the back of his neck, my body pressing closer to his.

“You drive me mad. Your long skirts and those tops, and the way you smile at me when I’m being a grumpy fucker, and then I see you smiling at my brother all the fucking time and -”

I decided to shut him up, pushing his head down so his lips met mine. He tasted of beer and mint, his kiss starting soft and then deepening, asking for entry past my lips which was granted without a thought. His hands dropped from my shoulders to my waist, one covering my ass. I pressed my body closer to his, not thinking about the repercussions this kiss could have because it was the sort of sweet that could get

spicy in a heartbeat and it had been a long time since I'd had one of those.

Roe swung us round, sitting down on the sofa and pulling me onto his lap, his hands back on my waist, a thumb just below my breast. Between my legs pulsed, a feeling that had been absent for so long starting to bloom and ache, that delicious ache.

I'd always liked sex. I'd never needed to think myself in love with a man to enjoy sex, which some of my past partners had found difficult to get their heads around. I liked the physical connection, the sharing of pleasure and that pause in time, because nothing else mattered for those minutes or hours or even days when you could become lost in each other.

I wasn't going to think about Marc right now and how things were with him. The last time I'd kissed anyone had been with him, and it hadn't been like this.

I let my hands explore Rowan's skin, pulling his T-shirt up so they could creep under it, feeling his warm tight skin stretching across muscle that I really did approve of. His hands started their own journey, inching under my broderie anglaise white top, pulling the ribbon that held together the sides so it came loose.

I wasn't wearing a bra, which he was about to discover.

My nipples had hardened, wet warmth had gathered between my legs and all the reasons why this was a bad idea had flown out of my head before I'd allowed them to take residence there.

I knew the exact moment when Rowan realised I wasn't wearing a bra from the hitch in his breath, his hands cupping my tits, thumbs finding my hardened nipples. He pinched them with enough pressure to make my hips move against his.

Then he broke the kiss.

"This is a bad idea."

I shook my head. "I think it's a great idea. I'm not looking for a boyfriend, Roe, but I wouldn't turn down an orgasm or two. Unless you don't think you can provide them."

Fire ignited in his eyes and I found myself on my back on the sofa, my housemate looming over me with a wicked expression on his face.

“I may be a computer geek but I have more than one talent.”

“So prove it.”

He didn't kiss me again, instead pulling out the ribbon completely, then pulling apart the sides to my top, exposing my breasts.

For what felt like the longest time, he studied me, my breasts feeling heavy, nipples tingling. I itched to be touched, however much of a bad idea this might seem in the morning. I itched to be touched by my grumpy housemate who wasn't looking at me like I annoyed him anymore.

After what felt like days, he trailed a finger from my collar bone to my navel. I bucked my hips, that wasn't where I wanted his touch.

“Patience.”

“Is over-rated.” I pulled at his T-shirt. “Lose this.”

Surprisingly, he pulled it off over his head, leaving him bare-chested and beautiful. I looked my fill, not knowing if I'd get the pleasure of doing this again. He was tanned, dark hair scattered over his pecs, thicker at the top of his abs and slimming down into that happy trail that led into his jeans.

“You might as well as lose those too.” I pulled at the waistband to his jeans. “And whatever's underneath.”

This time he ignored me, sliding his hands down over my skirt along the outside of my legs, slowly, slowly, until his hands changed directions and pushed the material up to my waist.

Since leaving Marc, I'd worn pretty underwear, just for me. It'd taken a few weeks while I became used to the rocky lifeboat I'd sailed off in; I had to get my balance and cast away the blame I put on my own shoulders. But when that had gone I started to remember what it was like to be me.

Lacy underwear, silky panties and delicate bras were my choice, all picked because they made me feel good. I had a box of them I'd taken with me, grabbed from under the bed and shoved in my car boot, purchased when I'd had spare money in the past and barely worn.

Today I'd worn panties that were made of sheer lace, black where there was colour and fine.

I watched Rowan's face when he saw them, the frown finally gone, pure lust shining from his eyes.

"Fuck. I thought you were some delicate fairy." His hand cupped my sex through my underwear. "I'm beginning to think you're a siren instead."

"I'm still waiting for those orgasms, Rowan."

His grin was that of a sinner. "Say my name again."

"Rowan -"

He dipped his head, his mouth latching onto a nipple and sucking on it hard, the pull sending a jolt of magic to my centre, my muscles clenching in anticipation of being filled.

His hands pulled my underwear down and off, my skirt bunched at my waist. He busied himself with the other nipple, teasing it with his tongue, and played at the entrance to my centre with his finger.

My legs spread further apart, my hands toying with the button and zip on his jeans, running fingers up and down his erection that was still concealed behind the denim.

I pulled down the zipper, pressing my hand to his hard cock through his underwear that did nothing to conceal what was going on in there. Rowan's breath hitched, his finger finally pressing inside of me. I heard how wet I was, could catch the scent of my own arousal. Another finger entered me, and I didn't try to stop the moan.

I was going to come easily, and I didn't care if it inflated Rowan's ego. He had seriously talented fingers and I was going to appreciate the hell out of that talent.

“I want your cock.” I pulled the waistband of his underwear down a few centimetres, his dick almost pushing out of them anyway.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard you swear.” He pulled his fingers away, moving away from me momentarily to get rid of his jeans and underwear.

He was naked now, standing there in all his glory. His thighs were thick, muscular, the same dark hair covering them. His cock was thick and long, mouth-wateringly big and it was so, so ready.

His grin was cocky as if he knew exactly what my assessment of him was.

“I only swear when I’m turned on.” It was kind of true.

“How about when you come?”

“Fuck me and find out.” I just wanted him in me now. “Condom?” I knew I didn’t have any.

“You sure? I can get you off without fucking you.” He slid two fingers over my clit, circling them slowly.

Another few seconds of that and orgasm number one would be ticked off.

“Condom. It’ll be fun for both of us.”

“Okay. In a bit then.” He leaned down, subjecting my nipple to another round of teasing before trailing his lips and tongue over my skin, avoiding a mouthful of material, and then straight between my legs.

He went to town, dining as if he were a starving man. I managed to angle my head to watch him for a few seconds before I was lost to the sensations of the world stopping spinning while I was pulled into an orgasm that I was sure would register on the Richter Scale.

Rowan gave me that smug grin again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You might think you’ve won that battle. You’re wrong – I claim victory.” My words sounded sex-drunk.

“If I wasn’t so fucking desperate to get inside you, I’d have a bet on who could last the longest.”

I didn’t respond with words, just reaching out to cup his balls. They were tight, heavy.

“I don’t see the point in that game.” I felt him shudder.

“I do. You want me more than I want you.”

“I have more self-control than you.” I tightened my hold just a tad.

“Can we have this debate another time?” He balanced carefully, reaching down for his jeans.

Pocket, wallet, condom. I took the foil square from his hand and ripped it open. It had been a long time since I’d dressed a man. After I’d left Marc, I’d gotten myself tested every way through to Sunday. I was clean. I was on birth control. But I wasn’t ready to trust someone like that again. Not yet.

Rowan tensed as I rolled the condom down over his cock, his expression one of almost pain. I lingered, dragging out the act even though I was aching myself.

This didn’t have to change anything. Tomorrow we could go back to avoiding each other in the house, merely ships that passed in the night.

There was a pause when I’d finished, his cock hard and big and throbbing.

“We stop whenever you say,” Rowan said, his words quiet. Serious. “You don’t like something, tell me. You like something, tell me. I’m not the boss here.”

“I want you to pretend to be the boss then.” Words he could use against me, especially if he thought about it.

“You know that’s all it is – pretend?”

“On many levels.”

He covered me with his body, lining his cock up at my entrance. His mouth went to my neck, kissing, biting, hopefully not marking although part of me liked the idea.

“Legs around my waist.”

I obeyed him.

He pushed into me with one smooth motion, my body set alight. There was pressure, pleasure, a bite of pain as my body adjusted to take him.

I could take him.

I wasn't sure that the sofa would survive this though.

His pace was demanding, his body asking everything of mine. He knew his angles, knew how to move me under him so there was pressure in the best places, friction where it was craved, touch where it was needed.

I came on his cock without him asking it of me, the orgasm taking me by surprise.

“Fuck, I think your pussy's trying to strangle my cock.” He took my leg and raised it higher. “Let me get deeper, honey.”

I didn't want to argue, pretty happy right now with how bendy I was. The yoga was worth it, just for this experience.

The sofa disagreed. Every thrust Roe made had me moaning and the sofa groaning. I didn't care right now though, I was on my way to orgasm number three and wondering whether Rowan would let me make a cast of his penis for future use.

Two more loud groans from the sofa, a half scream from me and my body splintered into a gazillion pieces. Rowan slowed, his thrust deep, pausing while his head tipped back and he found his own release.

We were both panting when the sofa gave one last squalling keen and collapsed.

Our laughter filled the room. Rowan's still hard cock still buried deep inside me. My arms wrapped around him, his chest pressed onto mine, his weight mainly taken by his arms.

“I think we might owe Lionel a new sofa.” He quietly spoke the words into my ear, pressing a lingering kiss onto my

neck as punctuation.

“It was worth it.”

Neither of us made any attempt to move.

My body was already aching in all the right places. It was also asking for more.

“It’s still early.” I figured it was about ten o’clock. “Do you need to work?”

Rowan’s cock grew harder inside me. I clenched my muscles around him and felt his back muscles tense.

“Even if I did, I wouldn’t be choosing too.” He began to pull out of me. “My room or yours?”

So we were doing this. Again. Without the involvement of too much alcohol.

“Yours.” Then I could leave when I wanted. “How many condoms do you have?”

“Enough. For tonight.” He kept his hands on me after leaving my body. “For the record, I’m clean. I’m not asking to go bare, but if there’s a malfunction in the rubber, I’m not going to give you anything nasty. Hopefully just more orgasms.”

“Good to know. I’m without any nasties too. And I’m on birth control, so no babies in nine months. We keep the condoms though.”

He nodded. “Absolutely. And we never speak of this to anyone. What happens in the house - ”

“Stays in the house.” I nodded, sitting up, pleased with how Roe’s eyes kept heading to my boobs. “My eyes are up here.”

He nodded, only briefly looking up. “I know. And they’re as pretty as your tits. Fucking hell, Freya, your tits are fantastic.”

I couldn’t help the grin and then a laugh, which made them jiggle. My boobs weren’t huge, but they were a good handful

and perky. I could get away without wearing a bra, which I did frequently. They were also sensitive in a really good way.

I also suspected that they were Roe's kryptonite.

He stood up, cock fully hard, the used condom still there, glistening with my residue. He bent down and scooped me up, dipping his head to put his mouth on my breast, finding my nipple. Luckily, he looked back up before walking with me still in his arms, up the stairs and into his room, depositing me on his bed without ceremony.

The condom discarded, the curtains drawn, his duvet pulled back, and then we were ready for another round or two. There was more talking, more exploration of boundaries. We exchanged stories of the best sex we'd ever had – Rowan's was in the dark with an ex-girlfriend, sensory deprivation. Mine was when I'd been with a previous lover who'd understood how to make edging work, how to take a lover closer to orgasm and drag out that feeling. He'd done it with me tied up, which definitely added a glint to Rowan's eyes.

We didn't try either of those things in the next three hours. He continued his obsession with my breasts, toying with them gently then not so, learning that I liked a little roughness with my sweet.

I found that I could almost make him lose his sanity when I touched myself, teasing my own nipples and between my leg, sucking on his fingers. Then his hand clasp together like he was handcuffing himself to stop him from touching, and I showed him what it was like to be edged.

The sex was the cherry on top. Actually, it was me on top, facing the mirror on the wardrobe door, Rowan's hands on my hips as he bounced me up and down on his cock, watching my boobs move like I was his uncontrollable sex doll. The position gave us both the chance to watch, to see his hands play with my breasts, toy with my clit and then as I reached a peak, one palm very gently press on my neck as I leant back against him, passing over all the control.

As much as he'd irritate the very bones of me, I knew within those bones that Rowan Holland would never harm me

in a million years.

I woke in an unfamiliar bed. Morning light trickled in through the gap in the curtains. I was naked, a sheet wrapped around me along with a man whose arms were making sure I wasn't going anywhere.

Cognizance of what we'd done the night before didn't have to strike me, the aches from muscles that hadn't really been used for a while were enough to have the memories of last night and again while the sun was rising playing through my head like a pornographic movie.

I debated trying to pull away from Rowan, but couldn't find a reason why. Not yet. For now, I could just enjoy it, because this wasn't happening again.

He shifted in his sleep, his hand cupping one of my breasts. A sound came from him that reminded me of a growly bear, just a cuddly one.

His length hardened against my backside. My body started to wake up – muscle memory was definitely already in place.

There was a kiss pressed to my neck, a lingering one. The hand on my breast began to toy with my nipple, Rowan rolling his thumb and finger around it.

Our hips shifted. His cock lined up with my entrance.

I was wet already. Sleeping naked and the recollection of last night and sunrise had me primed. The head of his dick pressed into me. Slow, lazy morning sex couldn't be beaten.

Another kiss to my neck.

“I need to get a condom, honey.” His voice was gruff with sleep.

I bit back the words to tell him that he didn't.

“Okay.” I pushed my hips a little closer into him.

Rowan groaned. “You're making this harder.”

“It’s already hard enough.” I heard his drawer open, his body partially leaving mine as he stretched over. There was the crinkle of a packet and then he was back in the same position.

I lifted my top leg to give him more space. His hand ran over my breast and then between my legs to my clit, rubbing circles over it.

I gasped as he pushed into me, the position tight, the lack of movement that it allowed making it feel lazy and intimate.

Neither of us made any effort to prolong the onset of either of our orgasms. We knew what each other liked already; Roe knew what angles to use, I knew that a few clenches would send him over the edge. We got there quicker than before, which was convenient, given that someone was trying to wake the dead with banging on our front door.

“Fuck.” He sat up and checked his phone. “Balls.”

“What’s the matter.” I leaned up, pushing the sheet out of the way. The knocking was definitely a sign. Without it, I knew I’d have laid in his bed for longer, maybe had a tea in there. We’d have talked.

Things would’ve gotten awkward.

“You’re about to meet my mother.” He shook his head. “She’s at the door now with my Aunt Marie.”

“Okay.” I smiled as his eyes found my boobs. “What’s the plan? You, me and the whole house smells of sex.”

His grin was part of the reason why it smelt that way. “I’ll phone her and ask her to come back in half an hour. I’ll tell her to go in the garden.”

“Cool. I’m looking forward to seeing how this conversation goes. I’ve heard a lot about your mum.” I had, from both Gully and Ruby.

He dialled her number, keeping loudspeaker on.

“Rowan James Holland, get your arse down here now and let me in.”

She did not sound pleased.

“Sorry, Ma, I’m just about to close something up on the computer. I’ll be half an hour.”

“Is that why you’ve not been answering your phone? You have almost all your family here – stop bloody working for a few days and come and be sociable.”

I stifled a laugh. Mama Holland definitely didn’t need to know I was present.

“As soon as I’ve done this, I’m staying offline for a week.”

I frowned at him. “Really?” I mouthed.

He nodded. Nodded again.

“You have thirty minutes, Rowan. After that, I’ll be breaking in!”

Roe



Was it possible to be ghosted by your housemate without her actually disappearing?

That was how it felt.

Since we'd slept together, Freya had kept a distance that wasn't physical but she may've been on the other side of the planet. There was no acknowledgement of the orgasms we'd shared or that she knew what I looked like naked.

Had it not been as good as I thought?

Had she faked it?

I didn't think that was the case, and I didn't think I was stupid enough to not be able to tell if something was real or not, but looking at how easily she'd slipped back into pre-sex mode made me question everything.

And I couldn't ask anyone a damn thing about it.

"Your mother's asked for another massage before she goes home. Do you think she actually likes them or is she just being kind?" Freya stirred a pan on the stove, one that smelled of lime and something floral.

She was soap making today, an activity that'd started about six-thirty this morning. Thankfully, the smells weren't the same as her tinctures; these were all fruity or floral so it hadn't been unpleasant to wake up to.

They had taken over the whole kitchen though.

“Have you ever used an outside kitchen to make these?” I peered into a pan, feeling Freya’s glare on my skin.

“Is that a hint?”

“No. These smell okay. I’m just thinking of you know, going forward.” I’d poked the bear without meaning to. This was not good.

“Roe, I have no idea what I’m doing with my life, or at least the where I’m going to live part, so I haven’t thought about anything other than one kitchen that’s used for everything. I did check with you last night whether I’d be in the way for you making yourself breakfast.” She sounded irritated.

“I’m meeting some of the cousins at Gully’s for pancakes. Why don’t you come with me?” The week had been filled with meet ups, which my twin was in seventh heaven with. I’d been to more than I’d thought I would, and spent yesterday on a fishing boat, trying to stop Max and Seph from feeding each other to the fishes. They’d both made it back to shore safely, which neither of their wives had looked especially grateful for.

“I need to do this. I have one more batch to make and set and I’m done. Back to your mother – the massage. Is she just being kind?” She started to mix more ingredients.

“No, she really likes massages. Don’t second guess yourself. I’m not leaving for the lighthouse for another hour – are you sure you won’t be done by then?” I watched her check the pan.

She sighed. “I feel like I’m crashing all your family stuff.”

“You’re not. There’s that many of them, they never notice having one extra.” I picked up a bottle and smelled the contents. My eyes started to water.

Freya whipped the bottle from my hand. “That’s concentrate – too strong. No, I need to get the packaging ready for the soaps when they’ve set. I’ve got clients all day tomorrow, so I won’t have any other chance. I’ll be out of your way tomorrow all day, by the way.”

I froze, stuffed my hands in my pockets. Sought words that wouldn't make anything worse.

“You don't need to get out of my way, Freya.”

Her shoulders relaxed. I saw her swallow. “Thanks, but I know this isn't your jam.”

“No, it's soap. I can eat jam. Can you make jam?” I was definitely making it worse.

Freya smiled softly. “Roe, just because we slept together doesn't make things any different. We agreed that.”

“I know.” More words needed. I wondered if I could install a programme in myself so the right words could be fed to me when at crisis point. “You were okay with everything that happened the other night?”

She nodded and smiled, a bigger smile this time. “The other night was great. Orgasm filled. Seriously, Roe, that night couldn't have been any better.”

“My mam could've not banged on the door so early.”

She laughed and shrugged. “I don't think my vagina could've taken any more, so the interruption was probably for the best. I think your Aunt Marie knew something had happened though. She made a comment about how flushed my cheeks were and suggested I'd had a *very* good night's sleep.”

“Sounds like Aunt Marie.” I watched Freya pour the liquid soap into a series of moulds, ladling it carefully. “I'm surprised Mam didn't say something too. I know we showered but - ”

“It seemed obvious. But no one's said anything, so that's okay.” She smiled, looking far more relaxed than I felt. “It was a really good one off and at least we managed a few hours without bickering.”

“Yeah. It definitely worked for that.” I felt really fucking awkward now. “I'll head over to the lighthouse now then, if you definitely don't want me to wait and you come with. Clover'll be there.” I knew Clover and Freya were getting along well, which was both great and freaky at the same time.

“I’m seeing Clover later for dinner. We’re having a picnic in the forest. I think she’s definitely over her crush on Gully now.” Freya studied a mould. “That’s cracked. Can you just pass me the yellow mould next to you?”

I passed it over. “I don’t think she was ever serious about Gully.”

“She was. But it really was just a crush. She found it weird though that she never crushed on you the same, even though you’re identical.”

I shook my head. “We’re not identical. I have a bigger dick.” I picked an apple up from the fruit bowl and bit into it.

Freya doubled over with laughter, which ended up in her spluttering and almost knocking the pan off the hob.

“You can say that!” She managed to spit the words out. “Because I’ll never know to be able to compare.”

I took that as a win.

Claire and Killian had spread out of the lighthouse onto the little beach next to it as the tide was out and the weather was warm and still. The only signs of a storm were related to the usual banter between my cousins, mainly Max and Seph, and as they were away from work and *the fucking photocopier* as it was known, there wasn’t much in the way of cross words.

“Where’s your housemate?” Ava, the youngest of the Callaghan sibs, and the one closest to me in age, sat down on the deckchair next to me.

We’d already eaten, so now the adults were fuelling with coffee and trying to ignore their sugared-up children – and there were a lot of them. Including Fleur and Thane’s twins, I’d counted twenty, although I could’ve counted some twice. Sitting still wasn’t a skill they’d mastered yet.

“At home, or she was when I left. She’s making soaps this morning.” I looked out to sea, keeping an eye on Seph and his daughter Rose, who were body boarding in the water.

“Her soaps are lovely. Amelie’s using them in the guestrooms at the Inn.” Ava stretched her legs out and smiled. “I’ve suggested to Eli we move here.”

“What did he say?” Ava’s husband Eli was a partner in the Callaghan Green law firm. Ava was an interior designer.

“It was a no, only it took him about three hundred words of an explanation to say it. ‘I like my job and I don’t want to change it’ would’ve sufficed.” She turned around and studied me uncomfortably. “Did we upset Freya? I thought she might’ve been here today.”

“I think she was worried about crashing family stuff. I did tell her that she wouldn’t be – and she was up to the eyeballs in making soaps.” I could’ve added an extra layer to that explanation that Freya was avoiding me, but that would’ve opened the floor up to questions.

The Callaghans were a nosy bunch.

“That’s a shame. We really like her. How come she’s on the island?” Ava looked over to where Eli and their baby were, playing on the sand. “Stupid question really. Why wouldn’t you want to be here. Only it’s a big thing, moving here when you don’t know anyone well. What’s her story?”

“It’s hers to tell. She’s doing okay though. Her business is growing and she enjoys what she does.” I doubted Freya would be bothered about me telling Ava about Marc, and Ava would sympathise. I knew Ava had a few ex boyfriends who hadn’t been the best in the past – I remembered Max and Jackson paying one a visit once and issuing a few threats that made them sound more like members of a motorcycle club instead of lawyers.

That’d pissed Ava off big style, as like she said, she could fight her own battles.

“How are you getting along as housemates? Gully said you were irritating each other. You didn’t like all her witchy stuff.”

Ava was definitely fishing now.

“I’ve gotten used to it. We’re okay now.” Eight words. Ava probably heard eight hundred. She’d read eight hundred into

what I'd just said as well.

“Mum said that she thought something was going on between you.”

And she cast the line. It was fishing time.

“Aunt Marie always thinks something's going on. Then she talks to my mam about it and between them they've issued wedding invitations and booked the band.”

“This is true.” Ava leaned forward. “Eli, just check I've put suntan lotion on him,” she shouted.

Eli responded with a thumbs up.

“There's nothing going on with me and Freya. I'm hoping that I'll move out in another six months.” I'd had an update finally on the house I'd put an offer in. Probate was finally about to go through, which meant the sale could follow. The house was ramshackled, pretty much down to its bare bones, but they were good bones.

It'd had been owned by an elderly lady, who'd moved in after she got married. She'd refused to move out until she'd accidentally set the place on fire, forgetting she'd left the deep fat fryer on one night. After that, she'd moved into a care home but she'd refused to sign over power of attorney to any of her children. She'd died fifteen years after that fire, having never returned to the house. After her death, it had been put on the market, but then infighting had broken out between her three kids and that had delayed the sale.

I could, if I wanted, buy a caravan and live on site where the renovations and building work were done, but I could cope with Freya's potions and tinctures for a while longer.

At least I thought I could.

“You were cute together the other night. You acted like a couple.” Ava smiled at me. “I miss those days when Eli and I first got together. All the anticipation and newness. It's so nice.”

“You could always finish with him and find someone else to have that with.” It was a suggestion I knew would go down

like a tornado on the Fourth of July.

Ava laughed. “Some days. Some days I think how nice it was when the only person I needed to tidy up after was myself, and I didn’t need to think about anyone else. But then Eli cooks me dinner or brings me up a cup of coffee before I get up and just small things like that and I decide I’ll keep him for a bit longer.” She dug her heels in the sand. “But seriously, are you not interested in Freya?”

That wasn’t the right question to ask today.

“We’re housemates. She’s friends with Gully. It’d be weird if we were involved.”

“Yes!” She lifted a fist in victory. “You do like her!” There was a whoop.

I considered stealing Rose’s bodyboard and sailing out to sea.

“I didn’t say that.” I had to get the balance of denial right here. “We’re housemates. We have to get along – most of the time.”

“She’s really pretty. And nice. And kind. I don’t see what there isn’t to like.” She was trying on her caring elder cousin role.

It wasn’t going to work.

“She’s all of that. But we’re housemates.”

“So you’d be fine with Gully asking her out on a date?”

“Gully isn’t interested in her like that. And Freya’s not interested in Gully like that either.”

“But you’ve talked about it.” Ava’s expression turned conniving. “Tell me the truth, baby cousin.” She jabbed her finger in my arm. “I’ll do an interiors consult free of charge when you get your house sorted.”

“I can do my own interiors.”

“Liar. It’ll end up being Aunt Bernie who does it for you because you won’t have a clue.”

She had a point.

I also kind of wanted to talk about what had happened.

I frowned. “You cannot say anything to anyone apart from Eli.” I wouldn’t ask Ava not to tell him, but I also knew Eli was a vault.

He and Ava had kept their relationship secret for months when they’d first started seeing each other.

“I won’t.” She looked at me curiously. “You’ve surprised me, because I was only teasing, kind of. You did look cute together the other night. Do you like her?”

“No. Yes. No – kind of. She’s annoying and impractical and doesn’t even know how to come up with a decent password for her laptop - ”

“Which you bought her. I heard about that.”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t much.”

“It was to her. Anyway, what fuck up have you mastered?”

“You sounded just like Claire then.” I frowned at her. “You might want to get that checked out.”

“Sometimes my sister is the answer. Have you slept with her?”

I opened my mouth and closed it a few times. “Once. Well, one night. More than once that night.”

“Okay. Have you been an arse with her since then?”

“No.” I stared at the sea wondering whether it would give me some answers. “She’s ghosted me.”

“As in she’s moved out or hiding in her room?”

“No.” I shook my head. “We drink tea together. We talk. She keeps a clear distance from me.” I felt like shit. “We finally spoke about what happened today. She said she had a good time, nothing was faked.” I cast a quick glance at Ava.

To be fair, it was Ava who’d told me and Gully about the birds and the bees when we were seven, and sent us various articles so we didn’t disgrace our gender. She’d been the

person I would call when I had a relationship issue, and I think Gully did the same.

“She doesn’t strike me as a person who’d fake it. But for her it was a one-night stand. That’s cool, isn’t it? That’s what you want. Done and dusted. Move on now. Nothing to see here.” She studied me again. “Or was once not enough.”

I itched inside my own skin. “I don’t want a relationship at the moment. I’m not a relationship person.”

“You sound like Maxwell.” She looked over at her eldest brother who was paddling in the sea with his daughter Lucy, his wife Victoria standing nearby with their baby strapped to her front. “He lied about that too.”

“I said at the moment. I didn’t say I never wanted one.” Max had been absolutely adamant that he wouldn’t ever be involved seriously with anyone. Then he’d met Vic and that was another story.

“True. Have you ever had a relationship?” Ava squinted at me. “I don’t remember you ever really having a girlfriend.”

“I’ve had short ones – relationships, and short girlfriends too. But nothing serious enough to introduce anyone. Three or four months and they’ve just kind of ended.” Usually because I was too busy, or we weren’t close enough to see each other regularly enough and neither of us was invested enough to make an effort.

“So what scares you about Freya?”

“Nothing scares me about Freya.”

“Bullshit.” Ava shook her head. “You don’t know what to do, do you? Gully was like this once, do you remember? That girl he was seeing in Manchester who he went on three dates with and then she told him she just wanted to be friends?”

I had a vague recollection of that. “That was years ago. You remember that?”

“It’s a female superpower. We remember everything.” She tapped her head and smiled knowingly. “Ask Eli.”

“I’ll pass. I might open old wounds.” I shook my head at her. “You’re evil.”

“I’m trying to help you. What do you want from this with Freya?” She folded her arms.

“I want things to not be awkward.”

“Is she making things awkward?”

“No. She’s being normal.”

Ava frowned. “Then what’s the problem? Are you being normal?”

“I’m not normal full stop, but that’s not what we’re discussing here. I’m trying to be normal.” Which was true. “I just don’t know what normal is now we’ve, you know - ”

“Screwed.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, if you don’t want any more than that one night and she doesn’t want any more either, I don’t see what the problem is, unless you do want more and you’re not admitting it to yourself. I thought you found her irritating – or do you find her irritating because you like her?” Ava delivered the crucial blow.

“I’m not thirteen anymore.” Not in total number of years anyway.

“So you want more and she doesn’t. Or your ego’s broken because she doesn’t want more.” She laughed and it was definitely at me. “Rowan, what do you want?”

I looked around for some reason and what I saw made me want to punch my brother. Gully was walking along the path down to the beach with Freya next to him. She was wearing a long dress that floated around curves I remembered far too well. Gully’s arm was around her shoulders and they were both laughing.

“I want to put my fist in Gully’s face.”

The fact Ava didn’t laugh at that told me exactly how I looked right now.

“You’ve said she’s not interested in him. She’s slept with you. I mean, I haven’t spent loads of time with her, but I don’t think she’s the type of person to mess people about.” Ava was watching them too. “They’re just friends, Roe. You can tell.”

“There are times when I hate being an identical twin. This is one.” I wished we didn’t look so alike.

I was the quieter, less sociable twin, but I could and had been mistaken for Gully many times. Girls would flock to us because of how we looked, and even more so to him because of his author status. I knew that some women had been interested in me because I looked like Gully; they wanted to pretend I was him.

Freya was friends with him. She didn’t care about his books or his fame and Gully needed friends like that, especially after Ivy’s death. He also didn’t know that, yeah, I liked Freya.

Like liked her.

“You should decide what you want, Roe. If you want to be more than housemates, then you need a plan. What do you want to do? Because she’s what I’d describe as a wife material and there are enough single men on this island to get in there quick.” Ava patted my shoulder and stood up. “But one piece of advice – tell your brother you like her.”

I groaned. “I can’t. He’ll suddenly decide he’s become a matchmaker and make things really fucking awkward.”

“Then tell your other brother who has far more tact and he can mention something to Gully so you don’t look like you’re going to murder him.” She stretched out. “I know you, and you’re going to stew on this and make everyone’s life a misery because we’re all going to be worried about why you’re in a funk.”

“But what if she doesn’t want anything more with me?” I looked at Ava. “She said it was just one night. And she’s just come out of a shitty relationship.”

Ava shrugged. “Give her time. Be her friend. Get to know her and let her get to know you. That’s what happened with me

and Eli.”

I stood up as well, realising that Gully was on his way over to me and he looked concerned.

“Speak to your brother.” Ava patted my arm and headed off to where Eli was, making sandcastles on the beach and surrounded by kids. To be fair to him, he looked like he was taking it all in his stride.

Gully was without Freya, which I was kind of glad about. She was talking to Clover and Amelie, who were with Jackson and Vanessa, cooing over their youngest.

“What’s the matter?” He was wearing exactly the same colour pants and a *Blossoms* T-shirt just like I was. This twin thing was weird.

“How did you persuade Freya to come here with you?” I didn’t like the tone to my words. It was definitely cranky.

Gully took a step back. “You have a problem with her being here?”

I shook my head. “No. I asked her loads to come and she kept making excuses.” I looked over to where she was and I could see she was smiling and laughing, like I expected.

“She said she thought you were just being polite by asking.” Gully relaxed his arms, taking his hands out of his pockets. “I promise you, I’m not going to ask her out. I like her as a friend, Roe, but not as anything else as much as I might’ve wound you up about it.”

I nodded, feeling a little better. “We slept together. Saturday night.”

He shrugged. “It happens. I’m not surprised.”

I didn’t respond. To be fair to Gully, he’d called it a while ago.

“Any sign of a repeat?”

“No. We’re getting on okay but she’s keeping me at arm’s length,” I said, watching as Freya made her way over to us.

Puffin Bay was one of those places that people took photos of and claimed they were a genius at capturing good looking places. In truth, you didn't need to be a good photographer to take a decent picture of Puffin Bay – it spoke for itself.

Right now, with the sun out and the sand strewn with pebbles and shells, the rocks forming pools teeming with crabs and molluscs, it was postcard perfect.

Freya looked like she'd been painted on it. Her hair, wild and curly like always, was lifted by the light breeze, her dress blowing with it. Since moving to the bay, she'd caught some colour, her paleness had gone as had the shadows under her eyes.

“Want me to leave you to it?” Gully suddenly developed tact.

“Actually, no. I don't think she's interested in a repeat, so don't try to force it.”

“Okay.” He didn't say any more, mainly because Freya was there.

She was looking at me, embarrassment on her pretty face.

“Sorry. I should've said yes to coming with you. I got the soaps done and Gully turned up and, yeah, I'm here.” She glanced from him to me. “Hope you don't mind?”

“Not at all. Ava was asking why you weren't here.” A piece of hair blew across her face and I itched to move it out of the way. I remembered how her hair had felt in my hand, the sound of her breath when she came, how she felt under me, around me.

She smiled, but it wasn't full of sunshine. “I'll go and find her. She wanted some soaps to take back to London.”

I watched her go, her hair lit up with the sunlight.

“You're a fucking idiot,” my delightful brother told me.

“Why?”

He shook his head. “Because you don't communicate. Or you don't communicate well.”

“You’re not doing a great job of that yourself right now.” I glared at him. “I don’t get what I’ve done wrong.”

“I think she likes you but she doesn’t think you like her. Like that. You know what I mean.”

“So speaks the award winning novelist.”

He grinned. “I’ve been nominated for another award. Found out today but I can’t say anything for another couple of weeks.”

“Doesn’t mean you’ll win it.” He probably would.

Gully shrugged. “My agent phoned me about something else too.” He looked more smug than usual, come to think of it.

“Go on. What now?”

“The DI Bower series has been picked up for TV. Not just optioned – picked up, with a provisional date of a year in September.”

He had reason to look smug.

“That’s amazing. Do you get any say in the script and casting?” I pulled him into a side hug because however blasé Gully would be about things like this, his ego could be a tad fragile sometimes.

“Some in the story archs. None in the casting. There’ll be a shit ton of publicity to do with it.” He slapped my back in return for the half hug. “Go and speak to her. Show her the caves or something. She’d like that.”

I frowned. “Who made you the relationship guru all of a sudden?”

He was quiet for a second. “Ivy. Ivy did. She was single – or she had short relationships that always ended well – but she was always the one her friends in London went to for relationship advice. She even wrote three romance books – I found the manuscripts on her laptop a few months ago.”

“Fuck. I didn’t know that.”

He shrugged. "I sent them to her sister to see what she wants to do with them."

"Her sister was one of the pallbearers at her funeral, right?" I just about felt I could bring that up without Gully needing to spend the next five hours playing guitar at Lovers Heights.

"Right. Anyway, I tried to learn a few things from them. Freya keeps looking over. Go and speak to her." He pushed me away. We were done with the Ivy talk.

"I feel like we're back in primary school again."

Gully laughed. "Yeah, you had no game then either."

I walked over to Freya. "Want to see the caves?"

She smiled and looked confused. "Caves?"

"The caves, don't get too excited, they're not full of treasure or crystals or anything." I played it down. "I'll show you them, if you like."

"You're with your family - "

"They're here all week. And my mam's about to get here and I'm planning to avoid her, so you'll be doing me a favour." This was true.

"Why are you avoiding her?"

"Long story about a deposit in her bank account."

Her smile was different this time. "You're good at doing that, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Sometimes. Want to see the caves?"

Her laugh made me smile. "You're really bigging them up now. Are you sure I won't be disappointed?"

"You'll definitely be disappointed. But you should see them anyway." Because my twin said you'll like them – I heard myself say that in my head and realised how lame it sounded.

“Am I okay in these?” She lifted a leg. She was wearing lightweight sandals which weren’t ideal.

“The tide’s been out for a while, so it should be okay. I can always pick you up.” I remembered the last time I’d done that, and judging by the flush on her face, so did she.

We walked along the sand until it turned into a rocky outcrop that led onto what looked like a marsh.

“Roe, stop a second.” Freya reached out and grabbed my arm.

“What’s up?” I took hold back, worried that she was about to fall or something.

“This is samphire.” She looked at the succulent plant that grew all around here. “I didn’t know samphire grew here.”

“Really? Finn uses this as a botanical in one of the gins. This place is known as Samphire Shore. Amelie sometimes picks it and adds it to some of the meals at the Inn.” I didn’t know why I was surprised that she didn’t know about it. She’d hardly lived here for ages.

“I can make soap from samphire.” Her eyes were lit up when she looked at me. “It’s a really traditional method, but it’s something I can try. I haven’t done it before.”

I knew I was grinning like an idiot. “We’ll come back tomorrow and harvest some.”

“Oh, it’s okay – I can come back on my own. I don’t want to waste your time.” She pulled her arm away from me.

I looked at my feet.

The silence was only broken by the interminable call of seagulls. They didn’t stop.

“You – you want to come with me, don’t you?” She sounded uncertain.

If there was one thing I was better at than my twin it was telling the truth. “Yes. I do.”

Freya



“Yes. I do.”

I blinked a couple of times, as if I needed to clear my vision. The same scene was still there though; rocks running into marshland, the sea gently rushing against the rocks and the samphire, growing wild with the late summer sky overhead.

But it wasn't that which caught my attention. It was Rowan and the unsure expression that he wore while he looked at me.

“You actually wanted me here this morning, didn't you?” I'd thought he was still being polite rather than sincere.

“Yes.”

One word.

“Why?”

Sometimes one word was all that was needed.

Roe shrugged. “I didn't like the idea of you at home when we were all out. I didn't want you to avoid me after the other night.”

“I've not been - ” I stopped. That would be a lie and I didn't lie. Not usually. “I liked what we did the other night. Really liked it.”

His grin bloomed. “So did I.”

“You made me feel good and you made me feel good about myself.” More truth.

“Good. But you don’t want a repeat?”

It was definitely a question; not a statement.

Did I want a repeat? The throbbing between my legs told me I did. My brain was still telling me this was a bad idea, but there were times when I chose not to listen to anything intelligent, such as when I decided on this career path instead of becoming a teacher.

“I’d like a repeat. But I don’t want a relationship. I don’t think we’d be compatible in a relationship. You prefer computers to people.” Which I could understand when you had people like my ex walking this planet. “And I need to sort my life out still. Do you want a repeat?”

I kind of knew this was a stupid question. If he didn’t, he’d be avoiding me.

“Yes.” It was definite. “But I don’t want things to be awkward. I don’t want anything serious at the moment and I don’t think we’d work.”

“So what are the terms of our agreement?” I bent down and plucked a piece of sapphire from the earth.

“We keep it to ourselves. If the others know, they’ll have us walking down an aisle and then I’ll be made the villain when it doesn’t end the way they want it.”

That was honest. I could deal with that. More than deal.

“I don’t need complications either. So just sex. No sleepovers like the last time. I’ll go back to my room or you go back to yours. If you meet someone else, what we’re doing stops. No complications.” I didn’t need to be the other woman or have another woman involved.

“And it ends when I move out.” He gave a nod. “No awkwardness. Be honest with me and I will with you. Not like this week when I’ve felt like you ghosted me even when you were standing there.”

If I was being completely honest, I’d have told him more about how I’d felt this week, but the sky was too beautiful right now for such truths.

“Deal. Now are you going to show me these caves?” Because I wanted to say more, things that were on the tip of my tongue but not really ready to fall off. Not yet.

“If you’re finished admiring the samphire.”

“I’m good to go.”

We walked without saying anything, taking a trodden in path down towards the sea and away from the marshy area. I saw oystercatchers and guillemots and no other people, not even the sound of cars or footsteps other than our own.

“How do you know about these caves?” I was curious.

“Finn and the everlasting search for botanicals.” He said it while shaking his head. “He had a near miss here a few weeks ago when he was rooting in the caves for something – fuck knows what – and the tide came in. He ended up trapped for a few hours.”

“That could’ve ended badly.” I shuddered – being trapped where there was a rising water was one of my nightmares.

“It could, but it didn’t. He phoned me and I managed to get one of Thane’s boats round and rescued him. Ruby doesn’t know. She’d return him to the cave at high tide if she did.”

We were at the entrance to the caves, the tide out enough for me to not worry about meeting a watery ending, not today anyway. I peered inside before entering.

“There aren’t any monsters inside.”

“There are always monsters inside; it’s just a case of knowing which ones to deal with first and how.” Green moss clung to the sides of the cave higher up; there were signs of erosion where the tide came in, shelves carved out where it was dryer.

I walked further in, surprised at how big it was, an arch at the back leading to another cave that was barely lit.

“Hang on.” Rowan flicked the torch on his phone, lighting the grotto up enough for me to be able to see.

It glistened. I was no scientist, so I had no idea why it glistened or whether it was just because of the weak light from Roe's phone.

"It's like a fairy cave."

"Maybe it is," Rowan said, surprising me. "There are probably stories about it – I haven't found any yet. Ask Mavis the next time you see her – she knows about every crevasse round here."

I followed him out of the smaller cave and back through the larger one onto the pebbled beach, rough sand in between the stones.

He stood still, looking out to sea.

I wanted to know what he was thinking. A lot of the time, I could guess what was going through someone's mind, if it was a client especially or someone I didn't know too well.

I had no idea what Rowan was thinking.

"Want to go back home?"

That was what he was thinking.

"Yes." Parts of me did. It hadn't helped that he'd spent a good portion of this week walking around the house either shirtless or wearing very tight T-shirts, even appearing once in the kitchen with just underwear on and I was sure he was doing it on purpose.

If he was, it had worked.

The stages of grief are worked through at the end of a relationship. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. When I walked away from Marc – from everything – I went through all of those twice. The first time was when I knew the relationship had to be over. I bargained with myself that I could go back and it would be different, and had I not found out that he was screwing his friend's ex-wife, I might've caved at that point.

I went through all the stages again when I realised how he'd manipulated me, how he'd stolen from me, defrauded me. That time each stage had taken longer.

I was still accepting what had happened and it was going to take time. I still saw that me in my rear view, broken and crushed, self-esteem on the floor being used as a doormat. I thought of myself as undesirable, only good to be taken advantage of and redundant as a worthy partner. A lot of that was psychotherapist speak; a lot of the acceptance had come about because I went through therapy. Was still going through therapy.

I didn't regret having sex with Rowan. I loved knowing the affect I'd had on him, how he'd been spellbound with my boobs, how he'd made me feel and hadn't treated me like spun glass. I wanted that again. I wanted that part of me back.

Sex with Marc had been okay. More than okay at first as it generally was in new relationships and he'd made an effort, a big one as I realised afterwards. Then it'd become about him and not about us. He wanted everything on his terms and did it in a way that I felt in the wrong when I refused. If I was in the mood for a few orgasms, he'd withhold everything, find a reason to go out or he'd be too tired, and then when he was in the mood and I wasn't, I was punishing him and making everything his fault.

You don't always see what's right in front of you.

I could see it now.

I was also wondering if we went back home now, I'd be doing this because it was just on Rowan's terms.

He stood still, looking at me with far too much knowing. "Freya, we can just have one of your teas."

Could he read my mind?

"Let's head back."

We didn't say much to each other on the walk back, taking a short cut as we didn't need to head back towards Thane's lighthouse. There had been a group message chat set up, so we knew that everyone had moved from the beach and onto other activities for the day. Roe wasn't expected back.

When the front door closed behind us and Roe locked it, I'd made my mind up. I turned to watch him, the tight-fitting T-shirt, cargo pants that hung too perfectly off his ass, deep blue eyes that I'd already drowned in.

"You can't look at me like that and not expect me to get ideas." There was a hitch to his voice that finally gave me an insight into what he'd been thinking.

Clue: it didn't involve clothes.

I didn't respond, just walked at pace towards him, down the short hallway and then, because I could, I climbed him like a tree.

Days of pretending he wasn't hotter than an erupting volcano and that one night was all that had been needed to scratch that itch exploded in our first kiss, my mouth fighting for dominance with his.

It was a tangle of lips, hands and clothes being discarded. My dress ended up on the floor, wrapped around Rowan's trainers, my sandals somewhere to be found at a later date.

His hands were on my breasts, his lips on my neck, travelling down to my nipples where he then worshipped, teasing them into tight peaks that became electrified. I pushed his pants down with my heels, his T-shirt already gone. I pressed my hand against his erection through his underwear, feeling its thickness and heard him groan.

"Freya, I need to get us upstairs where I've got condoms." He sucked on a nipple as he ended the sentence, then stood back up, picking me up with him so my legs wrapped round his waist.

"If this is going to happen more frequently, then maybe we need to stash condoms around the house." It sounded like a responsible idea. I was just surprised I could get the words out coherently.

"I'm up for that." He ran us up the stairs, making me feel like I weighed as much as air. "I'm up for getting inside you right now and fucking you blind more." I was deposited on his

bed with a bounce, Rowan caging me in, taking hold of my wrists and pinning them onto the bed.

His eyes were flames.

“No touching me.” He moved down my body, licking one nipple then the other, making me squirm with the featherlight feeling.

I bucked my hips, knowing what was coming. Hoping I’d be coming sooner rather than later.

“Keep your hands there. Understood?”

“Yes.” I didn’t dare move them, because I didn’t want to.

He pulled my underwear off, throwing it onto the floor, then bent his head down, finding my clit with his tongue, enough pressure to have me clutching the sheets. Without any other touch, the sensation of his tongue on my clit felt magnified, the whole of time standing still as I came quickly, almost embarrassingly so.

He looked up, smug again, smiling like he’d won another battle.

“Turn over.”

I did as he’d asked, going onto all fours.

A wrapper crinkled. There was a pause in the room, only broken when I felt the head of his cock at my entrance.

One of his hands gripped my hair, not too hard, just enough pressure to elicit a moan. His other hand cupped a breast, teasing the nipple, and he pressed his cock slowly inside of me.

“You’re so fucking tight, honey. Fuck.”

I didn’t know if I was or I wasn’t. But I did know that he was so damn big, especially like this.

Daytime sex always felt like I was stealing something, that I was using time when I should’ve been pursuing less selfish pleasures, but that only made it all the more decadent.

A rush of pleasure shot up by body as Rowan withdrew and then pushed himself back inside me harder this time.

This would be no sweet, slow fuck. This was about need and demand and achieving the goal we set out for.

His hand moved from my breast to my shoulder. I was effectively pinned by him, impaled on his cock, completely at his mercy. A kiss was pressed to my head, an unworded check-in, before he upped his pace. Carnal, base, fucking. That was what this was, and it was providing total release.

I came wet and messy, not even needing to touch myself to get to that end point. My body was fluid and malleable, pliant in Roe's hands.

His body tensed before he came, the change as he approached that sweet point noticeable. I wished I could see him, that I could watch the expression on his face and I missed seeing that dominant look in his eye as he came.

Two more forceful thrusts and I felt his cock pulse, knowing his was filling the barrier between us, wishing it wasn't there.

We both started to relax, the tension leaving his body, some sense of presence coming to mine. The bed dipped as we crashed onto it, Rowan's grip on me relaxing, but his arms scooping round me.

"It isn't night time. This isn't a sleepover. We never said we couldn't cuddle afterwards." His words were orgasm drunk.

I relaxed into him, pulling the sheet over us. "I never would've had you down for a cuddler."

His laugh was short. "I've just been inside you and fucked your brains out. Why wouldn't I cuddle you afterwards?"

I thought of my ex and how the afterwards was usually rushed and a tick box exercise, when he could be bothered. I'd blamed myself for being needy, told myself that we didn't need the afterwards because we were in a secure, committed relationship.

I told myself a lot of lies.

“I guess it doesn’t hurt.” I felt my breath even out, the endorphins fully kicking around my system now. “When’s the last time you had a girlfriend?”

“About a year ago. It wasn’t serious – we were just seeing each other for a few months.” He nuzzled my hair.

“How many months?” I was curious.

“Two. Maybe a bit less. It was while I was working in San Fran.” His hand rested on my stomach, holding me close to him.

“When’s the last time you had sex? Before me, I mean.” I felt stupid for asking so many questions. “You don’t need to answer if you don’t want. I’m sorry this sounds like an inquisition.”

“About three months ago. It was a one-night stand with a colleague.” Another kiss was pressed to my neck. “What about you?”

“Seven months ago. I left Marc that night.” Best decision I’d ever made. Or one of the top three at least.

“I broke your drought.” He chuckled and I could hear the smugness.

“If you want to put it that way, then yes.” I turned around in his arms, reaching a hand up to rub his half-beard. “You’re very convenient.”

“I’m going to say thank you and take that as a compliment.”

Something vibrated, probably a phone.

Neither of us moved.

“Yours or mine? I think it’s probably yours.”

His leg swung over mine. “My money would be on Finn asking if I want to go out sailing.”

“Do you?”

“No. Not today. I’m going out with my mam and Gulliver later and that’ll take up what energy you’ve left me with.” He was showing no sign of moving.

“Don’t blame me. You could’ve made it a lot easier and let me do the work.” I pushed him onto his back, the relaxed parts of me waking back up again.

I wanted to have some fun and Rowan’s body was on its way to becoming my playground. Plus, he wasn’t grumpy when he had access to my boobs. I’d noticed how his expression changed when he saw them.

I liked how it changed. I liked how he felt.

“I need to lose the condom. Maybe shower.” He sat up, me straddling him. “Why don’t we see if that shower can fit both of us?”

My hands rested on his shoulders, his went to my waist. His eyes dropped to my breasts.

“You can experiment with which shower gel washes my boobs the best.”

His eyes lit up like a child’s in a toy shop. “That sounds like a really good idea. And all in the name of science.”

“Really.” I moved off him. “Let me pee first. I’ll turn the shower on.”

He nodded, shifting off the bed himself. “You have two minutes before my experiment starts.”

I laughed, heading out of his bedroom towards the shared bathroom.

The bathroom was the best room in the house and the one Lionel had actually bothered to update to a decent standard. It would’ve been another bedroom at one point, when the bathroom was outside, so it was a decent size with a large walk in shower, including a little built in seat that was really handy when you were shaving your legs.

I used the toilet and checked my reflection, hearing Roe's feet crossing the floorboards on the landing outside. I felt no pressure to look a certain way or to try to hide things like I peed and had periods, which I'd done with Marc, feeling the need to be more than I was.

More than I was?

I knew I was enough. I knew his ideal of what any woman should be was unrealistic.

The door opened. Rowan stood there in all his naked glory, his cock half hard. He put a tissue which I guessed contained the used condom in the bathroom bin and put a strip of condoms next to the shower.

“No assumptions. But just in case. I'm happy to spend the next three hours washing your tits.” His eyes fixed on them. “I think they've made every one of my teenage fantasies come true.”

I felt my nipples hardening under his gaze. I'd never had my body so well appreciated. I knew I didn't look like a model – because I wasn't a model. I could eat what I chose, and I did, although I had lost weight when I'd left Marc.

I stood up taller, fully exposed. I didn't let embarrassment or shyness get in the way. Roe had already been close up and personal with almost every inch of my skin, so there was no point in hiding now.

He walked in the shower and turned it on, something I'd forgotten to do. His cock was fully hard now.

I watched as he stood under the main shower head even though the water wouldn't be warm quite yet. He soaped himself down, watching me all the while. Pecs, abs, arms, cock.

I felt like an invited voyeur, getting my own personal peep show.

The glass screen started to steam up, impairing my view. This was a good time to get in there.

I opened the door, Rowan offering his hand as if to pull me in deeper to the steamy cave. The water was hot now, pretty much my usual temperature which surprised me – Marc had said my water was hot enough to boil someone.

I'd never been kissed in a shower before with the water sluicing over us. My hands explored the ridges and plains of Rowan's skin, the suds and water alleviating the friction, making it feel different.

He did as he'd planned, lathering up his hands and letting them feast on my breasts, rubbing tiny circles that made me tip my chin back and wonder exactly what my body was capable of. I fisted his cock like I'd seen him do, getting a kick out of the hiss of breath he couldn't hold in.

We didn't speak, not with words anyway. There were kisses, mouths on skin, fingers and hands over flesh that not everyone got to see. My back against the tiled shower wall, he cupped me between my legs, the heel of his hand pushed against my pubic bone, his middle finger toying at my entrance.

A sound came out of me that was half wild when he pushed the digit in, fingering me with an expertise I didn't want to question. He had talented fingers – or maybe a lot of practice; either way, it didn't matter. Whatever he was doing right now was working, two of his fingers pumping inside me, his mouth on my breast.

I came without a fight, my muscles clenching his fingers, the sound of the water almost drowning out my calls.

He shifted his fingers when my orgasm subsided, but his focus on my breasts remained. I ran my hand up and down his cock, knowing what I wanted to do, wondering if he wanted the same.

I hadn't had a man in my mouth for over a year, Marc never being particularly interested and I hadn't been too enthused to go there on his either. This felt different right now. Rowan had never shied away from anything so far.

I put a finger under his chin and brought his head up to mine. Softly, I placed a kiss on his lips, then sank to my knees onto the shower floor, my fist around the base of his cock.

He didn't tell me no. He didn't hurry to get inside of me either. Instead, he shifted so he could sit down on that handy tiled seat.

“Your knees. It's hard.”

I laughed, the tip of his cock just in my mouth. He was salty and fresh, a mixture of him and the shower gel.

“This is hard. And you won't take long.” I put him back in my mouth, sucking and licking. Rowan bent forward, stretching out a hand to cup my breast.

“It's not a race,” he said, and I was reminded of the competition we'd discussed the first time.

I didn't speak though. My mouth was too full.

The fingers of his other hand threaded through my hair, gripping just hard enough to still feel good, and I went to town, taking him deep towards the back of my throat, but never enough to feel more uncomfortable than I wanted to be. Roe used my hair to guide a pace, slower then quicker, his legs tensing and I knew he was close.

“Stop, honey. I want to come on those pretty tits.”

He pulled my head away, using my hair. Then he let go, putting his hand over mine which was on his cock, directing slow, long strokes, his legs spread wide and his eyes roaming from my face to my breasts.

“Your tits are going to look so fucking good with my cum painted on them.”

I watched as he came over them, the shower head pointing just enough away from us to not wash the streaks away,

His breath came hard as he finished, his cock still hard, his eyes still blazing.

“Let's get you cleaned up again, honey.”

I didn't argue.

Two hours later and I was still in some sort of post-orgasmic bliss when the doorbell rang. Rowan had headed out after making sure I was thoroughly cleaned and satisfied once more. My body felt gloriously relaxed and content, better than a glass of wine in the bath, which was as good as it got towards the end of the Marc thing, which was what I was now going to describe it as.

Clover was on the other side of the door, dressed in exercise gear and her dark hair tied up in a messy bun.

I'd spent a couple of evenings with her, talking about books and wine and countries we both wanted to visit. She'd bemoaned the lack of boyfriend prospects on the island and the fact she was too quirky for most men to take an interest in, and I'd lightly whinged about my ex, without giving too many horrific details, because no one needed that negativity passing on.

She was someone I could be friends with, and I wanted friends here. I knew I'd be staying on the island, my little business was doing well and I liked being based in Puffin Bay. Roman's hotel was due to open soon, and I'd already been tapped up to lead the yoga sessions from there, and be part of the team organising well-being retreats, which would be another string to my bow.

"Hey, I'm sorry for stopping by without messaging you first, but I think I've sprained my ankle." She leaned against the door and pointed to her right ankle which already looked like it was swelling up. Along with that was a nasty graze to her leg and cuts to her hands.

"Come in – let's get it looked at." I opened the door wide and offered an arm to support her.

She took it, which surprised me as she was fiercely independent, hobbling into the front room with the repaired sofa that we definitely needed to replace.

"Is Roe out?" She made it through to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Raise your leg onto this.” I moved another chair round to face her. “He’s gone out with his mum and Gully for something to eat. I think he was preparing for an inquisition.”

Clover winced, looking at her leg. “She’ll grill them on why Finn’s married and they’re both single and showing no sign of having a girlfriend. Last time this happened, Finn had to put them in wheelbarrows to get them home from the Inn because neither of them could stand. I’ve really messed my leg up, haven’t I?”

I pulled my first aid kit off the top of the fridge. “You have. What did you do?”

She shook her head, clearly in some discomfort. “I was walking along the coastal path and decided to take a detour to get a photo of Thane’s lighthouse – it was a bit rocky and weirdly slippery and I just lost my footing and went over. Yours was the closest house, sorry.”

“Well, that’s a way to make a girl feel special.” I got out a dry cloth and applied a mixture I’d made myself, a natural antiseptic that wasn’t full of chemicals but would clean up the graze just as well, if not better. “Brace yourself.”

She winced and jumped at the sting. I ignored it and carried on. It would hurt a damn site more if any of those cuts got infected.

“No, you should feel special. I’m glad you live closest. You have all those witchy things in your cabinet.” She waved rather pathetically around the kitchen at nothing in particular. “I’m glad the hot twin isn’t here though. It’ll be embarrassing enough when he sees me like this.”

I froze. “Hot twin?”

“Yeah, Rowan. Your housemate.”

“You had a thing for Gully, not Rowan, I thought.” I was confused. Very confused. And worried.

Clover shrugged, wiggling her toes. Her ankle was really swollen now. “I had a thing for Gully, but that was just a crush. And infatuation – you know, the whole celebrity author thing. But I really like Roe, I mean, he’s hot and he’s got this

whole dark and mysterious thing going. He's also amazing with kids – did you see him with Claire's girls yesterday?"

There were hearts dancing in her eyes.

I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me. Clover and I were a similar age and I really felt we'd clicked. If she found out that I'd been getting very friendly with Rowan's appendage, any friendship could be ruined before the building blocks were secure.

Having thought that, I wasn't sure that Clover was Rowan's type.

"I did see him with Claire's girls. He was exhausted afterwards. I think he's offered to help Killian build the girls-only boarding school." Keep it neutral, Freya.

"Bad idea. I went to an all-girls boarding school. It wasn't great. Bitchy as hell at times and all those hormones – urgh. There was no way to talk to boys either, not unless we escaped to the boys' school, and none of us had a clue how to talk to the opposite sex. That's why I'm hopeless at dating now." She winced while I applied a tincture onto the cuts. "What's in that?"

"Herbs. It'll soothe it, help get rid of any nasty bacteria and promote healing. I'll give you a tub to take home with you. Let's have a look at that ankle." I was no nurse, but I was competent with first aid. I also knew my limitations, and there was a question whether Clover had broken something rather than sprained it.

"I think you need to get this X-rayed." The swelling was concerning. I applied more ice packs and elevated it further. "It might be broken."

She shook her head. "I've broken an ankle before, and it felt a lot worse than this. The worst thing right now are those cuts. And my pride."

"Okay. Your call. Let's ice it for an hour and then I'll strap it up and give you a lift home, or to Amelie's." Clover often hung out there in an evening, not because she drank a lot – she didn't – but for company. She was that girl who sat at the bar

with a book and a cup of coffee. No one minded in Puffin Bay though.

“Thank you. I can go now if you’ve got things to do. I don’t want to put you out.”

I shook my head. “All I had planned was to make some teas.”

That, and work out exactly what was happening in my life.

Roe



“To me; to me!”

I passed the ball to Gully and ran higher up the pitch, making sure I didn't pass the last line of the opposition's defence and make myself offside. A defender slid in, knocking Gully off his feet and causing the ref to blow his whistle for a foul.

“You okay?” I helped my brother to his feet, knowing that he was okay and was good natured enough to not want to go after the defender and make him eat dirt.

We'd leave that to Finn instead.

“Why can't he leave it?” Gully shook his head at our elder and allegedly more responsible sibling. “We've got the free kick, their goalie's too hungover to see the ball and the defender's apologised.”

“Because it's the only time he can be a dick. Oi, Finn, back off and get on with the game!” I yelled across to him, wondering if I was going to have to go over there.

Fortunately, Thane got there before the ref had enough and carded Finn, pulling him away and then giving him a mouthful. That was enough to calm Finn down and let us get on with setting up the free kick, which Gully would take.

He got enough swing on it for it to sail into the top corner, and even if the goalie had been on form, he wouldn't have had a chance to even get a finger on it.

We celebrated, Gully doing his usual routine of pretending he played in the Premier League and pulling his shirt over his head and pretending to be a robot. Two minutes later, the final whistle was blown and we'd won two-nil. A decent start for the first game of the season.

“Good game.” Thane wrapped his arm around my head and pulled it down to his sweaty shoulder. Somehow, he'd ended up being captain and it wasn't because he'd nominated himself. The other option had been Gully and well, he wasn't captain material.

“Good work sorting Finn out.” I looked around and saw Finn heading into the changing rooms.

Thane laughed, smacking my back with more force than he probably realised. “Would rather he wasn't suspended this early in the season. You coming to ours for dinner?”

I'd forgotten about that. It was Clover's birthday and Fleur was putting on a bit of a party for her. I'd said I'd go, mainly because everyone else was going and it was the last time I'd see them all for a few days. I was about to start a new project for Killian, one that I knew I'd end up engrossed in and would probably only come out of the stupor it'd induce to exercise, eat and enjoy a few orgasms with my still irritating housemate.

“I am. For a couple of hours anyway.”

Thane nodded. “Good. I don't want to be outnumbered by women.” He jogged onto the changing rooms, leaving me to walk with Gully, who'd finally stopped talking to the referee.

“Your ankle okay?” I looked down at his leg. He'd taken off his shin pad already and seemed to be walking with a bit of a limp.

“I'll ice it. It'll just be bruised so in a better state than Clover.” He wiped the sweat off his forehead and brushed his hair with his hand. “Why do I sweat so much more than you?”

“I got the better set of genes. How is Clover? She hasn't been round for – oh, let me think – thirty-six hours.” Since she'd sprained her ankle, she'd spent at least a couple of hours

each evening with Freya which had been mildly annoying because I'd rather have spent that time with Freya on our own.

I also had a feeling Clover had transferred her crush on Gully to me.

"I haven't seen her. I'm no longer the dish du jour." Gully shot me a grin. "I think she likes you."

"I need to speak to her then."

Gully frowned. "Clover's good. She's geeky, she gets computers. She's fun and she's pretty. You're not seeing any – what's happened with Freya?" He stopped walking. "I knew you weren't telling me something."

Which would be weird if I wasn't used to it. I'd only seen Gully a couple of times in the last four days and both times we'd been with some of the cousins. He'd sometimes known something was going on with me even when we hadn't seen each other for weeks and weren't even in the same country.

"We're having a mutually beneficial orgasmic secret relationship."

"Fuck buddies." He nodded. "Kudos. How's that going for you?"

"Great, actually."

"Tell me more. What happened when you showed her the caves?"

I paused. "You can't say anything. Freya and I agreed not to tell anyone anything."

"Secret relationship. I like it." He practically beamed.

"Secret relationship?" My brother definitely had been abducted by aliens at some point. Or maybe our mam hadn't been pregnant with twins and he was the result of some sort of cloning experiment that'd gone wrong when I was in hospital.

"It's a romance trope. Like a sub-genre. Anyway, what's the deal?"

"No strings. No seeing anyone else and if either of us meets someone, we call it off. No telling. No sleepovers. It

really is just sex.” And if those words sounded hollow to me, they’d sound really fucking empty to Gulliver.

“Bullshit.”

There we had it.

“You’ve had some relationships of convenience - ”

“Is that another trope?”

“Damn right. But this isn’t one of those.” He shook his head rapidly enough for a blob of sweat to fly off him and land on me.

I wiped it off. We may possibly have shared a room, but I had no desire to share any bodily fluids.

“It’s nothing more than that. Freya’s come out of that shitty relationship and doesn’t want anything complicated. And she’s irritating. There’s no way it could be anything more than physical.” This was what I was telling myself.

“That’s what you’re telling yourself.” Gully repeated my thought. “You don’t find her irritating, she’s just thrown you off-kilter, so you’re doing what you usually do and keeping people distant.”

“I don’t do that.”

“You do.”

I didn’t argue. One, that was possibly right. Two, arguments with Gully could last days.

“She doesn’t want anything. And she’s hot.”

“I know she’s hot – that doesn’t mean I want to be in your shoes though, so don’t get your jock strap in a twist. I also know she’s going to break your heart.”

“Now you are being dramatic. Nothing’s getting broken. Either she’ll meet someone, or I’ll move out and it’ll just come to an end.” We carried on walking to the changing rooms.

“Really? You don’t mind thinking about her being with someone else?”

I knew the look on my face was going to answer that one.

“I thought as much. Look, play it how you see fit, but don’t lie to yourself.”

I followed him into the changing rooms, the rest of the team in various states of washed, sweaty and, in Thane’s case, dressed and ready to go.

“I need to get back to give Fleur a lift with setting up for Clover’s party.” He nodded at us. “See you there in a bit.”

“Will do.” I looked at Gully. “Are you going?”

Gully nodded. “Yep. I’m looking forward to people-watching while I’m there.”

I shook my head. “Do not say anything.”

He just laughed.

It was strange being with a group of people and not having any of the cousins there. It felt too quiet and empty, although I imagined the local wildlife were relieved, and probably the local people too.

Amelie, Clover, Freya and Ruby were already there, as well as Romy, who lived in Puffin Bay with her daughter, Heidi, and Alys who was Amelie’s bar manager. Thane was there too, as well as Finn, Roman, Caleb and others from the lifeboat crew. Clover was wearing a sash with Birthday Girl written on it, as well as a crown which she looked like she was far too used to wearing already.

But it wasn’t Clover that stole my attention.

Freya was in the kitchen, a glass of prosecco in her hand, wearing the same white top I’d undone the first time we’d slept together. I could guess that she had nothing on underneath it, and that thought was going to be enough to distract me for the rest of the day.

She caught me looking at her and gave me a smile that told me she could tell what I was thinking about.

I tried to look away but couldn’t.

Gully was right. I was screwed.

“Roe! You came!” Clover ran at me, carrying a slab of cake. “I thought you might be too busy making millions on an app.”

“I don’t make millions on apps, Clo. Happy birthday.” I returned the hug she enveloped me in, noticing Freya over her shoulder. “I think Gully has your present.”

“He had. He’s given it to me already – thank you so much. It was really thoughtful.” She stepped back and gave me another big smile.

I needed to make sure she hadn’t transferred her crush over to me from Gully. That would make things awkward.

“I actually don’t know what we got you. It was Gully who organised it.” Step one. It was true though. Clover was an editor for a small publishing company and was obsessed with books. Given books were Gully’s bread and butter, he’d decided he was better sorting out a gift.

She laughed, thankfully. “I figured it was Gully. You got me a signed first edition of one of my favourite books, and a signed series by another favourite author. Your twin did good.”

“I’m glad. Happy birthday.” I looked over at Freya again, who was now talking to Cassian, the head teacher at the local primary school.

I remembered what Gully had asked about how I’d feel if Freya met someone else.

That answer was easy.

I’d fucking hate it.

I knew that someone else wasn’t going to be Cassian - he and Romy had been seeing each other for a few months. But if it wasn’t him, at some point it’d be someone else.

I headed over to her, trying not to look at that white top.

“How’s it going?” I looked from her to Cassian and back again. “Cassian, you missed the game today.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sorry about that. We stayed in Chester last night so I couldn’t get back in time. I’ll be at training on

Wednesday though.”

I shrugged. “We won. Finn only nearly got sent off once.”

“Standard.” He looked around and saw Romy. “Be back in a minute. Romy needs me to help bring Clover’s present in.”

It left me alone with Freya.

“Hey.” I wanted to put my arm around her.

“Hey.” Her smile was sunshine and warmth. “How was football?”

“Good. We won. Gully scored a really good goal.” When in doubt, talk about your more charismatic twin.

“He said you were man of the match. Well played, roomie.” There was that smile again.

I raised my brows. “Roomie?”

“Yes, *roomie*.”

Even I could translate that. *Stop acting weird.*

“Frey, does Clover have a thing for me? I’m not being big-headed by asking, but - ” I needed to check that Gully wasn’t stirring things.

“She does. I feel a little awkward and shitty.”

I shook my head. “Don’t. She’s a great friend, but that’s it, and I think it’s just because I look like Gully. Just so you know.” I did think that. Clover was quirky and sometimes dramatic, and sometimes a little lost too.

She nodded. “Okay. But all the more reason for you to act like I’m still annoying you.”

“Gotcha.” That was probably going to take some acting on my part. “You could’ve not worn that white top though.”

She looked down, as if she wasn’t actually sure what she was wearing. “Oh. I didn’t think.” What was in her eyes had changed when she looked up, there was a darkness there that told me she remembered what had happened when she last wore that top.

I felt my body stiffen. Everywhere.

“Maybe I should go home and - ”

“Rowan Holland, I’ve been having some computer problems.” Mavis, Queen of Puffin Bay, walked into the kitchen, completely oblivious to the fact that Freya was mid-sentence. “When are you free to come round and service my computer.”

Gully had followed her in and was now trying to stop himself from doubling over, probably because of the word *service*.

“What exactly’s wrong with it? We said last time that you might need a new one.” Her current one had at least four previous owners and she’d bought it off her grandson, who was rarely mentioned. I figured she’d paid over the odds for it, but if she admitted that, she’d have to admit that her grandson was a waste of space.

“Every time I click on a website, this *thing* pops up. I can’t get on anything.” She gestured like the computer was definitely out to get her and should be declared public enemy number one.

Which it probably was. I suspected malware.

“Have you been using it to do any online banking or buying online?” I was hoping the answer would still be no. Mavis liked to shop local. She also liked to go into one of the bigger towns to do her banking and was one of the few people I knew who received a bank statement through the post every two weeks.

“No, I have not. Brynn keeps asking me to send him an allowance and use that online malarky to do it, but I’m perfectly happy with how I do things already.” She put both her hands on her hips and looked cross at me. Her Welsh accent was even stronger when she was annoyed.

Brynn was on the top of my shit list to do some digging on. I suspected he was trying to fleece his grandmother for every penny she had, and was under the impression that one, she was stupid – Mavis wasn’t stupid. Batshit crazy, totally. Stupid, no. And two, she didn’t have anyone looking out for

her. She did – a fucking village of us, even if sometimes she was the busybody you really didn't need.

“New computer time, Mavis. Don't use that one again. I'll come round tomorrow and make sure none of your personal information is on there. What's your budget for a new computer?” She actually wasn't bad on the internet, and manned the town's website and information board with ease. Which was an issue if someone had hacked into the computer and mined the passwords. “In fact, I'll come round after this.”

“Thank you, Rowan, that's much appreciated. My budget is under four figures, but I would like something a little smoother. You know what I need it for.”

I did. Internet stalking of everyone and everything, video calling her sister in Norfolk and the website maintenance. Plus all her social. Mavis liked her socials. “I'll get something in for you by Tuesday at the latest. Can you manage till then?”

“I have my tablet. I can do what I need to do on that. Let me have the bill and I'll see that it's transferred at the bank. Not via anything electronic.”

I never wanted to tell her that electronically was exactly how the bank did it anyway. She'd probably start storing her life savings under the mattress at that point.

Might be safer. I knew what was out there.

“No problems, Mavis.” I looked at Finn as he and Ruby joined the congregation in the kitchen. “We have a gathering.”

Finn nodded, taking a beer out of the fridge. “A Puffin Bay one. Amelie's had to head back to the inn though. There's been a fight between a couple of families from one of the campsites and Amelie's needed.”

“Does she need any back up?” Amelie was feisty enough to sort out most problems. A fight between tourists was nothing she hadn't sorted out before, usually at least three or four times each summer season.

Finn shrugged. “Roman's with her, and Caleb's headed over there now.”

“I’ll go there too.” I looked over at Gully. “Coming?”

He nodded, putting down the can of cola he’d been sipping at. “Race you.”

Which was a mistake. We were both fit, playing football, running around the island, occasionally climbing Yr Wyddfa, and working out with the weights Finn had installed in one of the outhouses on his site. But competitiveness meant we didn’t always know where to stop, which also meant we turned up at the Puffin Inn on the winded side.

“Fuck.” Gully blew the word out as soon as he stood still.

I knew exactly what he meant. Two windows were out, there was a fight going on outside the main door, which looked like it’d been jolted off its hinges. Broken glass was everywhere, the sound of it crunching under the feet of both the six or seven people who were fighting and the spectators, a few of whom were being held back.

“What are we doing?” Gully looked to me. “Check on Amelie first and Roman – neither of them are out here.”

“Where are the police?”

“Hopefully on their way.” Gully ran round the side, me following him, heading straight into the pub.

The inside was trashed, tables overturned, bottles smashed. Amelie sounded like she was on the phone to the police. Roman was shouting at two men who were getting angsty with him.

That was the first job.

I looked at Gully, who passed his phone to Amelie, probably for safekeeping. He nodded at me.

We headed straight in together to one of the men who looked like he had been involved in a weekend drinking session, and had probably put a bit too much of the white powder up his nose.

We grabbed an arm at the same time, using the element of surprise and sheer force to move him.

“Let’s get outside, mate. Some fresh air might help.” I braced myself for him starting to struggle, which he did, but this wasn’t mine and Gully’s first rodeo. It definitely wasn’t mine.

“Three. Two. One.” Gully counted down and then we used force again to push him as far away as possible.

He was drunk, rocky on his feet, and the direction we sent him in had a slight slope, which meant he was on his arse within seconds. People were spilling out what felt like everywhere. Sirens were becoming louder, the police getting closer. Someone was vomiting onto a patch of grass.

Another fight started, but didn’t last long.

Caleb had the hose pipe out and soaked the two men like they were a pair of scrapping cats.

We turned around and saw Roman marching out with the other guy, who was sporting a split lip.

“Get in, we’re locking up. Police are near.” Roman’s words were quick and loud.

Another glance at Gully and we followed Roman into the pub, Caleb following us then bolted the doors behind.

“What the fuck’s happened, Amelie?” Gully asked

He gave Caleb a smack on the back as a well done. The noise outside was still booming.

She shook her head. A few of the bar staff took seats at the bar. Roman poured himself a whisky.

“I don’t know. I had a call that it was kicking off, so we headed straight down. When we got here, it was carnage.” She turned on the coffee machine. “I mean, it’s three in the afternoon. They must’ve been drinking since breakfast.”

“Or they didn’t stop from last night.” One of Amelie’s staff leaned back against the bar. “Marianne’s got a cut cheek from

when a bottle was launched. Dean's going to have a black eye."

Amelie shook her head. "I am so sorry. This should not have happened."

Roman took hold of her in a hug. "It's a bar. Fights sometimes happen, just not usually on this scale. This is a one off."

She leaned into him a little. "It's what it does to your reputation. Not just to the pub, but the town. Something like this can damage the whole area." She was stopped by a knock at the door.

I headed to it. The noise outside was still ongoing, and there were more police sirens joining the cacophony.

"Police. Can we come in?"

I unbolted the heavy door, opening it to see two police officers standing there, both looking solemn.

"Come in." I locked the door behind them.

"PC Tassaker," Amelie approached him. "Thank you for getting here so quickly."

He nodded and looked around the pub. "They've done a number, haven't they?"

"Just a bit. I was at Clover's birthday party which was at Thane's house." She pointed to Rich. "Rich was shift manager."

Tassaker looked at Rich. "What happened to start it off?"

"A group of eight came in. Said they were camping on the fields near Ddin Caer. They were already drunk – in fact, one of them walked in here with a bottle of cider. I told them one drink only. They weren't happy about that." Rich paused while the noise erupted outside. "Another group of six came in. They seemed more sober. Two went to the bathroom which I thought was a bit suspicious – I think they've done a couple of lines of coke. They sat in here and were hyper but okay. They were on shots. Then about half an hour later another group of seven came in. That's when things went to shit. I don't know

who started it, but something was said and it just went boom. Bottles, glasses, windows – we and some of the regulars managed to get them outside but, yeah, you can see what happened first.” He gazed round the pub, looking devastated. “It’ll all be on camera. I’m sorry, Amelie. If I’d have known what they were like, I’d have refused to serve them.”

She shook her head. “No, you wouldn’t have known. This isn’t on you. What do you need from us, Tass?”

The copper was local and sometimes came in the Puffin Inn for a drink after work. “Statements. I’ll come back later to take them. That lot are being taken over to Bangor. Take photos before you clean up and make sure you save the CCTV footage. I think this lot are known – if I’m right, some of these are suspected of causing a disturbance at a pub in Holyhead a few weeks ago, but they used the opportunity to empty the tills as well and ransacked the liquor.”

There was another knock on the door. Tass answered it himself.

“Ready to go. We’ve arrested twelve so that’s our evening gone.” Another cop stood in the doorway. He looked over at Amelie. “They’re not local, so I can’t see anyone being back. We’ll get a patrol round every hour though.”

“Thank you.” She stood up straight. “We’ll be staying shut tonight and opening up tomorrow tea-time. Make sure you come by for food.”

“That’ll be nice. Right. Let’s roll.” The second cop headed off out, a load of yelling still audible.

Tass held up a hand to say goodbye and then left as well. Amelie locked the door.

“Shit, it’s Clover’s party.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I wish we’d had it here and closed the pub for the afternoon.”

Roman walked up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders. She didn’t push him away. In the last couple of years I’d seen Amelie learn to rely on people to support her more, including Roman, despite being the most independent person I’d ever known.

“Yeah, well, these things happen. I’m going to take photos of the damage, then we’ll have a party here – a clean-up one.” He kissed her head. “Someone needs to get some food on – we can eat when we’re done.”

“I’ll do that.” She spun round to see Roman. “You can organise the clean-up. I’ll come out and help as soon as food’s prepped.”

There was another bang at the door and a yell from a voice I recognised. Amelie opened it, a line of people piling in: Finn, Ruby, Freya, Thane, Clover, Cassian, Romy, Mavis, Roman’s granddad and his girlfriend – then the rest of the town who weren’t busy and were in the area.

“Mavis sent out the bat signal from her phone.” Thane called over to me and Gully. “I’ll give Reggie a call about the glass too. It’s a standard size so I bet he’s got some in stock.”

The clean-up party began. Thick gloves were produced to clear up the glass safely. The furniture was taken outside where it could be: tables, chairs, and stools were all taken onto the car park where Mavis and four others had a carpet cleaner they were using to rid the material of spilt beer and spirits.

Gully and I tackled the toilets, getting rid of the remainders of any Class A’s that were lingering about, making sure we were gloved up. Neither of us were shy about cleaning – our mam had made sure we both had PhD’s in it as soon as we were ten – although it wasn’t on Gully’s list of priorities to clean his own place.

Finn cross checked the inventory, listing all the bottles that had been broken. He mentioned that a couple of grand’s worth of liquor had been lost, although seven bottles were found around the side of the pub near the bins, which suggested someone would be back later.

Freya cleaned up the injuries first and then helped out with the general clear up job, including hosing down the benches outside and managing to soak Gully, then me, entirely on purpose. It was a warm day, so none of us minded and we were full of grime anyway.

By six o'clock, the place was back to normal, albeit a bit damp. The windows had been fixed, Tass had returned, collected the CCTV and taken statements, and food was being served.

"I can't believe we got all that done." Amelie stood in the middle of the main room, looking around. "It's cleaner now than it was before."

Fleur and Romy chose that moment to walk through the doors, Fleur with a pushchair containing her twins, and Romy pushing a trolley laden with food from Clover's party.

Clover had, of course, done the whole clean up in her crown and sash. Many photos of her had been taken, all posed with her holding cleaning utensils, sashaying around stools and hanging off doors once they were reattached properly, the boot she was using to stabilise her ankle decorated with tinsel for some reason. She was posting to social media too and the Inn had received a ton of calls already, with people asking how they could help or donate – Amelie diverted any donations to the animal sanctuary nearby.

"We have cake!" Fleur yelled loud enough to be heard over the din.

"And we have beer and wine." Amelie had started pouring pints and putting them on the bar. "Thank you to everyone."

We all grabbed a drink and held up our glasses to toast the clean-up. Food was out. Large trays of lasagne and fish pie, salad and chunky chips to go with it, as well as the party food that was now here, and cake. Fleur had made a huge cake for Clover, a tiny model of her on the top of it, sitting on top of a pile of books.

"I can't believe how this place looks now." Freya had ended up standing next to me. "I heard you and Gully carted a bloke out of here too."

I shrugged, shoving a forkful of lasagne into my mouth. I was starving, not having eaten properly since breakfast which had been a huge muffin stuffed full of bacon and egg. That was a football match, a run and an almost fight ago, so I

wasn't going to apologise for eating like a caveman in front of Fleur.

“Kind of. Roman was taking two on by himself.” I knew Roman had moves though, but still. The two dickheads had been wired. “This place looks almost better than before though.”

She nodded. “It does. I can't believe how many people came out to help.”

“Small town, honey. One of the reasons I live here.” I was definitely debating another plateful of lasagne.

“You've got a bruise coming up on your jaw.” She waited until I'd finished the final forkful, took the plate off me and ran her finger along the bottom of my jaw. “Is it sore?”

It was a bit. I hadn't really noticed it until now, but the bloke who me and Gully had gotten hold of had managed to get a couple of elbows in.

“I've got some arnica in. Let me put some on it.” She put the plate down on a nearby table and reached down for her bag.

“Did you have all that with you at Fleur's?” I knew she always had a few bits of first aid with her, but what she had with her now was like a paramedic's bag.

“No. I went home for it when I heard there were injuries. Plus you never know if someone's going to cut themselves when they're cleaning up glass, or Mavis is going to need reviving after seeing Albert with no shirt on.”

I didn't know how to feel about that.

“Really?”

“Oh yes. She had a funny turn and had to fan herself for a good few minutes. Albert lapped it up.” She started to put something wet on my face which I figured was to clean it. I had no idea how filthy I was, probably very.

A shower sounded good. I wondered if I could persuade Freya to join me.

She crouched down next to me, unscrewing the lid from a jar. “You okay with me doing this?”

“I’m okay with however you want to touch me, honey. You never have to ask.”

I expected to see at least a small smile. Instead she looked nervous.

“Clover’s watching us.” She smiled then and hurried up rubbing in the arnica, or whatever it was. “She’s not stupid, Roe.”

“All you’re doing is helping like you’ve done for other people. Don’t be paranoid.” I snuck a glance at Clover and she was watching us, her expression not one a birthday girl should be wearing. “Okay, I see what you mean.” I kept my voice low and tried to look serious and not flirty.

Freya finished up, not lingering next to me. I had a quick flashback of her on her knees in the shower, giving me one of the best blow jobs I’d ever experienced. Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about that.

Clover was still watching us. She was also talking with Romy and Fleur, but I could see her continuing to glance over to me and Freya.

“Okay. I need to make sure she knows I’m not interested.” I muttered the words to Freya when I turned around.

“It’s her birthday.”

“I know. But it’s wrong if she’s going to have her hopes up and I don’t want her thinking that you’re getting in the way. I know you get along well.”

Freya looked nervous. “I really want to make friends here and everyone loves Clover. If they think - ”

“They won’t. Clover’s had crushes on people she knows it isn’t going to work with. I don’t think she wants to date.”

“She wants to date. She’s just scared of getting hurt.” Freya still looked off. “Don’t say anything today, Roe. It hasn’t been the best of birthdays for her.”

I nodded. “If she says anything to me about a date or anything, I’ll let her down gently, but I’ll deny that there’s anything between us. Okay?”

Freya nodded and smiled, but that smile wasn’t the one I was used to.

I was swept away by Finn to help sort out the inventory in the fridge and restock for tomorrow. By the time I’d finished that sweet job, Freya had headed home.

Clover found me outside when I was taking out the glass recycling for a much happier Amelie.

“Is something going on with you and Freya?” There was no malice to her words.

I wanted to say yes, but that would get me in Freya’s bad books, which would mean there definitely wouldn’t be anything going on.

“We’re housemates who don’t argue that much anymore.” I dropped the last couple of bottles into the recycling bin.

“Oh. You seemed to be whispering together a lot. Like there was something going on.” She took the crown off her head. “And you look at each other a lot. More than friends usually do.”

I smiled and shook my head. “I’m probably making sure she’s not about to stab me in the back with something she’s sharpened.”

“Oh, okay. Are you seeing any one then?”

Shit. Why did she have to do this on her birthday.

“Kind of. Someone not from round here.” That wasn’t a lie. Freya wasn’t from round here.

“Oh. Oh, sorry. I didn’t know. I forget that you’re not always in Puffin Bay.” She looked at the floor rather than me. “I was going to ask if you wanted to go out on a date.”

I waited until she’d tilted her head back up to look at me.

“I don’t see you like that, Clo. You’re a good friend and I like hanging out with you. I want to carry on hanging out - me, you, Gully and the rest of us.” I managed to avoid using the word ‘but’.

“But not to date.” She did it for me.

“No. Not to date.” I felt like absolute shit. I wondered whether I should try to make her feel better, say something about there being someone out there for her.

I had the sense to keep my mouth shut.

She looked crestfallen. “I know I’m not ugly. I also know I’m really weird because I read books and edit books and prefer to be in a small town than a big city and I can be kooky. I know all that. I just don’t get why I’m always friend-zoned.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Roe. I just hoped I could have a shot at a relationship with you. With someone.”

“Clover, you will. Even my cousin Seph managed to find someone to put up with his cranky, dickhead ways and you’re so much more than him.”

“Georgia would disagree.” She mentioned Seph’s wife who had more patience than a hospital of nurses combined.

“Maybe. But you’ll meet someone. I know you will. Hell, even I might.”

“It isn’t serious with you and this person?” She looked hopeful for a second. “Not that I’m trying to muscle in.”

“It isn’t serious for her.” Because it wasn’t. I was part of her rehabilitation, I guessed.

“But it is for you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. She’s made it clear that it’s just sex. There’s no point in letting myself get involved if that’s how she feels.” That might be too late.

“Roe, you’re amazing. She obviously doesn’t know how lucky she is – maybe you just need to woo her. Make a fuss of her. Be romantic.” Clover’s face lit up.

I shook my head. I didn't think Freya would appreciate those gestures. "She's had a rough relationship. I think big gestures are what she had with that."

"Empty gestures. Make it more personal then. Cook for her. Fill her car up with fuel. Have coffee or cakes delivered to where she works – little things then that make a difference to her day." She laughed. "Look at me giving you relationship advice when I have no experience at all."

"No experience?" What was Clover confessing here?

"Absolutely none. But I read a lot. You learn things from books." She gave me another smile. "I'm sorry if I've made things awkward."

I shrugged. "I'm just glad we've cleared things up. Let's go in. I'll buy you a birthday drink."

"Thank you. I'll make it a cocktail."

I grinned. I had no doubt she would.

Roe



I bought Clover her cocktail and headed home, something in my gut not feeling right. Freya had slipped away quietly, there one minute and gone the next. I knew she didn't like to make a big deal about goodbyes, once saying that she felt like she was stealing attention from other people and making everything about her. I knew this was bullshit, but I wasn't her therapist.

Gully threw me a concerned glance and made a phone gesture, which basically meant to let him know what was going on. That could be arranged, mainly because if I didn't, he'd end up on my doorstep.

It was quiet when I got home. No TV on, which wasn't unusual, but the kitchen was empty too, and that was Freya's happy place. She liked the view from the window, looking straight down to the sea, and the fact that she had hot chocolate on demand from the weird jug thing that was her prized possession.

I headed upstairs, not hearing any signs of life.

The bathroom door was open, the light still on.

It was at that point my heart rate jumped to a level my watch recorded as being concerning.

The shower was splattered with red. Dark red water pooled near the drain, flecks of it against the shower pane.

Fuck.

“Freya! Freya! Where are - ” I pushed open the door to her bedroom and found her sitting on her bed, knees tucked into her chest, tears falling, and her hair now a bright red colour.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

She'd coloured her hair. Was she crying because she hated it? Or was she crying because of Clover? Did she feel guilty?

Could I be any more out of my depth?

I left my words in my mouth and went straight to her, toeing off my trainers and sitting on the bed, shifting so she was sitting between my legs.

Her hair was still damp, but not drenched. I didn't pass comment. I wrapped my arms around her waist instead, tucking my chin on her shoulder.

“I think you would look beautiful no matter what colour your hair is.”

I wasn't sure if that was the right thing to say because she cried a little harder.

“Clover's fine, by the way. She wasn't really interested in me, she just wants a relationship.” I kissed her shoulder. “I don't think she's had one before.”

Freya nodded. “I'm sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?”

“Everything.” She shook her head. “I know I'm being stupid, Roe, I get like this sometimes.” She leaned to the side and opened up the drawer to her bedside table, taking out a packet of tablets and putting them in my hand.

“Sertraline.” I read the black print. “That's for anxiety, isn't it?”

She nodded. “I've been taking it for years and it helps. I've tried not to take it, but then things get worse, so I've just accepted that this helps.”

“Just like I use a knee support when I run.” Because there was too much stigma associated with taking medicine that helped.

“Yeah, not quite.” She shook her head. “I get like this sometimes. Marc couldn’t cope with it, so I’d stay at a friend’s for a few days until I was back on an even keel.”

“Do you always colour your hair when this happens? Just so I know – the red in the shower was a bit of a concern.”

She managed a laugh, although it was filled with tears. “Not always. I don’t know why I did it.”

“It’ll look pretty. Like a sunset.” I lifted a damp curl. “You must’ve thought about it if you had the dye in.”

She nodded. “Marc was adamant I stayed blonde. I always wanted to try being a redhead.”

I ran my fingers through her curls. “It doesn’t matter anymore what Marc thought or wanted. He’s not in your life anymore.”

“And that is such a relief.”

I understood the tears now. These weren’t sad ones; these were relieved ones. Cleansing tears, which was how my mam used to put it.

“What else is bothering you?” I needed to ask. I was bothered that she was worried about Clover.

“Was she okay? Clover?”

I was right. Maybe I did know how to *people* okay sometimes.

“She was fine. I told her I was seeing someone casually, but she doesn’t think I meant you.”

“I feel bad for deceiving her.”

“So tell her.”

Freya shook her head, relaxing back against me now. “Clover is a gossip. She’ll tell everyone and there’s nothing to tell.”

I didn't say anything because I disagreed, but now was definitely not the time to get into that. "It's up to you, but she won't hate you. I'm just a Gully lookalike she could transfer her crush onto. I feel used."

That made Freya laugh. "Poor, poor Rowan. Feeling used because of how he looks." She snuck a look back at me.

I shifted us further back on the bed so I could lean against the headboard. "How about we go downstairs and you can instruct me on how to make one of your teas?"

She turned her head so her cheek was against my chest. "Thank you."

"What for? Offering to let you boss me about?"

"For not freaking out about my freak out." She wiped her eyes, but it was futile. The tears had done their damage.

"You're allowed a freak out. I had a freak out when I saw the red in the shower." My heart rate was only just slowing down.

"I'm sorry about that. I meant to clean up properly but I ended up crying instead." She half laughed and half sobbed again.

"I can clean the shower. I need to jump in it anyway after that clean up job. What a day." I lay a bit further down, feeling her weight against me and liking it very much. "I don't think you'll be the only one who feels rocky tonight."

"I wish I could've helped more."

"You helped plenty." I wanted to reason with her and explain how she had helped, but that would be telling her she thought wrong and I didn't think that was what she needed right now. She seemed fragile and tender, more so than ever before. "How often does this happen?"

"It depends. I've had a few moments like this since I walked out on Marc, but this is the first time here. Before that, it was every couple of months. A few years ago it wasn't even one a year. I've been like this since I was about thirteen – very

up and down. It must sound mad to you.” She burrowed a little further into my T-shirt.

“It doesn’t sound mad. Give me some credit.” I wasn’t letting her get away with that.

“Sorry.”

“I’m accepting your apology and moving on. What makes you feel better?” That was what I needed to know right now. We could talk more about this when she was in a better place.

“Crying does. I feel like I get it out of my system. Taking a walk outside – I think tomorrow I’ll walk along the beach at low tide, get up early when there aren’t a load of people around. Doing yoga. Being with someone – I feel better when I do something normal, like making something or making tea.”

“So all of that is doable. Why don’t I come with you for the walk?” Work could take a long pause.

“Don’t you have other things to do?”

“Yes, but they can wait.” I sat up, moving her up with me. “A long walk on the beach tomorrow sounds great actually. But first, I need to shower.”

“I need to as well. I know I’ll feel better if I shower – I only washed my hair before.” She lifted a hand to touch her now red curls.

“Save water. Let’s shower together. No funny business. I’m not trying to get inside you right now. Later maybe.” I gave her my most charming smile, the one Gully had learned from me. I also didn’t really want to leave her on her own.

“Kay.” She pulled herself off me and the bed, standing up before freezing. “I feel like I should ask what this is. What is going on between us, but I don’t want to right now. I just want to go along with it.”

“Then do that. We can talk about it another day.” Or not. I was good with not talking about it.

She was wearing an old T-shirt, too faded to see what the image on it had been, and a pair of shorts, also old. Both had stains on from the hair dye. Slowly she turned around and

pulled the T-shirt over her head, leaving her naked from the waist up, but I could only see her back.

“It feels weird being like this in front of you, even though you’ve seen it all before.” She slid the shorts off her long legs, leaving her in just a pair of cotton underwear, pretty with lace at the edges..

I stood up, pulling off my T-shirt that definitely needed washing, and losing my jeans. Freya turned around, her arms across her breasts, hiding them.

“It’s just different.” I felt my cock hardening. “I meant what I said, I’m not trying to get inside you right now, but my body’s not being well behaved.”

She looked at my underwear where it was becoming obvious I was turned on.

“I’m sorry.”

“What the hell are you sorry for? You can’t help having the best pair of tits I’ve ever seen.” That wicked grin came in useful sometimes. “Do not apologise for that. Ever.”

I followed her through to the bathroom, losing my underwear at the same time she lost hers, and watched her walk into the shower cubicle, a little more confident now. She turned the water on, standing away from the shower heads while it warmed up. I busied myself with getting a new bottle of shower gel and looking at the bruise that was forming on my jaw.

By the time I turned around, the glass was steaming up and some of the red dye had gone from tiles and the shower tray. I walked in, squirting shower gel on my hands and lathering up my chest and abs, onto my arms.

“Turn around, I’ll do your back.” Her light touch on my arm sent shivers over me. I shifted like she’d asked and then felt her hands on my skin, the pressure deep enough without being hard. Back, shoulders, my sides, she washed them all, wrapping her arms around to my front and lathering my chest and stomach, not flinching when she touched my cock that was hard and aroused, and being ignored by both of us.

“Let me do you.” I took her soap, one she made herself from local herbs and botanicals, and lathered my hands, starting with her back. I knew every curve and dip already, having memorised them when we were in bed or on the sofa or wherever else we’d let off steam together. Her head tipped back when I shampooed her head, careful not to get suds in her eyes.

I was done with tears for today.

Time ran away like water down the drain while we washed and rinsed off, no need to rush, no places to be. When I turned the shower off, I pulled one of the big fluffy towels I knew she favoured and wrapped her in it, then tried to dry off her hair, which I was an epic failure at, but it made her laugh.

We dried, she moisturised and made me put more arnica on my jaw, ending up doing it herself. I pulled on clean sweats and a sweater; Freya found a silky nightie that wasn’t going to do my cock any favours and the large well-worn dressing gown that definitely needed replacing, but I had a feeling it had sentimental value.

“Tea?”

She nodded. “Can I still boss you about.”

“Just this once.”

I made the tea like she instructed, camomile and peppermint and lavender, plus some other things I measured out. We sat at the kitchen table together and sipped and I realised that I didn’t feel irritated by these rituals of hers anymore. The scent of the tea was now soothing and reminded me that I was on a physical planet and not living inside a hard drive or on a virtual reality platform.

For ten, fifteen minutes, we didn’t say anything, just sipping at our tea, the sound of seagulls still fracturing the silence outside. It was dark now, the sky black, but I knew the tide would be just starting to head out and there was no breeze.

“Fancy a walk down to the beach?”

Freya frowned at me, surprised. “Now?”

I nodded. “Why not?”

“Okay. Will I get away with not getting changed?” She was still in that grotty dressing gown.

“No one else will be about, and if they are, they’re probably walking their dog in their pyjamas.” Which I had seen before.

“Okay.” She put on old trainers which were at the back door next to the shoes I wore for running on the beach.

Without saying anything, we headed out, leaving the back door unlocked. I took Freya’s hand, not over thinking it, and led her down to the beach, the sky above us spotted with stars and a crescent moon.

Seagulls called in the distance and the waves crashed against the shore, their rhythmic ebb and flow a lullaby.

“It’s so peaceful.” Freya kept her hand in mine. “Quiet.”

“It’s one of the reasons I’m staying here. This.” I didn’t need to explain anymore; the setting did that for itself.

“It’s a reason I’m staying here too.”

We stood there on the sand, watching the tide and the distant lights from the smattering of boats far out at sea.

The air was turning chilly, as it did at this point in summer, even on what had been a warm day. Without discussing it, we turned around and started to head back in, Freya taking my hand with hers this time.

Inside, she took off her shoes, leaving them in the same place and then put both of our mugs in the dishwasher, turning off the main lights.

“I know we said no sleepovers, but would you stay the night with me?” Her eyes were still puffy from crying, her hair dry now, her curls bouncier than ever.

“I wasn’t going to let you sleep alone. Not tonight. Your room or mine?”

Her smile was soft, without tension. “Yours. I like your sheets better.”

I curled around her in bed, the first time either of us had been between the sheets when we were clothed. Her ass tucked into my groin, which I knew would make for an uncomfortable situation later on, but I'd worry about that then.

“Thank you.” Her words were sleepy. Settled.

I felt relief combined with worry. “As long as you're okay for now.”

“I actually feel really okay. Are you sure you don't mind me sleeping here? You know, without us bumping uglies?”

“Where did you get that phrase from?” I kissed her shoulder, wrapped my arms a little more around her middle, her nightie riding up higher.

“My grandmother. She had a way with words.” Her words came slower. “Are you comfy like this?”

“Very.” It was nice to hold her. I could feel tension leaving my muscles, the stress of the day seeping away. “No freaking out in the morning from either of us.”

“Promise.”

I fell asleep after that, only waking once in the night when an owl hooted near the bedroom window. Freya stayed asleep, her head on my chest by this point, hair mussed everywhere.

I got it then. I understood what had made Finn bend over backwards for Ruby and Thane leave his lighthouse for Fleur.

Love.

I was in love with Freya.

I woke up with the sun pouring through the gap in the curtains and my hand underneath Freya's nightdress, cupping her breasts, which was possibly the best ever way to wake up. She was lying on her back, half on me, my hard cock pressed against her ass and she was wriggling her hips which told me

that however much it had been platonic last night, this morning wasn't the same.

I circled her nipples with my fingers, hearing her breathing change. Her tits were responsive, nipples hardening. I could probably do this all day if Freya ever wanted me to.

Her eyes flickered open and she looked at me, still sated with sleep.

“That feels good.” Her words were slurred.

“You want me to carry on?” Mine weren't much better.

“Yes.” Her butt rubbed against my erection.

I carried on, teasing and toying, doing all of the things I knew she liked. I peeled her nightdress off her, feasting on her tits with my mouth and pushing her underwear out of the way so I could dip my fingers in her honey. She was wet, her pussy already plump and her body relaxed and pliant, ready for an orgasm.

There was a lot to be said about those feel-good endorphins. I was ready for some too.

My mouth found hers, our kisses messy and wild. She rid me of the T-shirt I'd slept in and my underwear, her hand pressing against my cock. Facing me, she wrapped her leg over my hip, my erection lined up with her entrance.

“I need a condom.” My words were strained. We were both still half asleep, relaxed, partially in another world where the reality of this one wasn't as clear.

“No. Not this time. Just this once.”

I didn't question her words. I pressed into her, feeling her tightness and warmth around my cock, every bead of my being now focused on that joining, of how she felt.

Of how impossibly close I was to the woman I was in love with.

The position we were in made everything slow down, made us take our time. I felt her body respond each time I moved inside her, sensed where she was up to in her quest to

achieve her prize. Her breasts were pressed together, perfectly viewable, smooth creamy skin with nipples as hard as precious gemstones.

I upped my pace, unable not to, knowing I was going to come inside her bare, nothing in between us.

I altered the angle of my hips, cognizant enough to know how to get her off, how to make her come on my cock. She had a hand on my chest and another on my shoulder, her nails pressing into my skin. She could press harder if she wanted, brand me on my skin like she had elsewhere.

I felt her tense, knew that she was close. Slipping a hand between us, I circled a finger around her clit. "I think I could spend forever doing this."

Her lips parted, her breasts pushed closer to me. "I want you to finish on top. Harder."

I flipped us so she was on her back, not caring to debate what she wanted. The pace immediately changed from a slow gentle fuck to hard and furious, my body claiming hers in the most primeval way.

Her legs lifted, wrapping around my waist, allowing me deeper. I took hold of her wrists in my hands, pinning them lightly above her head.

"You're mine, right now. This pussy that I'm fucking, it belongs to me. Those tits bouncing while I fuck you? The only person who gets to see them is me."

She whimpered, digging her heels into me harder, her fingers gripping onto my hands.

Her body writhed as she came, her pussy gripping my cock like a vice, sending me over the edge so I spilled inside her, her name a growl on my lips.

I watched her, lips swollen, chest flushed, that new red hair spread over my pillow adding colour to my sheets, to my life.

I was a goner. I could accept that.

I just needed to find a way to show her that I was everything she needed me to be.

We curled up together, both avoiding the wet patch on the sheets that I'd deal with later. There was something extra about now, that my cum was inside her, that the last few hours had been intimate in ways other than physical. She thought she was broken, but she was anything but.

I needed to make her see that.

"I think your cock has magic powers."

That was not what I was expecting her to say.

"Good to know. You can test them out whenever you want. Make sure they're still working." I wrapped my arms closer around her. "Do you still want to go for that walk?"

"Yes." She moved closer, her body soft, relaxed. "You don't have to, you know, if you've other things to do."

"I've got other things to do, but I'd rather walk along the beach with you." Truth. "Your hair looks really pretty." It suited her. So did the blonde. I liked both.

"Thank you. I've had red before and I liked it, so it wasn't that brave." Her laugh wasn't a happy one.

"What colour's next?" I ran my hand up and down her arm.

"What do you mean?" She turned around to face me.

"You can dye it any colour you want. There's nothing to stop you." I moved a strand of it away from her face and back onto the pillow. "No one to stop you."

Her eyes flashed as if she'd just realised something. "Maybe navy blue. I always wanted to see what that would look like."

"Then you have a plan."

"I do. And I can change it if I want."

"You can." I stretched a little without moving away from her. "We should get up really. Go for that walk."

"We should."

Neither of us moved.

“How about breakfast in bed first? I can make pancakes.” I had a limited repertoire, but what I could do, I could do well.

“I’ll help - ”

I sat up, untangling myself from Freya. “No. You chill here. Read or whatever. I’ll bring it up.”

“You’re sure?” She shifted, the sheet wrapped around us coming loose, her breasts exposed.

I leaned over and took a nipple in my mouth, giving it a quick suck. She murmured a sound that encouraged me to carry on. My cock grew harder, bless his magic powers.

“Maybe pancakes can wait?”

Her fingers threaded through my hair, keeping my head on her breast. “I think you should taste something else first.”

I wasn’t going to argue.

Freya



“He doesn’t press me to talk, or make demands, unless it’s, you know, in bed.”

“And you’re happy with all that? The bed part as well?”

Sofia was my therapist, the one aspect of my life I hadn’t walked away from even when I barely had enough money to buy beans after leaving Marc. At that point, she’d waived her fee, asking me to repay the favour one day and counsel someone who was in a similar position pro bono.

“Especially the bed part. Or the not bed part.” Because it wasn’t just in bed, it was anywhere around the house. At one point this morning it had been at the kitchen sink when I’d been cleaning up the pans I used for making soap. Roe had come behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist and I’d turned my head round for a kiss, something that was becoming easier every day.

That kiss had led to his hands slipping under my shirt, where he found I wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Do you think about me when you choose not to put a bra on?” he said as his hands toyed and cupped and played. “Do you think what my reaction will be when I find out? Do you realise that when I see you around town I spend five minutes thinking about whether you’re wearing anything underneath and if you know how all I can think about is that?”

By the time he’d finished his sentence I’d forgotten about soap and pans and everything else. He pushed my skirt up,

yanking down my underwear and dropped to his knees, my skirt dropping over him like a veil while his tongue teased at my folds, running over my clit while I braced my hands on the worktop and hoped my legs would keep me upright while I came.

He gave me no time to breath after my orgasm, standing back up, my peasant skirt up at my waist, his hands on my hips.

“I’m going to fuck you now. If you can keep yourself standing, I’ll let you have another orgasm.” His words were whispered into my ear, his cock pressing angrily against my ass. “Do you want me to wear a condom?”

He asked every time. Every time I now said the same thing. “No. Come inside me.”

That was all it took. Half a second later and he was seated deep inside me, my hands braced firmly on the worktop, my breath held. Roe used my hips to push and pull me on and off him, the dirtiest words flying out of his mouth as he told me how I felt, how I teased him, how he couldn’t stop thinking about my tits, my cunt, my skirts, how I smelt. It was crude and intoxicating at the same time.

A hand cracked on my backside had me orgasming with a sob, and then he filled me, for the second time that day. I leaned back against him, our breath rapid as we sought more oxygen. My body felt like it was floating, every joint seemed smoother, every sinew lighter.

I didn’t tell Sofia all this. There were some things even a therapist didn’t need to know.

“Judging by the colour in your cheeks, I’m imagining that’s all going splendidly well.” Her smile was amused. “You said a while ago that this was only sex. That you had clear rules that you would stick to. Is that still the case?”

“No. I think we’ve broken most of those rules. We’re sleeping together most nights. We’re not using a condom. No one knows about us and it’s still temporary.” I wasn’t in the

business of lying to myself. I knew I'd broken through the boundaries we'd laid out at the start and I accepted that.

“When you left Marc, you wanted to have a break without being romantically involved with anyone for a period of time. To frame that – I'm pre-empting what you're going to say – what you wanted then and want now can be two completely different things and that's okay, Freya. You are allowed to change your mind and sometimes we change our minds because a factor has come into play that we didn't foresee. That we couldn't foresee.” She adjusted her screen, our session done online as she lived in Edinburgh. “Are you accepting that your parameters have changed?”

It was a good question. “Yes. I get stuck sometimes in the *how*. *How* I ended up with someone like Marc who manipulated me and *how* I allowed him to manipulate me. I know - I know that you don't always see what the bigger picture is and that I did get fulfilment in many ways from my relationship with Marc. Needs were filled on both sides. I think I'm ready to stop blaming myself. Maybe.”

“It's okay to do that. You can accept what happened and take stock of what you learned. How do you feel about that?”

I smiled. It was a key psychotherapist's question. *How do you feel about that?* “At peace. Since I've come to Puffin Bay I've started a life I thought wasn't possible. I'm in an environment that works for my energies. I have the start of friendships with people who don't judge. I'm making a difference here.”

“Tell me about how you're making a difference. Last time we spoke, you'd doubled your online psychotherapy clients and could potentially take that full time. There was also the opportunity for leading the wellbeing centre at the new hotel – what's happened with that?” Sofia picked up her mug of what was probably tea, the writing on it declaring that she was *proud to be neurospicy*.

“It's in three parts, really. I'm keeping the therapy online for about three and a half days a week, although some is in the evenings, as you know. The hotel manager has offered me a

fifteen hour a week contract for now, with a view to it being reviewed after twelve months. It's offering yoga sessions and planning retreats, which will mean more hours but there's a different income strand for that. I'm doing Reiki on the side, and still selling soaps and tinctures online and from the community centre. I'm pretty much full but I can manage my own time, so I can adjust to fit different things in and not feel overwhelmed." The last six weeks had brought everything together, which had surprised me. I'd thought it would've taken much longer to build a clientele.

Sofia nodded. "So financially, you're in a strong position?"

"For the first time in my life, yes. My house sold. It completed last week. I don't owe any money and I have a good savings pot and a reliable income. I don't think I want to do more than the hours I have already at the hotel, because I like the diversity, but those hours mean I have a reliable income. I feel secure." I rubbed at my hands, my tell when I was anxious about something. "I worry about when it's going to go wrong."

"What could go wrong? What are your worries?"

I shrugged. "Rowan. If – or rather when – it ends. My friendship group is tied to him. We live in the same small town, his family are here. His house purchase is going through and while he's got a few months with all the reno that's needed before he can move in, he will be moving out. And we are circumstantial. I don't think that we'd be sleeping together if we hadn't been housemates."

Sofia sat back, her mug back on her desk. "I met my wife when we lived together for three months. I shared a flat in London with my sister. She moved to Hong Kong and sublet her room. That was when Terri moved in temporarily. She was due to move to Edinburgh and needed a short term let. I ended up moving with her. How we met doesn't devalue what we have, circumstantial or otherwise." She shook her head at me. "Don't use your preconceived judgments to taint what is good, and Rowan seems good."

“He is. He’s good at lots of things.” I knew I was blushing again. “He set my psychotherapy website up so it appeared at the top of search engines. That’s how my practice has grown so quickly.”

“Why do you think he did that?”

“Because while he’s really grumpy, he’s a good person.”

Sofia smiled at me. “How has everything else been? Have you stayed on your medication?”

I nodded. “I don’t want to try without it. I know it works. I had one blip – the one I told you about.” I’d had a couple of sessions with her since then. We’d gone through how I’d felt that night and why; undeserving, a trouble-maker, useless. All those old feelings that had erupted when I’d been a teenager came back to the surface as they sometimes did.

I’d explored why I felt that way. I’d combed through my early childhood experiences, the loss of my elder sister when I was five to measles of all things, and how I felt responsible because I knew she’d caught it from me.

It’s impossible to compete with the memory of a dead person. Alyssia was a typical seven-year-old, or so my patchy memory of her suggested. The rest of how she was became constructed from other people’s memories. She was good at sport, she was talented with art and surely would’ve taken that up as a career, she was excellent at maths, she had lots of friends and was really sociable. All of these may or may not have been true, I’d never know, because I had no concrete memories of her, or very few. But I did remember the comparisons, never from my parents but from grandparents and aunts and uncles and Marjory next door – *your sister was much friendlier; she was so creative maybe try to think of what she would’ve done; you know, you’re nothing like your sister.* A sister who no one knew past the age of seven. We didn’t know if she’d have been an artist or an accountant or an astronaut. We’d never know, and coming to terms with that was part of the grief process.

I didn’t talk about her anymore, not with friends, not with my parents who were now living in France, not with people I

met. She'd died and I'd lived, and I knew that more than anything, she'd have wanted me to be happy.

“And since? How've you felt?”

“Level. I think living here suits me. Being near the sea, being on land that's so full of history. Rowan helps.” It was hard to admit that last part.

“How does he help? I know you thought that Marc didn't make things worse but he didn't help and you had to hide a lot of what you were feeling from him. What's different with Rowan?”

“He's practical. He seems to know where my head's at and just makes space around it. We go for a walk on the beach most mornings and then just before bed. He doesn't ask questions when he senses I don't want to talk, but when I do want to talk he communicates. And when I don't want to talk, he communicates in other ways. I just wonder what I'm giving him.” I knew what her response was going to be because I could hear myself saying it to someone else.

“It isn't all about giving and taking. It isn't a competition and it doesn't have to be fair. But you're talking like this is more than just friends with benefits, Freya. Do you want it to be more?” She picked up her mug again.

Did I?

“I don't know. Roe and I haven't spoken about what more looks like. We haven't been on a date or out to dinner, unless there's a group of us and it's just as housemates. Friends.” Which made me feel pathetic.

I was a good therapist. I could empathise and I was boundaried. But I couldn't read inside the heads of people in my life.

“Maybe you need to redefine those rules, especially given lots have been broken already. You'll know when the time's right to have that conversation. And your worse case scenario is that things with you and Rowan end, correct?”

I nodded. “Yes. I'd lose the person who's probably my best friend here.”

“So a question or two before we finish. Would Rowan behave in the same way as Marc? Do you think you would continue to be friends if you cease with your relationship as it is now?”

They were easy to answer. “There wouldn’t be drama with Rowan like there was with Marc. He doesn’t need my money or anything from me. If I caused drama, it might be different, but that wouldn’t happen. As to the friends part – I don’t know. I hate the idea of him being with someone else.”

“I want you to think about those answers. Mull on them, because you’ve told yourself some quite important things there. You and I both know that it’s impossible to predict a person’s behaviour; factors can occur that make such predictions uncertain, but there is the law of probabilities. I think you can use that when deciding what moves you make in the next few weeks. I’m proud of you, Freya. You’ve done remarkably well. I want you to be proud of yourself too.”

We closed the session, booking in our next one in a fortnight’s time. I sat back in my seat at my desk. I was in my little unit at the community centre, the time of day for most of the businesses who used the place to close, with just the evening groups starting to congregate.

It was a big old building that used to be a pub and inn. Roman had renovated it and signed it over to Amelie to use for Puffin Bay, partly because he was a good guy but also because he was trying to win Amelie over. I’d heard the story from Clover, probably with a few embellishments.

The place was now home to an eclectic mix of shops, a cakery run by Amelie, artists’ studios and craft centres. In the daytime, visitors would come, day trippers and tourists. In the evening it was more about the space for local groups – an art group met weekly, a weight loss group gathered a couple of times a week, AA held their meetings and a bitch and stitch club which I avoided like the plague.

Monday nights were one of the quietest, so I was surprised when I saw Clover leaving the little free library she helped

organise. She was usually away on a Monday night in London, there for a team meeting with the publishers she worked for.

“Hi Freya,” she said, messing with the almost black curls she often complained about. “You’re here late.”

I was, for me. Mondays was when I usually ran a yoga class in Beaumaris, only I was at the point where something had to give, so another teacher was taking over for six weeks. We were now into September and the nights were starting to draw in, which meant everyone’s energy would lessen. I’d learned not to fight it, and instead enjoy getting comfy in front of a fire with a hot chocolate, often spiked, and comfy blankets. There was no fire in Lionel’s house, it had long since been blocked up, which meant I’d probably be joining Clover in her corner at Puffin Inn.

“I thought you were in London on a Monday.”

She looked apprehensive. “The little publishers I work for have been bought by one of the big guys, so now it’s a fortnightly meeting online. Which is good, but weird.”

“How long have you worked for them?” I locked the door to my unit.

“Since I graduated, so about nine years. I got really lucky and walked straight into the job. It’s worked out well – so far.” She looked worried for sure. “I think things will change though.”

“Change can be good.” We headed towards the stairs, the sounds of Myrtle’s bitch and stitch ringing down the hallway. It must’ve started early; maybe they had a lot to discuss.

“It can. I know I’m going to need to move out of where I’m living too in a few months. Myrtle’s son’s moving back so that’s me homeless.” Clover shook her head. “I don’t like change.”

“In that case, shall we go to the Inn and have something to eat? I don’t like cooking on a Monday so I’d rather not change that.” I probably met up with Clover three times a week for a coffee or a chat or something to eat. She usually worked at Amelie’s cakery, or the new little café that had opened up, or

in Puffin Inn, liking to be around people at the same time as not saying much to them.

“Sounds good. She’s made beef and ale pie as well which smelled divine before.”

We walked across the road to the Inn which was dressed in autumn blooms, the window boxes tended by Roman’s grandfather. There were no signs of any damage from the fights a few weeks ago. Several of the people involved had been charged, not just with the event here, but at two other pubs as well. They were part of two extended families who were at war with each other, a war which was frequently used to cause enough disruption so that there could be some unplanned theft.

The fire was on, flames roaring. Amelie’s dog was lying in front of it, tail twitching every so often, and Clover’s table was empty, a reserved sign placed on it, although no local would ever dare sit there.

“Evening.” Amelie took down two wine glasses. “Tonight feels like a red wine night.”

“It’ll go well with that pie.” Clover sat down on the seat nearest the fire. A bit like Amelie’s dog, she liked the heat.

“Wine coming up. How’s today been.” Amelie didn’t have to raise her voice as the part of the pub we were sitting in was still quiet right now. It’d busy up in another hour after people had their dinner, but as it was a Monday, it wouldn’t be packed.

“Weird.” Clover tapped the table with a beer mat. “New bosses. New ways of doing things.”

“How about you, Freya? You were at the hotel today, I think. Roman mentioned something this morning about a business case.” She brought the wine over, sitting with us.

“We planned the schedule for the winter period and planned three retreats. It looks good – I can’t see why they won’t sell out and if they’re marketed now, booking one would make a great Christmas present. Roman mentioned he was off somewhere to set up something else. Is he going to be gone a

while?” This had bothered me. I’d lived here for six months now and had seen how close Roman and Amelie were. He adored her, that was completely obvious, although his favourite sport was bickering with her. She was independent and feisty, but I’d seen her let herself increasingly rely on Roman over the summer. She’d spent more time living at his house rather than her flat above the pub, and there was even a muttering that she might make the move permanent.

“Three days.” She shook her head. “Three days and he thinks it’s a lifetime. He used to spend months living out of hotel rooms and now he can’t manage three days.”

“He doesn’t want to leave you.” Clover sipped at the wine.

“I know. I’m also perfectly capable of managing myself for three days. I managed it for thirty years.” She rolled her eyes. “The man’s a pain in the rear.”

I chuckled, knowing I didn’t need to say anything. Amelie was one of the most self-aware people I knew.

“Move in with him. That’ll make him feel better about going away.” Clover chugged another mouthful of wine back.

Amelie shook her head. “Not right now. Caleb will be off to university in a year, so maybe then. I don’t want to invade the man-cave until he’s not there full time.”

“I thought he lived part of the week with his mum?” Clover finally put the glass of wine down.

“He did. But he has more room at his dad’s and doesn’t have to do as many jobs around the house – typical teenage boy.” She shook her head. “Also he can bring his girlfriend back there to stay overnight, while that’s against his mum’s rules.”

“Who’s he seeing now?” Clover stood up and put another log on the fire.

“Still the same girl at Menai University. She’s going into her second year. Roman likes her – she’s sensible and is really keen on studying, so he thinks she’s a good influence. I have no idea how long it’ll last. Caleb’s fan club seems to get bigger every week.” Amelie shifted on the stool. “You know, I might

have a drink with you. It's going to be a quiet night." She got up and headed back to the bar, calling for Alys who was also working.

Clover held her glass up to me. "Cheers. I'm planning on having a few of these tonight. Work has really annoyed me today."

"Could you work for yourself?" I was curious about what Clover did some of the time. I knew she spoke to her authors a lot and she spent a ton of time going through manuscripts, but there were days when she seemed at a loose end.

"I could. I've got one or two independent clients and I could easily build up more." She shrugged. "We'll see what happens. How about you? You seem busy."

"I am. It's working out really well. Lots of things to work on and I love living here." I really meant that. Even though autumn was starting to settle in, things were seeming brighter than they had for a long time. Maybe ever.

"How're things with Roe? His house is coming along – at least, I think that's right seeing as it's back to brick." She looked up at Amelie who was heading towards us with a wine glass and a bottle of red.

"Roe's good. He's been busy with a new project and something for Phil." I watched Amelie top us all up and then fill her own glass.

"Who's Phil?" Clover squinted at me.

"His mum's boyfriend. He has the security company." I'd learned a little more about how Roe diversified his work recently. He'd been tracking a woman reported as missing from the Glasgow area, with some suspicion that she might be with someone against her will. He'd been getting up at two in the morning to do various online things, and while I only knew the bare bones of what was happening, it sounded like something that could inspire one of Gully's crime books.

"Oh." She narrowed her eyes at me. Or squinted again. "You seem very close at the moment."

Amelie looked at me too, the same curious expression. “I did wonder. You don’t argue anymore, and when that bloke from Holyhead chatted you up at the bar on Saturday, Roe looked like he was going to murder him.”

“He did speak to him actually.” That was Clover. “Just before the bloke left. I noticed that too.”

I put on my best innocent look.

Amelie leaned in. “Is there more going on with the two of you?”

Clover leaned in also. I cast her a concerned glance. She shook her head slowly. “On my birthday, I asked Rowan if he’d go on a date with me and he said no, and I realised that I was being an idiot anyway. But he did say that he was seeing someone.” Her eyes stayed on me, watching my reaction. “I asked him if it was serious and he said she didn’t want anything more, that there was no point in him wanting something serious if she didn’t.” She put her glass down and folded her arms. “Were you that person?”

I looked at Amelie for support. Got nothing apart from a knowing look.

I was never a good liar.

I had no idea what to say.

For seven years I’d been with Marc. The close friendship group I had back then had been less astute, mainly because we were all so overwhelmed with our own lives we didn’t really have an investment in each other’s.

“I’m not mad or jealous, Frey. I liked the idea of Roe, and you’ve got to admit he’s pretty. But I’m not mad at you if that’s the case. I do want details though.” Clover moved into full gossip mode, which was a relief.

“We’ve been having a housemates-with-benefits agreement for a bit.” I hoped he wouldn’t be mad at me saying this. I knew I was the one who was most bothered about people knowing. “It isn’t serious, just convenient until one of us moves out.”

Both Amelie and Clover sat back in their seats with the same expression as a leopard about to set its jaws on its prey.

“I think we need more details.” Amelie was the first to speak. “We’ll spare you the deep and meaningful questions until we’ve had more wine, so let’s stick with the physical facts: how big, how good and rating out of ten.”

My jaw dropped. “You won’t say anything, will you? Roe and I agreed to keep it secret.”

“So why’ve you just told us?” Amelie tipped her head to one side. “Because this is a secret you’ve been keeping for months. Have you told anyone?”

“My therapist. That’s it.” I also knew why I’d chosen to tell Amelie and Clover now. “And now you both.” It wasn’t just about not wanting to lie.

“Why now?” Amelie looked curious.

“Because – I don’t know.” I shrugged. “You really don’t mind, Clo?”

She shook her head. “It was just a fantasy. I knew that. You have questions to answer; don’t hold out on us now. How big is it?”

“Bear in mind, Clover’s never seen an adult one in real life.” Amelie leaned in closer. “She’s been living vicariously through me and Fleur for the last five years.”

I turned and stared at Clover. “Really?”

She batted her hand at me. “We can discuss that another time. Length? Girth? Unusual features? Tell.”

I stared at my glass of wine and took another mouthful. I was going to need to eat after this. “He’s big. A lot bigger than my ex.” I made a gesture with my hands to show length. “That’s hard. And I can’t quite fit my fingers round it.” I knew my face was the same colour as the wine.

Amelie nodded and smiled knowingly. “I’d love to know if he and Gully were identical everywhere, but there’s no one on this planet who can answer that.”

“What do you mean?” I was definitely interested in that.

“They have completely different tastes in women, not that either of them are known for their serious relationships.” This was Amelie. “You’re definitely who I can see Roe with. His actual living opposite, but in some ways you’re really similar. You’re both quieter than our average. You suit.”

“It isn’t anything serious. I mean, it stops when he moves into his new house. That’s what we agreed.” I wasn’t sure it was what I wanted any more. There was no reason for me to self-impose a no relationship rule. No law around that was what I had to do following my break-up with Marc.

“Can he use it though?” That was Clover’s current thought. “I mean, that seems on the big side. Surely that would hurt if he doesn’t, you know, know how to get you ready?” She sounded very Welsh right now. I wasn’t sure if that was wine or embarrassment. “Amelie, you said that Roman’s larger than average but knows exactly how to use it to your best advantage, didn’t you?”

Amelie choked on her wine, then nodded. “He knows what to do. I wouldn’t have kept him around for so long if he didn’t. Back to Freya. And Rowan’s penis.”

I think I needed more wine.

“He knows exactly what to do. I’ve probably had four times more orgasms as he has.” Possibly more, but I’d lost count after the first couple of dozen.

“Pretty good numbers,” Amelie took another mouthful of her wine. “What’s his rating?”

I had a brief flashback to the first time this morning, just after the sun had risen. We’d gone for an early walk on the beach and had our clothes off before we’d even closed the kitchen door. The table had been the chosen location and it had been rough and desperate and needy, a complete contrast to how still the sea and air had been.

“Ten. No points for improvement. He knows how to read the room.” I relaxed into the seat. “I honestly think I’m addicted.”

There was silence at the table.

“Have I said too much?”

Clover shook her head. “Your face has said it all. Housemates-with-benefits my arse. Tell the poor bloke and put him out of his misery. He’s here now, in fact.” She nodded over to the bar where Roe was standing with Finn and Gully. Amusement flickered in her eyes.

I looked over to Roe who was definitely looking at me. He raised his brows.

Stick or twist.

What would my sister do? I wouldn’t know, because she’d never had the joy of this feeling.

I stood up, leaving my wine on the table, keeping my eyes on Rowan, the few metres between us feeling like a thousand. Four pairs of eyes were glued to me, Clover and Amelie had stood up. Finn and Gully were wondering what the heck was going on.

Roe put his pint on the bar, turning towards me, his eyes questioning, a slight smile growing. Maybe he read my mind, maybe he read the situation or maybe Clover said something I didn’t hear, but his hands went straight to my waist and brought me closer as the rest of the distance was removed and my lips met his in a kiss that was definitely not a secret.

There were cheers. I was sure I heard Clover shout something about big dicks, and I heard later that Gully fell off the stool that he’d climbed on, whooping his head off, but I didn’t notice any of that.

My heart was pounding too quickly, the thuds from it almost deafening me. Rowan’s kiss and his arms that were wrapped around me stopped the noise, my world steadying as it always did.

“Fucking finally!” That was Gully.

“Have I missed something?” Finn.

“Look at that big dick energy.” Clover. Of course it was.

“I have rooms available.” Amelie.

The kiss ended, which was a good thing else we would've been needing one of those rooms. Roe pulled me into his side, his look containing a million questions.

“How long's this been going on?” Finn looked incredulous. “Why didn't I know?”

“Because you'd have told Ruby and Ruby would've told Fleur and Fleur would've told Clover and Clover would've told Puffin Bay.” Gully put the stool back on its four legs.

“He's not wrong.” Clover picked up her wine. “I think we should have champagne.”

Roe turned towards me, putting his back to everyone.

For a moment, I was nervous. He had no idea about any of this. I'd been adamant we kept everything a secret and I'd just outed us. I'd done something impulsive and I was starting to panic.

He shook his head.

My heart cracked.

Roe



I shook my head, amazed, slightly mind-blown, by what Freya had just done.

“I guess you don’t want it to be a secret anymore?” I heard Gully talking about champagne, buying a bottle, which took the attention off us, which was probably partly his intention too.

“I’m so sorry.” Her eyes were filled with panic. “I shouldn’t have done that. You might not feel - ”

I leaned down and stopped her words with another kiss, this one sweeter, gentler. Her arms went back around me and I heard another whoop, then the sound of champagne being opened, followed by my twin swearing.

We stopped the kiss to see what was going on. Gully had somehow ended up on his arse, but the champagne hadn’t been spilled.

“I’m glad you did that.” I pushed her hair away from her face. She was flushed, her pupils dilated. Maybe we should grab one of Amelie’s rooms. “I take it you told Clover and Amelie?”

She nodded. “I did. They asked outright and I couldn’t lie. I didn’t want to lie.”

“Good. Gully’s known for ages, by the way. Ava has too.” In fact, Ava had phoned me this morning and asked for an update. Her advice had been to do something obviously romantic, in the form of flowers, a meal and a ring. But Ava

was romantic, or at least now she was. Eli had possibly made a rod for his own back.

That could wait a while longer. There were other things to do first.

“That makes me feel better.” Her relief was obvious. “I can’t believe I did that though. That’s so not like me.”

I chuckled, freeing a hand from her so I could take the champagne Gully offered. “You can do that whenever you want, honey.”

She was smiling now, no longer looking worried. “Can we talk later?”

“Don’t we always?” Because we did, mornings and evenings, sometimes in the middle of the night. “So yes. Any time.” One of those times I’d tell her I was in love with her.

That now seemed like a possibility, rather than a dream.

We drank the champagne, teased Gully for falling off the stool for no apparent reason and ate the beef and ale pie that Amelie had made, Freya having the veggie version, which I completely took the piss out of although it was actually pretty decent.

We sat next to each other around a table and no one said anything when I put my arm around her. This felt right.

Bernadette was going to be so proud.

“Gully, please don’t say anything to our mother,” I yelled at him across the table when he was mid-speech about some awards ceremony. “I need to speak to her first.”

He looked sheepish. “Sorry. Already messaged her. With a photo of you kissing Freya. It’s a really good picture, actually.”

I frowned, wondering why my phone hadn’t blown up yet. Even if he’d only sent that to Mam, which he wouldn’t have, I’d have had fifty thousand messages by now and a phone call.

“I’m so sorry.” Freya looked worried again.

It was Gully who spoke first. “Don’t be. Mam was convinced there was something going on between you about five months ago, so she’s just been proven right. It’s me getting the grief because I didn’t tell her.”

“Expect a care package in the post – all the things you need to survive a Holland brother.” This was Ruby, who’d joined us after Finn texted her the gossip. She’d driven from the university where she worked and possibly picked up a speeding ticket.

“What does it contain?” Clover was being far too curious. I had a feeling there had been a conversation about my penis at some point, judging by some of the comments that she’d made. That was definitely something I’d pick up with Freya later on.

Ruby smiled, glancing at Finn. “Finn doesn’t actually know this.”

“I’m not sure I want to.” He shook his head. “My mother and her sisters have no boundaries.”

I looked at Freya. “You might regret that kiss.”

She blushed again, her cheeks the same colour as her hair.

“So go on, what was in it?” Gully folded his arms on the table, almost knocking over his champagne – he’d ordered a second bottle.

Ruby swallowed and looked around us. “Lube, with a note – I’m not saying what was on that note. Bath salts to ease muscles. Painkillers. An apology note – it’s one written in advance for all the mistakes you’ll end up making, and to be fair,” she looked at Finn, “she knew what mistakes you were going to make. Then there were really pretty things like a photo frame and album, all filled with photos from when you were a kid.” Her expression was now victorious. “Along with some of your school reports and baby stuff. The lube was unnerving.” Ruby looked at Freya. “But understandable.”

“Totally understandable. I’ll let you know if I get a box.” Freya sounded far too understated.

“You’ll let me look if you get a box.” I massaged the back of her neck. “And remember, our mam can’t tell me and Gully apart in photos when we were kids.”

Gully snorted. “If you get a photo with one of us with brown smeared over his face, it’s Rowan and yes, it was the content of his nappy.”

“Fuck you, brother.” I threw him a glare.

He laughed and shook his head. “Seriously, check your phone.”

I braced myself and pulled it out of my jacket pocket. I’d put it on do not disturb mode a while ago and hadn’t changed it back.

It had blown up.

Mam: Rowan Ashley Michael James Holland! Why am I finding out about this from your twin and not you?

Mam: I need details. What’s Freya’s favourite food? When’s her birthday? What would work for bribery in the future? Is she medically sane?

Mam: @Marie have you seen this?

Oh shit, Aunt Marie was in the group as well.

Marie: Bless. He looks loved up already. That’s 2/3. Only one more to worry about.

Mam: The worst one, but you probably thought that about Seph.

Marie: That’s true.

Marie: That photo of them is divine.

Finn: Someone needs to teach him about the birds and the bees. Make sure Freya isn’t disappointed. Since when does Roe have all those names?

I threw shade at Finn.

Gully: I sent him links to videos.

Finn: You shared porn with your brother? That's just not right.

Gully: Erm, remember who told us about porn in the first place?

Mam: I knew I should've set the internet settings better. I give you all extra names when I'm pissed off with you.

Gully: You did. Roe hacked them.

Mam: Little fucker.

Marie: You can't call one of your children that.

Mam: Seriously? After what you've called Seph?

Marie: True.

Mam: Anyway, when did Roe bribe Freya to go out with him?

Gully: It was a joint financial venture between Finn and I.

Mam: Good move. I'll update the will. Seriously, those photos. I'll have to get them printed. If the neighbours see that they might start to believe I raised three well-adjusted boys.

Marie: *chokes on wine*

I looked at the photos Gully had taken. The first was when Freya kissed me, her arms around my neck, mine around her waist. The second was straight after the kiss ended. I couldn't see my face that well, but her expression was clear.

That wasn't a woman who wanted to keep this secret anymore.

I put my phone away, ignoring the messages popping up from the Callaghan clan, Ava and the seven missed calls from my mother.

“It isn’t that bad.” Gully gave Freya a grin. “I’ll show you later.”

“Don’t. You’ll scare her.” I shook my head. I did not want her seeing that thread.

Freya laughed and glanced at me, still smiling. I had no idea what had led to that kiss but I was thankful for it.

“It won’t scare me.”

Because I hadn’t been scared by her. I put my hand on her leg under the table and squeezed her thigh.

“I want to go home soon,” I whispered into her ear, aware that I’d pick up shit for it from the others. “I want to follow through on that kiss.”

She licked her lips.

I wanted to lick them too.

I was now wanting to lick other things too. But maybe the words – some words, not The Words – needed to come first.

“Let’s head back then. I think everyone will get it.” She picked up my hand and placed it in between her legs. I felt the heat there and wondered how the fuck I was going to stand up.

Finn coughed.

“We’re going to head off. Thanks for dinner and the champagne, Gull.” I managed to stand up, remembering when I walked in on Great Grandma Enid having her toenails trimmed. That was the most painful and yet useful image I possessed in my memory bank for situations like this.

“I’m paying, am I?” He feigned looking hard done to.

“Yep. Call it the celebration for whatever deal you’ve done this week.” There had been more since the TV one. Gully was making it, which was great for lots of reasons, not least with what was looming next week.

“Fine. You go home. Kiss some more. Take a selfie for Mam. When you’re dressed. And Freya, thank you for putting him out of his misery. He’s been mooning over you for weeks.” Gully held his hand out for me to shake.

I just shook my head.

The talking started after we were five metres from the exit of the Puffin Inn.

“I’m sorry. If you’d done that to me I’d have been mortified, but I had a session with my therapist today and I kind of saw the wood for the trees and then Clover told me that, or she said something, that you might’ve wanted something more and I confessed that the woman you spoke about was me and - ”

“Did you talk about the size of my dick?” I kind of wanted to know what she’d said.

“Yes. Sorry. That’s the bit you’re bothered about?”

I laughed, stopping walking, which was at pace along the coastal path. “Frey, I’m fucking over the moon that you don’t just want sex on tap at home anymore. I can take you out to a restaurant and hold your hand when we walk along the beach during the day and tell people about you, that you’re my girlfriend, I guess. But I do need to know how you described my dick.” I was a man, after all. Things like this matter, especially because it would get back to Gully.

She shook her head. “You’re unreal.”

I shrugged. “I know. We can talk more about that later.”

“So Clover and Amelie made me say how big it was, if you were any good with it, and to rate you on a scale of one to ten.”

She paused.

I waited.

“What did you say?” I needed to know.

“This long.” She gestured with her hands. “This thick.” Again, another hand gesture. Both accurate, both impressive.

“And what about performance?”

“Holy mother. Really? You need to hear this?”

I nodded. “I do.”

“I said you were proficient and had the skill set to be able to use a large weapon. I rated you eight point five out of ten.” Her hands were on her hips and she looked like she was about to breathe flames.

I was incredibly turned on right now.

“Eight point five. Why eight point five?”

She shrugged. “You’re just not a ten.”

I picked her up in a fireman’s lift and began to run, hoping to fuck I didn’t drop her.

Freya laughed, clutching at my jacket and my hair, giddiness oozing from her like I hadn’t heard before.

I put her down when the path got too rocky to chance it, both of us laughing, both of us breathless.

“I’m going to prove that I’m a ten.”

She laughed again. “Looking forward to it. Let’s see what you’ve got!”

We made it to the sofa, the new one, which I’d bought to replace the one we broke on our first time together. Our kisses were messy and wild, hands untamed. Clothes were lost, I fought with her dress because I hadn’t taken this one off before. I didn’t apologise for ripping it slightly either.

Freya made short work of my jacket, sweater and then pants. I toed them off and onto the floor, hoping that no one looked through the gap in the curtains because there’d be no doubt what had happened in here.

Then I slowed it down.

She'd said I was an eight point five.

That hurt.

So I was going to show her that I was never less than a ten.

"Legs around my waist." I picked her up, feeling the press of her tits on my chest. "We're going upstairs."

Her hips moved against me, seeking friction.

"No." I froze, two steps off the top. "That's not happening. I'm in control of your orgasms, remember."

Her eyes widened. "Better make sure you're up to the job then."

I growled, pushing open the door to my room and putting her down on the floor. "Bend over the bed."

"What?"

"Bend over the bed."

My bed was high, the perfect height for what I had in mind. She looked over her shoulder at me. "Do I need a safe word?"

"Choose one."

"Reiki."

That answer came too quickly. "I hope you've not used that with anyone before."

"Never."

"Good. Because you're not going to remember anything that happened before. Bend over like I told you. Hands on the mattress." I dropped to my knees, my head between legs, and licked her from her clit to her entrance, just softly enough to make her legs kick.

I repeated it, over and over until she was crying for more pressure, trying to press down to get more, seeking her release. I sucked on her clit, knowing her well enough now to know exactly how close she was to coming, and stopping as soon as she approached anywhere near.

“Roe, please, just fuck me. Your fingers. Or your cock. Please.”

I laughed, the vibrations hitting her clit. She could beg all she liked.

One final lick, a shallow dip of my tongue into her dripping entrance and I pulled back, slapping her ass.

“On the bed, on your back, hands at the headboard.”

She dragged herself up there, face flushed, breath laboured, her nipples harder than I’d ever seen and I hadn’t touched them yet.

I’d make up for that in a moment. But first I needed ties.

In my drawer I had pieces of silk, long enough to tie Freya’s wrists to my headboard. I’d found them a few weeks ago in one of the craft shops at the community centre, buying them for this purpose, although the vendor thought I was sending them back to my mother. The mother who didn’t know one end of a needle from the other.

The silk ties were strong enough to give some resistance, but soft enough not to hurt Freya’s skin.

“You remember your safe word?” I checked, knowing she would but wanted to remind her. “Say it, and everything stops. We cuddle. I fuck you sweetly when you’re ready.”

“Got it. Don’t stop.” She held her hands where I wanted them.

I tied them to the headboard, knotting them so she couldn’t pull out of them. She gave each hand a good tug then lifted her hips. “Rowan, I can feel how wet I am.”

I could see how wet she was, her juices smearing her inside thighs.

“You’re going to feel so fucking slick when I get inside you.” I leaned over her and pressed the lightest of kisses to her lips. “I’m going to fuck you so well you can’t count anymore.”

“Please.”

I laughed, pulling away from her, looking up and down her body, appraising her tits and her hips and her pussy, my cock almost too hard, too engorged.

Her nipples were my first target. I took the left one in my mouth, flicking it with my tongue before sucking on it softly, always too softly for her.

Her mewl was frustrated, asking for more. Her hips bucked.

I laughed. "I'll tie your ankles if I need to." I wasn't going to. I wanted her legs around my waist when I fucked her, maybe higher.

I swapped to the other nipple, playing with the one I'd just left with my fingers. A check between her legs told me she was drenched, trying to grip my hand to alleviate the need.

I teased her with a finger, slowly sliding it in and out of her hot, smooth channel, knowing that she was on the verge of coming.

"It'll be a shit orgasm if I let you come now." There wasn't enough there, not enough pressure for the release to be worth it. I shifted my fingers away.

She cursed me, swear words coming from her mouth. This was the only time she swore, when she was close but I wouldn't let her get there. Not yet.

"Do you want me to wear a condom?" I asked her every time, and every time now she said no. I didn't argue, I didn't ask again, but I needed her to know she held that power.

This, the ties, the edging, she had the control, she had the safe word.

I had her trust. I had the knowledge that I was giving her pleasure and taking mine.

Fuck that eight point five.

I leaned over her again, my mouth just above hers. "I'm going to fuck you now. When I tell you you can come, you can. Not before."

She nodded, eyes big and wide and looking into mine. “I think I’m going to explode, Roe.”

“You can – when I say.” I thrust into her, cursing her tightness, her wetness. “Legs around me.”

They were wrapped around my waist in seconds. I leaned back, raising her hips, fucking her deeply and slowly, listening to her fracture words, hearing my name and her pleas.

“How do you rate me now?”

“A nine.” Her eyes blazed.

I paused, my cock deep inside her. “A nine? Shall I stop then?” I knew she was being a brat, a tease. “No point carrying on if I’m a nine, is there?”

I brushed her clit with my thumb.

“Nine point five.” She was closing in. “Almost perfect. Almost.” There was a brief scream when I took my hand away, her pussy starting to flutter around my cock.

“What do I have to do to make it a ten, honey?”

“Let me come. Please, let me come.” There were tears in her eyes.

I started to move, slowly picking up the speed, lowering her hips, hovering back over her. “You can come.”

That was all it took. Freya’s hips went wild, her body rocked with her orgasm. Her hands pulled at the silks, unable to let go to touch me.

I leaned an arm out, pulling quickly to release each hand, and she grabbed at me, our bodies pressing together as her orgasm continued and mine began.

There was no space between us, my movements constricted by how tightly we were holding each other, the pace slowed. My lips pressed into the curve of her neck, my arms wrapped all the way around her. I wasn’t letting go.

Our breath settled. Bodies still closer than possible. I could feel her heartbeat. I figured she could feel mine.

“I told them you were a ten.” She whispered the words. They were sweeter than sugar.

“What?”

“I said you were a ten. To Amelie and Clover. But I’m so glad I told you that you were an eight point five.” She was giggling. “That was worth it. That was an eleven.”

“An eleven. Really.” I pulled her on top of me, me rolling onto my back. “I have no idea who has the power in this relationship.”

“We both do. And relationship? Is that what we’re calling it?”

“I think that sums it up. What do you think?”

She lay down on my chest. “I can go with that.”

Things were amazing.

A week later and I was sex-drunk, love drunk and driving my brothers and Ruby to the Coroner’s Court just on the mainland.

Ivy’s death was the sort that required an inquiry, or a coroner’s inquest. She’d died after her motorbike skidded during a bad storm, thrown off the cliff at the top of Lovers Heights and over the rocks below. Why she’d taken the bike out in such weather was unknown, a bad decision which would haunt us all for the rest of our lives, especially my twin.

He’d loved Ivy. Maybe not as a partner, maybe not as Finn loved Ruby or how I loved Freya, but she’d been more to him than anyone else apart from his family, and that was just because it was different. They pranked each other, spoke most days, gave each other shit. He wanted more, he’d admitted as much, but she hadn’t. Part of her life was a mystery, one that could be revealed today.

Gully was nervous as we sat down in the court. We knew how these things worked. The coroner had already reviewed the evidence and done her investigation; today was the verdict.

Today we'd get some form of answer, some peace.

For a while, Gully had questioned whether Ivy had intended to take her own life because taking her bike out during that storm was suicidal. He'd put a lot together to make a narrative that didn't necessarily exist: she'd just finished writing her book, she'd given away possessions, she'd told him that she didn't want a relationship as she wasn't looking for long term. For my brother, this had led to him blaming himself.

He'd recently come to the conclusion that her death was accidental, accepting that she'd made a bad decision rather than a planned decision.

We sat in the Coroner's Court hoping for a verdict that would give Gully and everyone else some peace.

"You okay?" I gripped his hand with mine and we were back to being seven-year-olds starting a new school.

"Yeah. I am. Probably as good as I could be given what this is." He nodded, looking down at his shoes.

We were suited and booted, the four of us looking ridiculously smart. Ivy had been at Finn and Ruby's wedding with me and Gully, just the five of us.

Now it was four.

There were few people here from Ivy's family. Her father was ill, unaware some days that Ivy had died, some days he didn't know he had daughters. Her mother was in America and hadn't come over for this.

But her sister was there. She'd been a pallbearer at Ivy's funeral, saying very little and leaving after the burial. I didn't know how much she and Gully were in touch; Gully had said very little about her – I didn't even remember her name.

The coroner entered. The court fell quiet.

And we listened to the verdict.

It was bright outside. October was approaching, leaves were falling and the outdoors smelled of autumn, the sweet smell of decomposing leaves. It wasn't raining when we got outside either, which felt synonymous with the outcome.

“Accidental.” Finn looked at Gully. “It was an accident.”

Gully nodded, not looking at any of us. “I don't know how to feel.”

I pulled him into my chest, letting him cry, seeing someone over his shoulder who shouldn't be here.

For the next ten minutes, I ignored her, focusing on my twin, seeing him crumple with relief, with grief, with hurt and then brighten up with strength.

“It's all going to be okay,” I muttered into his ear.

“I know. I have you all.”

That was almost enough to start me off. Gully turned around to speak to Ivy's sister, which gave me a moment to find the woman I hadn't expected to see.

She was sitting on a bench near a flower bed, reading a biography of Alexander Hamilton and unaware I was approaching.

“Savannah, what are you doing here? I thought you would be in San Fran by now.” I gave her a brief hug, a hug that gave me a niggling indication as to why she was there.

“Things changed. Look, I'm sorry I'm here. This is completely the wrong day for this and I probably should've just messaged you or rang you or something, but that didn't feel right.” She rubbed her belly which was definitely a lot bigger than the last time I'd seen her.

“You're pregnant.” The world spun a little too fast,

“I am. Eight months, so not long to go.”

She waited for me to do the maths. She didn't have to wait long.

“Am I the father?” It tallied. Savvy had been the woman I'd slept with before Freya, a one-night stand when we were

working together on a project. I'd used a condom. Nothing had gone wrong with it.

Or had it?

"This sounds terrible, but I don't know - "

She stopped talking while I sat down.

She sat next to me. "I don't think it's yours. We used protection. It wasn't the right time in my cycle and I was sleeping with someone else."

"Who?" We'd worked in a close-knit unit.

"Yeah, that's the problem. It could be Jay's. It's likely to be Jay's. We were sleeping together on the regular until he went undercover." She looked at the steeple of the nearby church. "I have no way of getting in touch with him until he's out of there and I really want to know because - "

"I get it." Jay worked for Phil, Mam's boyfriend. He was a techie, but had gone under into businesses where there was suspected shit going down, often related to terrorism. "Why's it taken so long for you to get in touch?"

"Good question and a fair one. Time flies. I put it off. Then I wanted to speak to you in person, but didn't want to turn up on your doorstep or in your picture perfect town in case it caused an issue or rumours, so the day you get the verdict from the coroner for the death of your brother's friend seemed apt." She shook her head and looked at the ground. "Look, I don't think this baby is yours, Rowan. I have money on it having blonde hair and brown eyes and a huge attitude from day one, but if I can rule you out, I know."

My world was still spinning. I was about to tell Freya I loved her. About to sound her out around moving in with me when the house was ready. Asking her that at the same time as telling her I might be a dad in a couple of months didn't sound quite as romantic.

"What do you need me to do?"

She bent down and rummaged in her bag. "This. Standard DNA test. If you can do it and send it off, I'll have the results

in a week. If it isn't yours, it's Jay's, so he's going to have a shock when he gets out of Bumfuck."

Her and Jay had a fiery relationship. I hadn't known they were on speaking terms, let alone sleeping together. I didn't want any more details right now though.

"Give me five minutes and you can send it off for me." I stood up, still feeling like the world was shedding its skin.

"I'll wait here."

I headed back into the coroner's building, straight to the disabled bathroom which was free and there was no one around who looked like they might need it.

I read the instructions, followed them, sealed everything and went back outside, noticing my brother still talking to Ivy's sister. Savvy was waiting in the same spot, her massive coat camouflaging her belly.

I handed the package to her. "Okay. Let me start again. Are you okay? How's the pregnancy going?"

She took it and put it back in her bag. "Pregnancy has been great. Had no idea I was expecting until I was five months, so it was a bit of shock. No morning sickness or anything weird. Bump appeared overnight. I always wanted kids, so I'm cool with it."

"If the baby is mine - "

She held up a hand. "Stop there, Roe. I don't think it will be. Laws of probabilities and all that. You may well have super sperm, but Jay and I weren't careful and there was a lot of it going on. The timing's slightly out for you anyway, but I need to rule it out. If this baby is yours, we'll talk then. You'll be an amazing dad, I just hope it's not with me for your sake. You deserve the morning sickness and ante-natal classes." Her smile was teasing.

I thought of Freya, how she'd look pregnant. With my child.

Yep, I'd gone there.

Taking a deep breath, I pulled Savvy in for another hug. “If it’s Jay’s and he’s a nob, I’m still here.”

“I know. But if it’s Jay’s – which I’m sure it will be – he won’t be a nob. Not for the baba. We both know that. We both know his story.” She struggled to bend down and pick her bag up. “I’m off back to Cardiff. Via the post box. A week – I’ll be in touch as soon as I know. Take care, Rowan, and look after your family.”

A family that included a woman whose life I might have to turn upside down.

Freya



It was late. Last orders had been called and I was still sitting at the bar next to Clover, who had her nose buried in a book so was about as much company as Caleb, who was sat at my other side, typing away on his laptop and working on some assignment that was probably due tomorrow.

“Want a pot of tea?” Amelie swung past me, putting away freshly washed glasses. “I’m assuming you’re here until I throw you out in half an hour.”

“Tea’s good.”

She didn’t mean just tea. She meant the words that came with the tea as well. My heart was heavy, my stomach more unsettled than the sea in a storm and I wasn’t sure what was broken, so I didn’t know how to fix it.

“Come through the back and let’s have a proper cup. These two can carry on being miserable.” She looked from Caleb to Clover and shook her head.

I opened up the bar hatch and followed her through to the back room, which was used as a staff area as well as space for Amelie’s informal therapy sessions, which I was entering.

She brewed up, turning the radio on low so the room was filled with something other than my anxiety.

“What’s up, sugar?” She put the mug down in front of me, keeping hold of hers.

“Since the coroner’s verdict, Roe’s been really different. Do you know anything about what happened?” I didn’t beat

around any bushes. While I knew there was no point swearing Amelie to secrecy, she didn't gossip unless it was fun gossip, and if she said anything it was usually to move a situation forward.

My situation currently felt stuck.

"I know the verdict was a relief for everyone. Ruby gave me the details, but I don't know anything apart from that. How's he been different?"

"He's been avoiding me." I swallowed the lump in my throat and drank some tea that was too hot. "I think he's changed his mind about me and him."

Amelie sat down opposite me and shook her head. "I don't. Remember I've known Rowan since he was in nappies. He doesn't ever do something unless he wants to. He's quietly very stubborn. If he didn't want to be in a relationship with you, he'd have said something that night after you kissed him in the bar."

"So why's he avoiding me?"

Amelie shrugged. "I don't know, sugar. You need to ask him and stop avoiding him. You're here. He's at home. Is it him who's avoiding you, or the other way round?"

She had a point, almost. "He's avoided me all day. He worked all last night, which I think was to avoid coming to bed. It's felt like he's deliberately gone out of his way to not be with me for more than a minute. The change in his behaviour is like Jekyll and Hyde."

Amelie nodded. "So something's happened that he doesn't want to tell you. Have you spoken to Gully?"

"I saw him this afternoon. He said Roe's been weird with him too and finding an excuse not to talk. He said he didn't really speak on the drive back home after the inquest." Which had kind of made me feel better.

"So it isn't you. If it was, Roe would be talking to Gully about it." She sounded very definite about it. "Go home, Freya, and speak to him. If he doesn't want to talk about it,

that's up to him, but you can ask him for reassurance. He won't want to worry you."

The door cracked open and Caleb appeared, hair mussed like he'd been pulling at it. I'd caught sight of his assignment so I wasn't surprised.

"Freya, Roe's here looking for you." He delivered the message and left, completely preoccupied.

Amelie shrugged. "I'll tell him to come in here." She picked up her tea and headed the same way as Caleb.

I festered over my tea for the thirty seconds it took for Roe to appear, carrying my thick coat that I'd recently bought to see me through the winter.

"You only had your jacket on when you went out and the temperature's dropped, so I wanted to get this to you." He stood just through the doorway, holding my coat, wearing his thicker one.

"Thank you." I didn't stand up. I did take a deep breath. "You're making me feel that I've done something wrong and you're avoiding me."

He sank down on the chair Amelie had left free, shaking his head. "You haven't done anything and I'm a dick for making you feel like that." He stared at his hands. "I've found something out that's thrown me. I'm not sure how to tell you about it and actually there might not be anything to tell. I'll know in a few more days."

Tense didn't begin to describe how he looked. His shoulders were hunched and he looked exhausted.

"Have you slept?"

He shook his head. "No. I dozed off a bit before."

"What's the worst case scenario right now?" I decided to work backwards.

He took a big inhale. "I'm a dad in two months."

My mouth opened and closed a couple of times. "Okay. I wasn't expecting that."

He nodded. “Neither was I. And it might not happen – it might not be mine.”

“When do you find out?”

“In about a week.” He glanced at the door. “I should’ve told you this when I got back from the coroner’s court, but I needed to get my head round it, or try to get my head around it.” Another breath. “Are you okay if I tell you more when we get home?”

I nodded, feeling a little earthquake around my feet. This was before me. It was the woman he’d had a one night stand with before we met, unless there was something that he hadn’t told me.

“Sure.” I finished my tea, even though it was still too hot, then pulled on the coat he’d brought. It was a thoughtful gesture. “Thank you for bringing this.”

“I was worried about where you were.” He stood up as well. “You didn’t say where you were going, and I knew I’d been off. I’m really fucking sorry, Frey.”

“I don’t expect you to tell me everything, Roe. I get you needed to work through this, but I was worried you wanted us to end.” I felt relief at being honest and not pretending that it was okay. With Marc, I’d have brushed it off and criticised myself for being too sensitive. I was allowed to feel, I was allowed to not be strong all the time.

But what Rowan had just told me was still sending tremors through my little world.

“No. I don’t want to end things. But I am worried that you might.” He looked so raw right now.

“I have questions. But I’m not running for the door knowing what you’ve just told me.” I just needed to remember to breathe. “Let’s go. I need to pay Amelie for what I’ve had.” Which had been a roasted veg salad and a couple of coffees.

“Am, can you add Freya’s bill to Gully’s tab?” Rowan called over to her as we went through the bar hatch. We always added everything we could to Gully’s bar tab. Standing joke that everyone bar Gully found entertaining.

“Will do.” Amelie waved at us. “See you tomorrow.”

Neither Clover nor Caleb looked up as we left, both still on their own separate planets. Amelie just shook her head at them and headed off to sort out another one of the regulars who was having a clothing crisis.

Roe took my hand as we walked, not saying anything. Autumn had entered with a bang, any sign of summer’s sun just a memory now. The wind had kicked up and the air had a nip to it that was making me miss having a real fire or a log burner at home.

It was quiet out; we didn’t pass a single person given it was after eleven and most sane people were in where it was warm. Neither of us said anything, our mouths covered by our coats which were zipped up all the way.

Finally, the front door was visible. I upped the pace, digging in my bag for the keys, only Roe got there first.

The house was warm and there was a smell of cinnamon and warm bread, the curtains all drawn. It felt cosy, and I still missed having a fire, but I missed having a happier Rowan even more.

“Hot chocolate?”

He shook his head. “I made some hot milk with cinnamon and spices. It’s in the pan. I thought you’d like it.”

That was an apology.

I accepted it. “Thank you. Do you want some?” Unspoken words made the air feel stilted. Blocked.

“Please. I’ll warm it up. You sit down.”

For a couple of minutes, nothing else was said. I watched him stir the milk and hang his coat up, his shoulders carrying too much weight.

Eventually, he brought the mugs to the table and sat down.

“Savannah was working on the same project I was a couple of months before I met you. We had a one-night stand. We used protection and it was nothing serious – we were the

last two people left finishing off a job and it just happened. We were friends; we'd worked together before on projects but this was the first – and the last – time we hooked up.” He looked up from his drinks at me. “If I am the father of her baby, we won't be getting together. There's nothing like that between us.”

“Okay. That answers my big question.” The half a lung of air I'd been holding was expelled. “I can handle you having a baby, Rowan. I can't handle there being something more romantic between you and their mother.”

He let out a long sigh. “Okay. That's good. That's really good.” His smile didn't quite fill his face like it normally did. “So before Savannah and I hooked up, she was seeing another colleague. I didn't know about it, I don't know much about it, and I was surprised because they didn't really get on. Jay's a daredevil. He takes on risky shit and goes undercover a lot, Savvy told me that he's more likely to be the dad. They hadn't always been careful, and the timing and stuff means that he's probably the one going to be a dad.”

“So why's she not getting a DNA test from him to find out? She could've spared you this.” I felt angry at her. Not because she was possibly pregnant with Roe's child, but because this could've been done differently. “I don't get - ”

“Jay's still undercover, Frey. He works for Phil, Mam's boyfriend. He's been under for about seven months and there's no way to contact him without putting him at risk.” He shook his head. “It's shit and I'm in limbo for a few days and I want to punch a hole through a fucking wall. I've just met you and things feel good, really good with us and this could change everything. If the baby's mine, my life changes.”

“What would you do?”

He looked at the ceiling. “I'd move closer to Savvy. I'd want my kid to grow up knowing their dad from day one – Gully and I never had that. I can work from anywhere.”

“Couldn't Savannah move here?” I wasn't called her Savvy. I felt for her, I really did. She was pregnant and on her

own, and would have more uncertainties than Rowan, but I couldn't like her right now.

Rowan shrugged. "Possibly. She's a penetration tester – a white hat who tries to hack into organisations to test for their weak spots. If I'm the dad, we'll have to have those conversations. But I don't know yet. I won't know until Sav gets the test results back in another few days."

I nodded, understanding where his head would be at right now, why he'd been quiet. "So, really, nothing right now is different. You know your colleague is pregnant and the baby could be yours, but it's more likely to be Jay's."

He nodded. "That's it. That's all of it."

"Do you want to be a dad?" I didn't know why I needed to ask the question.

Roe's smile was fuller this time. "Yeah. I'd love kids one day. I'm not worried about being a dad in two months, if the baby's mine, it's the circumstances."

"How will Jay be if he's the dad? Will he step up?" I wondered now how Savannah was with this.

Roe shrugged. "He's different. He likes adventure sports and travel. A baby would mean having to be more responsible. But Savvy's okay with doing it on her own. Jay could be undercover for another twelve months or even more, depending on how things are going."

"Could his boss pull him out?" I only knew about things like this from detective shows and Gully's books that I'd been secretly reading.

Roe nodded. "He could. But not for this." He drained his mug and stood up, putting it straight in the dishwasher. "I'm going to head to bed."

"Do you want to sleep on your own?"

When he shook his head it was vigorous. "No. I actually really don't. I'm gutted I'm putting you through this, especially when it might be a false alarm. I wasn't going to say

anything until I found out if it was definitely mine, but I can't stop thinking about it. You knew something was wrong."

"I'm glad you told me. Right now though, there's nothing for us to decide. Everything's the same as it was a couple of days ago, you just have some information that you didn't have before." I stood up too. "Can I sleep with you?"

"I'd like that."

We headed up to bed, going about nightly routines like we'd done a few dozen times before. I changed into a cotton night dress, feeling it was too cold to start with nothing on. The sheets were cold too, my feet two ice blocks.

I stuck them on Roe's leg to warm them up, which made us both laugh, the tension shattering again.

Lights off, he pulled me closer to him and I felt us both relax. There was still something not settled, but it no longer felt like there wasn't peace.

"It'll be okay, you know, either way." I faced him, running my hand up his side and round onto his back. "Please don't worry about it because there isn't anything to worry about."

"I was worried this would put you off. We've just started something and it feels like it could be something really good, and then boom. I might be having a baby with my one-night stand from months ago." His hand slipped onto my hip and he moved us closer.

Kisses could solve a lot of things. They were plasters and salve and sweet words all rolled into a simple touch. They could blossom into much more or they could soothe a situation. I touched his lips with mine.

"But we don't know that's what's happening. If it is, we'll deal. Babies are a good thing." My hand was under his T-shirt now, running over his chest, trying to be soothing but I was enjoying the contact far too much for this to be just about me giving.

"Do you want kids?"

“I think so. I had a sister. She was two years older than me and she died when I was five and she was seven. It was measles, and she shouldn’t have died from measles, but the virus caused complications. I don’t remember loads about that time. I was young and I think I’ve buried a lot of it, but I remember how much grief there was. To lose a child. I think that worries me – I’d have a different level of worry if I have children.” This felt like the right time to tell him this. The nugget of information I never felt the need to share because it was firmly rooted in my past, although it resonated through my worries and fears and that fight, flight, freeze response that dictated so many things.

“I didn’t know that.” Roe’s hands crept under my nightie. “I bet that’s been hard.”

“It has. But I’ve accepted it now. It’s why I’m anxious sometimes. Or the root of it.”

His eyes were full of understanding. “What happened to your sister was tragic, but rare. And don’t you think that sometimes you have to take a risk to feel that joy?”

“Look at us.” My eyes were blurry with tears that I didn’t want to fall.

“Look at us.” His lips captured mine in a kiss that morphed from sleeping to awakening in the space of a minute. It was without any finesse or grace; sleepy, tired kisses that weren’t about chasing an ending, but about being here.

Being grounded.

Our hands slid under clothing, fingers grazing over skin, tender touches sending shivers to every pulse point. Roe’s hand dipped between my legs, my underwear pushed down my legs and kicked off by my feet. He teased there for a moment, smoothing my wetness around my clit and my entrance, dipping a fingertip inside me, toying and playing, before he returned his focus to my clit.

I was relaxed now the tension of the last few days had gone, my body already sated with relief. It wouldn’t take much to nudge me over that pretty edge, which Roe knew me well

enough to work out. I pushed away the shorts he had on to sleep in, freeing his cock. A bead of moisture danced at the tip, ready to get inside me.

I lifted my leg over his hip, shifting so we could line his cock up at my entrance. There was going to be nothing graceful about this, but that wasn't the intention. Our arms clutched round each other as he pushed inside of me, slowly and carefully. Rowan had been inside my body enough for muscle memory to kick in, for his size to no longer be uncomfortable. I knew how he felt deep within me, I was expectant with pleasure for what this invasion was going to bring.

But something was new, or maybe this was the first time I'd been aware of it. Our eyes stayed open, fixed on each other as we moved, Rowan deep inside my body, as close as two people could be.

I knew I had tears escaping from my eyes, but they weren't from unhappiness or hurt or worry, I was just overwhelmed with how very close we felt.

"This is different, isn't it," he said, still moving slowly inside me. "This feels like more."

"It is more." The words just managed to escape, my body feeling like it was about to burst.

My orgasm wasn't the most powerful I'd ever had. It wasn't the biggest or the longest, but as I watched Rowan as I came, I knew that I hadn't felt this before. Not in the seven years I'd been with Marc, not before that with the one or two boys I thought I'd been in love with.

This was different.

Roe started to move faster inside me, his gaze still on me. I felt his cock pulse and then spill inside me, our bodies and breath slowing.

"I love you." He said the words quietly, but there was steel behind them. "I don't think I'm meant to tell you when I'm still inside you, but I can't not say it."

I swallowed back a sob. “I love you. I didn’t expect to when I first saw you, and I didn’t plan to, but I do anyway.”

Our lips met again, a kiss that was more than any I’d had before.

“We seem to agree on things easily now.” That grin was far too cocky.

“Yeah, let’s see how you like the lotions I’m cooking up tomorrow.” I wasn’t, but he could find that out then.

“Save me from the stench. That batch before weekend was vile.” He screwed up his face.

“It was, wasn’t it?” I beamed at him. I’d actually made it worse on purpose. “I should clean up.”

“We should sleep. I think I need to sleep for a week.” He pulled out of me. “I’ll let you have the not wet patch.”

I grimaced. “Appreciated.”

We cleaned up, shifting the sheets so no one had the wet patch, and then settled back under the sheets and blankets, the night cool. Rowan was like a heated blanket around me though, warm and heavy, safe as well.

His arms cocooned me, wrapping me up against him. He drifted off to sleep before me, his body still and utterly relaxed. I heard the owl hooting, his mate calling back from somewhere nearby. Wind whipped around the house and I felt the seasons shift into place.

Winter was on its way, my first winter away from the city. I knew I was in for a season of storms on the island, but I hoped that they would stay outside. Inside, Rowan and I could find our own haven, whatever that test result had in store.

It was later on, a couple of days after when Rowan turned up at the community centre, takeaway cup of hot chocolate in one hand and muffin from Amelie’s cakery in the other. “Are you free for an hour?”

I'd actually just finished up for the day and had a three hour break until I was seeing some online clients this evening for therapy sessions.

"I am. Thank you." I took the muffin and bit into it. Raspberry and white chocolate was one of my favourites. "Any update?"

He knew what I was referring to and shook his head. "Any time now though. I've got something I want to show you though."

"Okay. Let me lock up." I messed around with my keys for a few seconds, already wearing my coat and the soft scarf Clover had bought me as a gift for no reason other than she thought I'd like it, which I did. "Where are we going?"

"My house." He took my hand in his.

Mavis was stomping up the stairs as we went down. "Oh, just the person I'm looking for." She used both hands to grab Rowan's face and planted a kiss straight onto his mouth.

Roe froze, looking utterly horrified.

"You, my boy, are a genius. That new computer is so good I think it could make me a cup of tea if I asked it, and it was so inexpensive too! When my grandson found out that I was getting a new one, he said he could beat any price. Anyway, when I told him what it was costing me he didn't know what to say! He's asked to come and use it, but I've told him he's not allowed to touch it because he might end up downloading that malware onto it by accident which is obviously what happened to the old one." She patted his arm. "So I'm returning the favour you've done for me and getting you a lovely housewarming gift when you move."

"Thank you. I'm sure it'll be lovely, but you don't need to. I think you're right though, don't let your grandson use that computer." Rowan took a step back, probably fearing that Mavis would kiss him again. "You've still got the fingerprint and face recognition set up though?"

She nodded adamantly. "Of course I have. I'm doing everything you've said to the letter. I'll let you get going

though – I need to see that Albert about the Christmas concert at the church.” She patted him again and then scuttled up the rest of the stairs.

Roe looked traumatised. “I really didn’t need that experience.”

I laughed. “I did. I just wish I could’ve filmed it. The look of horror on your face after she kissed you was perfect.”

“Good to know you found my discomfort so amusing.” He squeezed my hand a little tighter. “Let’s go before it starts to rain again.”

We left the community centre and headed towards a path that ran behind the Puffin Inn, cutting across fields where cows and sheep often were and along a fence to the back entrance of Roe’s new old property.

It was about two months off being completed, which meant he’d be able to move in just before Christmas. I’d only been there twice before, once early on, when I’d been counting down the days before he moved out, and again a few weeks ago when it had been made watertight again.

The work had progressed quickly since then. There were gardens on all four sides, the property detached with a couple of acres of land in total. Part of the gardens weren’t visible from the house itself, a double row of trees shielding the gardens behind them.

Gardens wasn’t the right term. Once upon a time, probably in the days of Robin Hood, they’d been gardens; fruit trees, a rose bed, raised beds for growing vegetables and a walled garden at the edge of the land. When I’d seen that area last, it had been overgrown and cluttered with relics, some fly-tipping in the raised beds and what looked like a den for teenagers to hang around in.

“Nothing’s been done over there yet, but I want to show you inside. The first fix has been done and there’re a couple of features that I think you’ll approve of.” We went around the side of the house to the front, the doors open and workmen to-ing and fro-ing. There was a lot going on, a big bath tub that

would be freestanding being wheeled in and two people carrying in large toolboxes.

“How’s it going, Andy?” Roe nodded at the tall, dark-haired man who exited through the doors.

“Good. Ahead of schedule. I think we’ll be handing over a week early.” He went on to explain how a problem they’d been anticipating hadn’t happened, which all sounded really positive to everyone apart from me.

If the house was ready sooner, then Rowan would be moving out sooner. I’d be staying in Lionel’s house on my own until I found somewhere I wanted to move into, and I hadn’t even started looking yet.

“I’m just going to show Freya what’s gone in so far.” Roe nodded at Andy, while still clutching my hand. “Come and see this.”

He led me through the doors, through a storm porch, then into the hallway, the floor now tiled in a pattern that fitted the period of the house. Doorways led off both sides and a staircase was in the middle of the hall, leading to a quarter landing, where it split into two more staircases, one leading to the west of the house, the other to the east.

“It seems huge now.” I looked around, the walls bare plaster, some having had panelling put on them already. The doors were dark wood with brass handles, all in keeping with the period of the house.

“It does. It won’t be as big when we have furniture in. This is the lounge.” He pulled me through one of the first doors into a big room that looked formal. At the centre was an inglenook fireplace, the actual fireplace huge, dark marble, with a dark surround and a tiled hearth.

“Will that work? Is it just a feature or - ”

“It’s a real fire. We’ve opened up every fireplace where it was feasible. This, when it’s lit, will heat the whole room. What do you think?” He looked at me expectantly.

I blinked a few times, wondering. “I think it’s amazing.” I let go of his hand and went over to the bay window. It over-

looked the driveway up to the house, but in front of that was part of the front garden, ancient trees standing strong on the lawn, which was now well-tended. “How have you managed to get all this done so quickly? It was going to take months.”

“Andy, the foreman, had another big job on that needed to be postponed, so we threw all his crew at this. It’s cost a bit more, but it’ll be good to get in here. Come and see the snug.” He grabbed my hand again and led me out of the living room and across the hallway through another door.

The room was smaller, the window looking out towards the side of the house and the rows of trees. It was lined with dark wooden bookcases, built into the walls, a newly reupholstered chair near the window and thick patterned carpet. In the corner was a wood burner, that when lit would heat the room nicely.

“This is heaven.”

Roe nodded. “Ava’s design. It went in early – a few of the rooms are more finished than others. I just need some books now.”

“You don’t have any?”

He had the grace to look embarrassed. “No. I don’t.”

“That’s an exciting shopping trip.” I eyed the bookcases again. Was this room already like this, or have you put it in?”

“It was the library. There’d been a massive leak in here as the bathroom’s above and something went wrong, so everything in here is new, but it’s how it would’ve been for the couple of centuries before. Ready to see the next one?” He tapped his foot on the carpet.

“We should’ve taken our shoes off.” I looked at his feet on the carpet. They were dusty from the mess outside.

“Once everything’s finished there’ll be a deep clean. Come on, let’s see next door.”

Roe



I ushered her through to the room next to the library. This was my favourite room so far. It had a bay window with a view in between the trees towards the large gardens that would eventually be dressed in curtains Ava was currently overseeing being made. The floor was hardwood, a deep brown that would be partially covered with a Persian rug. I'd ordered a plush velvet sofa to partially furnish it, but the main feature would always be the fire.

It was the original fireplace which Ava had lost her mind over. It'd needed restoring, which had been done, and the chimney had needed to be rebuilt and lined so the fire could be lit. This was the informal sitting room where I wanted to chill. No TV, just music and sofas you could fall asleep in, and a fireplace that I could stare at when it was lit.

I knew Freya would love this room.

I watched her turning round in a slow circle, glancing at the flooring which had been one of the major expenses when it came to the fixtures and fittings. It was worth it though.

"This is incredible."

"You like it?" I asked her, hoping she'd more than like it.

She nodded, looking round again. "It's so peaceful; it has a really calm vibe."

"The rest of the house feels the same. Come and see the dining room and kitchen." I took her hand again, leaving that room and heading into the hallway. The dining room was across from there, a room that had been dark and unused by

the previous owner. The furniture in it had been around a century old but not restorable. The owner's children hadn't touched the house while she'd been in the nursing home, none of them wanting to spend on its maintenance, so the contents of it had been left. When I'd first gone round, it'd looked like a place urban explorers would've broken into. There were cups left out in the kitchen to put away, food still in the fridge, post out, some of the bedrooms were still needing to be tidied, the beds unmade. It had felt eerie and haunted.

I'd had a reduction on the house if I emptied it myself, so the first job had been that, once the relatives had made sure that they'd taken what they wanted. Unsurprisingly, the valuable items had been lifted a long time ago, so most of what was left had been junk. We'd filled six skips, or rather the building company had. Some of the furniture had been salvaged and either restored or sold to an antiques dealer. That had left me with an empty shell of a house, not weatherproof or watertight.

The dining room had been opened up to lead into the kitchen, which had been extended and was now completely different from the small, almost unfunctional area it had once been. I'd added a pitched roof with Velux windows and floor to ceiling bi-fold doors. The kitchen was sleek and tidy, an island at the centre of it.

"Wow." Freya had frozen in the middle of the room. "Roe, this is like something from a magazine."

"Ava designed it. I think she built her dream kitchen. She's already asked for first dibs if I ever decide to sell." That was no joke.

"It's perfect. Not the sort of place I'd be able to make soap and tinctures." She shook her head and her expression altered to one I didn't see very often, one of sadness, even though it was fleeting.

I wasn't going to persuade her it would be the place for her weird smells and concoctions, because there was a surprise for her, although it wasn't ready today.

We toured the boot room, the downstairs bathroom and the wet room. There was a utility room as well, all designed by my cousin who'd been like a pig in shit when I told her my budget.

This was going to be my forever home, even if my world had to spin upside down with the result of that test. I'd still return here eventually.

Freya and I were upstairs when my phone rang, Savannah's name flashing up on the screen. I answered it with my heart racing like I'd just done a five hundred metre sprint and was about to keel over.

"Hey, Savvy. I have you on loudspeaker so my girlfriend can hear – is that okay?"

Freya had turned a shade of white I hadn't known it was humanly possibly to achieve whilst still being alive.

"It's cool and it's all good. As suspected, your DNA is not responsible for my indigestion. The baby's Jay's. I'm sorry for all the stress." She sounded upbeat and relaxed.

"I can't say I'm not relieved." I watched Freya sit down on the floor, pulling her knees to her chest, colour back in her face. "How are you?"

"I'm good, just indigestion," Savvy said with a laugh.

"I can send you something to help. It's a herbal remedy – no side effects and completely safe to have while pregnant." Freya raised her voice so Savvy could hear.

"Cool. And I'm happy that you don't have an unexpected plot twist to deal with. Please send me that remedy," Savvy said, the sound of birds in the background.

"Any idea when you'll see Jay?" I asked, feeling guilty as she was now definitely doing this on her own, for a while at least.

There was a short laugh. "Twelve to eighteen months. I checked in with Phil. We'll let him know as soon as it's safe but he's deep under at the moment, so I'm flying solo, which is fine. We can do this. I have help."

“You’ll let me know if you need anything?”

“I will. A break on your little island would be great next summer if you’ve space.”

“He’s got plenty of space. We’re at his new house now and it’s huge.” Freya got to her feet and came over to the phone. “This is a great place for a break too.”

“Thank you.” There was a relieved tone to Savvy’s voice. “That means a lot. I can only imagine how stressful the last few days must have been for both of you.”

“I think you’ve had the rougher end of the deal.” I meant that. “I also know you’ll be just fine.”

“I will. Anyway, I’m going to let the two of you celebrate not having to turn your lives upside down. Have a glass or two of fizz for me.”

We said goodbye and I hung up, stuffing the phone back in my pocket just in time to throw my arms around Freya as she launched herself at me.

“I hate to say it, but I’m so fucking thankful for that.” I held her tightly against me. “That’s a relief.”

She pressed her forehead against my chest, not saying anything.

“And I know Savvy will be okay.”

She tipped her head back to look at me, her grip on me slightly less fierce. “I feel bad for her because you would’ve been amazing.”

“Don’t. When Jay finds out, he’ll be there, and Savvy’s got a lot of people to help out. She isn’t on her own.” I took in a full lung of air for the first time in days. “I’m so relieved. So fucking relieved. I’m sorry you had to go through all that.”

“Don’t be. I’m just glad you eventually told me. If it had been yours, we’d have dealt with it. Although it’s easier to say that now.” Her fingers grabbed hold of my jacket, the house cold as the heating obviously wasn’t on and the doors were continually open.

“It is. But we can breathe now. I can look forward to moving in here. Let’s see the rest.” We went into each of the four bedrooms and the master bathroom, a couple of the bedrooms having an ensuite. The master bedroom had a balcony from which you could see the sea not too far away.

“This is a gorgeous house. Huge.”

I stood behind her, my arms wrapped around her waist, nose nuzzling her hair.

“I’m going to get lost in it.” I had no intention of being lost in here by myself. I was kind of hoping for some company, but that wasn’t on today’s agenda to talk about. We had news that was good for us, and I hoped it was good for Savvy as well. I’d sounded out another colleague of ours, Flora, who’d been working on the same project and without letting her know that I’d been one of two potential baby daddy candidates, I’d asked what’d been going on with Sav and Jay.

It seemed I’d missed a lot.

I also figured Savvy would rather Jay was the father as there was definitely history between the two of them. Maybe I’d find out more in a few months.

“You are. Can we look round the gardens?”

She was curious about those, but I had good reason to keep her away from them. I’d started a project over there, one Finn and Gully were helping with and Gully was managing to keep his mouth shut about. I knew Freya had no intention of leaving Puffin Bay and even if she didn’t want to move in with me, the project I was building for her would be hers.

“There’s a load of stuff going on and I need to meet Gully and Finn tonight. We’re going over the distillery’s quarterly accounts.” This was also an excuse for us to get together, just the three of us. I probably owed them an explanation as to why I’d been a moody fucker for the last few days as well.

“I have clients as well. Shall we head back?”

I nodded. “We can walk along the beach. The tide’s out.”

I owed Lionel a beer as a thank you. Maybe more than a beer.

“So, if we purchase two new stills, we can triple the output.” Finn sat back in his chair, tapping his finger on the top of his laptop, that was now thankfully closed. “I know it’s a huge investment, but with the two new contracts, we’re going to see the return within five months, if not quicker.”

In short, he’d struck gold. It wasn’t a surprise for anyone because the brewery was doing just as well, as a second site in Cumbria under way to be opened early next year.

“Are you thinking of offering shares?” Gully put his elbows on the table, something Mam would’ve had his head for.

Finn shook his head. “I don’t want it to get much bigger than this. The next move will be to open another distillery elsewhere, operating on the same business model, but a different brand, using other local botanicals, but that’s five years away. I don’t need to earn any more money, and with the appointments of the production manager and distillery manager here, I can have more of a life.”

“So what are you planning to do?” I knew Finn wouldn’t be able to do any less. He’d get bored too quickly.

“I’m not sure. I have a few ideas but none have grabbed me yet. Ruby and I have planned to go travelling next summer when she’s on the summer break from university, so nothing will start until after that.” He cracked his neck, one of his many annoying habits.

“Where are you planning on going?” Gully reached into the bag he’d brought with him, the contents of which were currently unknown.

“South-east Asia. Thailand, Cambodia, Bali. Beach combined with sight-seeing. We’ll be away just under four weeks.” He liked his holidays. They went away somewhere during most of Ruby’s breaks from the university where she was a professor.

“Nice. I might join you.” Gully put a book on the table.

“No you won’t.” Finn picked up the book. “Is this the latest?”

Gully nodded, looking very pleased with himself. “It is. It’s a contender for the Gold Dagger award already. I haven’t won that one.” He turned his head to me. “You’re in a better mood.”

“I was waiting for some news. I got the right sort.” I leaned back in the dining chair. We’d had a take-out and a couple of beers while Finn gave us the update.

They both looked at me.

“So what was it?” Gully shook his head at me. “You were like a bear with an infected, pus-filled paw for a few days after we got the coroner’s verdict.”

“I had a one-night stand with a woman called Savannah eight months ago. We were working together on one of Phil’s projects. She was waiting for me after the verdict was given because she needed me to do a test to find out if I was her baby’s father. There was an outside chance, and the more likely dad was – still is – undercover. I’m not the father, by the way. You’re not going to be uncles.” The relief was still hitting me.

Gully stood up and brought three more beers over. “Fuck me. I totally get why you’ve been a miserable fucker. Does Freya know?”

He passed me a beer.

“I told her. She was there today when Savannah phoned to say it wasn’t me. It’s been a bit stressful.” Understatement of the year right there.

Finn frowned, taking a beer off Gully. “How was Freya about it? I mean, that’s not easy. You’ve not been seeing each other that long; that’s a lot of pressure.”

“She was amazing.” I looked at each of them. “Just understanding, not blaming or anything like that, and she said

if it was mine, then we'd deal with it. But it isn't, so, yeah. Relief."

"What's happening when you move out of Lionel's? Is Freya moving in with you?" This was from my brother who married someone because it was convenient for both of them. The fact I'd known Freya just over six months was irrelevant.

If you knew, you knew.

"I haven't spoken to her about it yet." Today had not been the right day. Besides, I wanted to get the garden and soap kitchen right before I asked her.

Gully tipped back on his chair a little too far, wobbled and almost shat himself when he nearly clattered to the ground.

Finn and I pissed ourselves for the next five minutes while shouting abuse at him, because that was what brothers did.

"You're fuckers, you know that?" He steadied himself and took a swig of beer. "I could've really hurt myself."

"You could," I agreed. "And it would've been your own fault. Mam would've grieved."

"And Clover. Clover would've been upset." Finn nodded. "Or maybe not. She seems to have moved on."

"Definitely moved on." I nodded. "Poor Gulliver."

"Fuck off." He shook his head, laughing. "I need to know, this one-night stand, did you wrap it up?"

"Of course. It was never going to be more than one night, so, you know. First rule of Bernadette." We'd had safe sex absolutely ingrained into us from the time our mam knew we were half interested in girls. Safe sex and consent. Gully had been verbally lynched by her one day, when she'd overheard him speaking disrespectfully about a girl he knew had been sleeping with her boyfriend. I'd actually never seen him so scared or run so fast.

"Fair enough." He shrugged. "I'd have supported you whatever, you know that, but it's going to be weird when one of us has kids – your kid would effectively be mine with the whole identical twin thing."

“I hope they get the twists on my DNA rather than yours.” I looked over at Finn. “What about you and Ruby? Any plans?” I knew Ruby was obsessed with Thane’s twin girls, who were her nieces.

He nodded. “Yeah. We’ve talked a lot about it recently. I think after the holiday next summer we’ll think about it again. Tell me more about the house, Roe. I haven’t been round for ages.”

I accepted his change of topic, figuring we were getting a little deep with all this. “First fix in the hallways is done. That was after a complete rewire. I’ve had all the servants’ bells put back in as a feature, but don’t tell Mam that else she’ll be a nightmare when she stays. We’re hitting the decorating next week and then the light fittings are going in. Carpets are going down then, and after that, furniture. Ava’s coming up in a couple of weeks to check everything off.”

Finn rubbed his stubble. “She’s staying here, I think. How’s that little library room? Didn’t you have carpet go down in there?”

“Yeah, don’t ask. They had to fit it early – long story, not ideal. Freya wants to go book shopping now she’s seen all those shelves.” I did need to get some books to go on it.

“Have you actually talked about her moving in?” Gully looked at me curiously. “Like ever had a discussion?”

I shook my head. “We’ve not been properly together-together for more than a few weeks. It’s all been just while we were living together at Lionel’s.”

“Forced proximity,” Gully said, making no sense as usual.

“Whatever.” Finn gave him a look that translated as *I think you’re insane*. “Anyway, I’m going to kick you both out in half an hour. Ruby’s on her way home and she won’t want you here.”

“That’s bullshit. She loves us. You just want us to go now.” Gully tilted back on his chair again.

“Absolutely correct. Fifty points for the winner. But, before you go, it’s Mam’s birthday coming up. What are we

doing for it?” He stretched, almost knocking one of Ruby’s ornaments off the sideboard behind him.

“Oh god. She’s a nightmare to buy for.” Gully rubbed at his face. “Should we see if Phil’s got any ideas?”

“We can do. He’ll be doing some grand gesture.” I knew Phil better than the other two having worked with him a fair bit over the last twelve months. “Why don’t we just get her a hamper of bits – books, bath stuff, gin, a new gin glass – that sort of stuff? Nice, but nothing *big* big. We can leave that to him.”

“Good idea. I’ll ask Ruby what she thinks.” Finn looked smug because he had someone to delegate it to.

“Is that a good idea? The last hamper her and Mam had involvement in contained lube. Maybe she’ll try to return the favour.” It was the best possible thing to say to Finn who now looked absolutely grossed out.

“No. Absolutely not. I have images now I don’t need. Time for you both to go.” He stood up and picked up the empty beer bottles. “Off you go. I’ll see you next decade.”

Gully and I just laughed.

I didn’t say anything to Freya about moving in. Words were Gully’s thing, not mine, and sometimes I didn’t get the right ones. I wanted to bring it up with Freya about where we were living, especially when Ava arrived a week early, and was full of furniture ideas and updates about paint colour and wallpaper, wanting my opinion – which of course I didn’t have.

My lovely, enthusiastic cousin kept looking to Freya for her ideas, which of course, Freya just reverted to me. *It’s Rowan’s house, so he needs to choose.*

This led to me being accosted by Ava when we were in the smallest bathroom of the house one afternoon, inspecting the tiling job, which wasn’t up to Ava’s standards and was probably going to involve her taking the tiles off and redoing it

herself after bollocking someone who'd tried to do it in the first place.

“What’s happening with you and Freya?” She glared at me with the force of a thousand Claires.

“We’re together. It’s serious.”

“Where’s she living when Lionel comes back? She has money from the sale of her old house, doesn’t she?” Ava put her hands on her hips.

“You look so much like Claire like that.” I smirked, knowing how much that comparison irritated her.

She shook her head. “Okay, straight answers, Romeo, because I’m trying to stop you from fucking up here. Are you going to be living with Freya at any point in the near future – by which I mean approximately two years.”

“I hope so.”

She inhaled long and deep, as if she was trying to hold her patience. “Okay. She needs to make some of the decisions about how this place is decorated then.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Why are men so dense? At least Eli knows he’s dense and just lets me get on with it.” She shook her head again, definitely at me. “You don’t know why I’m saying Freya needs to make some of the decisions, do you?”

“No. Not a clue.” It was easiest to admit defeat.

“If she moves in and everything’s what you’ve chosen, it’ll never be her house until you next redecorate. She’ll always feel like a lodger. If you get her involved, it’ll become her home. Does that make sense?”

“It does.” Fuck, Ava was right. “But you’re the one choosing the décor. Not me.”

“Even worse, Roe. Even worse.” She stood looking at me like she was expecting me to answer a question. One she hadn’t asked yet. “Rowan - ”

“I don’t know what to do.” This was the least competent I’d felt since I’d put on ice skates and tried standing up in a rink.

“I’m going to pause finalising stuff. You need to go and speak to Freya and ask what she wants and explain how you feel and what you want. Then ask her if she prefers sage or navy blue.” Ava took her phone out of her pocket and glanced at it, smiling. “Eli’s at the beach with Nancy so I’m going to meet them there. Be here tomorrow at ten so we can finalise at least three rooms. Go and speak to Freya. You don’t want her putting a deposit on a house thinking that when you move out that’s it.”

She had another point. A stabby one.

I had a feeling that Freya was at the hotel today, teaching yoga and leading a mediation group that had booked in there for a monthly meet up. I had no idea what time she would be finished, or whether she had a gap between sessions, but I needed to think anyway, so the walk there and some time with a coffee in the bar there wouldn’t hurt.

It was soon, really soon to be moving in with each other, but we’d been living together for nine months already and I couldn’t tell you the date or even day of the last time I slept without her, apart from that one night when I was avoiding her because of the Savvy situation. I couldn’t imagine having a bathroom that wasn’t loaded with her home-made cosmetics or the ever-present pile of shoes near the door. I couldn’t imagine living in this big, beautiful house on my own.

When was it too soon? Maybe it wasn’t soon enough.

I left the couple of remaining builders to it and headed towards the coastal path, keeping up a decent pace to get from my house to the hotel, which was just the other side of Puffin Bay.

It suited the bay, the rendering a shade of white that made it resemble a cliff. It had been built from the ground, a design

Roman had overseen and the town had watched with interest as it rose and developed.

Since it'd opened, it had brought more footfall to the village and therefore revenue. The hotel sourced local produce for its menus and used local businesses and tradesmen as far as it could. Some of the townsfolk had taken up jobs there, and a few more permanent residents had moved into Puffin Bay because they were now working at the hotel.

Inside, it felt like a luxury hotel rather than a large guesthouse in a seaside town, a contrast to the guesthouse further along the coastal path and the Puffin Inn, appealing to a different market.

I didn't really notice what was happening in the reception, just saying hi to Audrey who was on the front desk and then heading over to the wellbeing suite where there was a small bar that had smoothies and juices, as well as coffees and cocktails.

I ordered a juice and a coffee, figuring they balanced each other out, then took a seat near the window so I had a view of the sea. I texted Freya, letting her know I was there and then I thought, planning sentences in my head, knowing none of them would come out the way I intended.

Freya appeared an hour later, wearing yoga pants that made me stare too hard, and a loose top which clung just enough to remind me exactly what it was hiding. I'd professed my love to her and to her tits, which I definitely had a healthy obsession with.

"Hey, is everything okay." She sat down opposite me. "You didn't have to wait – I'd have found you."

"I needed to think." My blood pressure was definitely at a dangerous level. "Have you thought about whether you want to move in with me?" The words were rushed and I'd be surprised if she understood them.

"Have I thought about whether I want to move in with you?" She repeated.

I nodded.

“Yes, I have and I do. Just not maybe straight away because I think it’d be healthy to live apart for a bit, in case this is because we’ve had to spend so much time together.” She paused. “That’s if you want me to.”

“I want you to move in with me. If you want some time on your own first, that’s fine, but I want you to move in when you’re ready.” My words were still mumbled. I’d been hoping she would just say she would move in at the same time as me though. Disappointment rifled through me.

“It will happen, if that’s definitely what you want, I just think we need to have some space to start with. What’s brought this on?” She entwined her fingers with mine.

“I don’t want you to go and buy a house so then you don’t move in with me and Ava said she wants your opinion on paint colours if you’re going to live there.” I sounded like a real man child.

Freya was trying too hard not to laugh. “I can chat with her. I’m not great at things like wallpaper and paint and stuff, but I can say what I don’t like. But it’s your house, Roe. It should be what you like.”

I shook my head. “I want it to be our house in the future. If it doesn’t work out then I’ll redecorate if it reminds me of you too much.” Fuck, I hated the idea of that. Not redecorating, Freya not being there.

“If I move in, I won’t be intending on moving out. I’ve done that before. Wasn’t nice.” She pinched my juice and had a long drink of it. It was my third one, so probably good to share at this point.

“That’s kind of what I wanted to hear.” I pulled the juice from her, acting possessive over it, which led to a tug of war over the glass and a near miss.

“Let’s see Ava together then, if that’s what you want and we can tell her what we don’t like. I’m wondering if this is a way to get me to make decisions because you don’t have a clue.” She shook her head at me. “And let’s not rush me moving in. Just see what happens.”

I was okay with that, kind of. “It’ll be weird not having you around all the time.”

“Same. Lionel’s house will feel really big all of a sudden.”

We both laughed.

“No it won’t. It’ll still feel like living in a tiny box,” she said. “But it’ll be okay for a little while. I’ve decided to put most of my savings in a high-interest account for the time being. It’s my rainy day fund.”

“Good.” She wouldn’t need it. “Want to go home for some afternoon delight?”

Her face lit up. “That sounds like a really good idea.”

Freya



Heavy feet treaded in the hallway and the slam of my front door was not at a speed that I recognised.

My heart started to race and I reached for a kitchen knife, holding it up so I could plunge it into whoever had just broken into my house.

I didn't stand there in the kitchen and wait. Making sure the back door was open so there was a way for one or both of us to get out, I opened the kitchen door into the hallway and saw a rather rotund giant of a man wearing a stained white T-shirt, faded blue jeans and work boots.

This was Lionel. I'd seen a couple of photos, both of them clearly taken some time ago.

"Is it Freya? Sorry for just letting myself in. I was going to call you but I lost my phone and didn't have your number. I'm your new housemate." He grinned, his smile friendly and he did not give off any unfriendly vibes.

But no. He was not my new housemate.

That was definitely not happening.

Rowan had moved into his house just before Christmas, everything decorated and furnished, the house a mixture of old and new, blending smoothly with colour and patterns and wood. Ava was a master at her craft and once she'd grilled us about things we did and didn't like and showed us pictures of

interiors, asking us questions about them like we were five years old, she'd just gotten on with it.

I'd gone with Roe to buy a bed for the master bedroom, spending an afternoon testing mattresses, and then I'd dragged him to a bookshop, but it had been me who bought the books even though he'd tried. I could accept that he had a ton more money than I'd ever have and he wasn't affected by it, but I had pride.

We talked about me living there at some point, but in the meantime, I was staying at his some nights, which had become most nights. My stuff was gradually migrating over there, to the point where I was only really using the kitchen at Lionel's to make soap and tinctures in, which was kind of handy. I didn't need to be as conscious about how well I tidied up or worry about some of the smells being a bit nasty sometimes.

We'd spent Christmas and New Year together, Bernadette coming over from Ireland with Phil, staying on the top floor, which was a large bedroom, sitting room with a view over the bay, and a bathroom that would've fitted into the Ritz and still looked classy.

My hamper had arrived as Ruby had predicted, containing lube, bath salts and other thoughtful things. Roe had stood there for about ten minutes when it'd been delivered, staring at it as if it was going to grow scales and growl.

We hadn't used the lube. That would've been weird given his mam had bought it.

It was now February. The storms were in full force, some days the sea crashed against the rocks with such force I wondered if they'd become eroded by the time we reached Easter. In the few months since Rowan had moved into his house, Clover had chosen a different career path and had a new place of residence, and Amelie had finally moved in with Roman. There'd been big changes.

The next one might be about to occur.

I'd had no idea that Lionel was about to appear back at his house. He knew Roe had moved out as I was now paying all the rent, but like he'd said, he didn't have my number.

"Are you moving back in now?" I knew my mouth had been left hanging when he'd said the words 'new housemate'.

"I am, sweet pea. Sorry to cramp your style, but I need a few weeks back here before my next job starts. I think we'll have a ton of fun together, don't you?" He gave me a wink that had no weirdness to it. I didn't feel like he was a worry, he just didn't know how to *people* very well.

"I'm sure we would, but I'm not sure how long I'm staying on for." Possibly four or five hours or however long it took to get the rest of my stuff out of there. I'd just finished a batch of soap, which was setting in the pantry. "I'm sorry – I have my soap making stuff everywhere. I'll get it cleaned up." And packed. Definitely packed. Even if Roe didn't want me to move in right now, Amelie had free rooms at the Puffin Inn.

"No problem. I need to bring stuff in anyway. Have you got anything in to eat? He moseyed over to the fridge and opened it. "This looks at bit bare."

He wasn't wrong. There was a slab of cheese in there and some goat's milk.

"Do you cook?" He frowned at me. "I mean, we'll share grocery costs, but I'm not very good at cooking."

"I don't, no." I did, but not for him, so it wasn't a lie. "I'm rarely here anymore. In fact, I have an appointment I need to get to, so shall we sort things out later?"

He nodded. "Sure. Whatever. I'll probably be over in Amllech when you get back. Just wanted to drop some stuff off before I met up with old friends. Not sure what time I'll be back. Maybe catch you later?"

I slipped my trainers on, my bag already in a handy position to grab. "Absolutely. Have a great time."

"Will do!" He waved at me and headed back out of the front door, leaving a large suitcase which was emitting a strange aroma. I hovered around, watching what he was

bringing in next, which seemed to be a huge TV, the sort that would cover an entire wall.

I had a feeling when I walked back into the house, it would be unrecognisable. This was fair enough, it was Lionel's house, and I was paying a peppercorn rent, so he could do with it what he wished.

The tide was in so I took the higher path to get to Rowan's, a twenty minute walk usually, but given I was walking twice as fast as usual, I was there in just under fifteen minutes. I had a key, but only used it when I knew he wasn't in. I knew right now he was in residence, the hallway light already on, which was the giveaway. I also knew he was on a deadline for a client.

I hoped he'd met it because his day was about to be disturbed.

I'd become better at not being afraid of asking. With Marc, I'd always tried to be what he needed me to be, and by always, I meant all the damn time.

With Roe, I'd discovered a different pace. I would be what he needed me to be, because he'd chosen that. He'd chosen me. I didn't need to always make all the effort, because he met me halfway. He was what I needed as well, and he liked it when I voiced what I needed.

I rang the bell and waited, eventually hearing footsteps on the other side of the door.

"Frey." He sounded confused but looked pleased to see me.

"Lionel's just moved back in." I entered the house, closing the door behind me, automatically glad of the warmth and the dryness. Outside was damp. I could tell Roe had one of the fires blazing, the scent of it reminding me of home.

"Just moved in? As in turned up?" Roe led me into the lounge with the big fire and no TV.

"Just turned up and moved straight in. Asked me what was for dinner, pretty much." I shook my head. "This sounds wrong, but can I move in here?"

His grin turned smug. “If I knew that was what it took, I’d have got Lionel to move back ages ago.”

I glared at him. “Stop it. And I’m not just moving in because I don’t want Lionel as a housemate.” Because that was the truth.

“It just feels like the right time.” He nodded. “It does. When should we get the rest of your stuff?”

I sat down on the sofa, my favourite one of the two. There were already throws and blankets on it, and a few cushions I’d bought from one of the crafters at the community centre. Roe was not a fan of them. “Maybe in a couple of days. I don’t want to upset Lionel by moving everything out today and I should give him a month’s notice.”

“Fair enough.” He sat down next to me, putting a relaxed arm around my shoulders and then drawing me close to him. “I probably need to show you something then, because there’s no way I’m having my kitchen filled with that stench again.”

He stood up, taking my hand and pulling me up. “Wrap up.”

I grabbed my coat that I’d only just taken off and followed Roe to the cloakroom and then out of the side door towards the walled gardens.

I hadn’t seen what had gone on around there yet, told that it was a work in progress and I couldn’t see it until it was finished. That had annoyed me, as I liked being in a garden and clearly Roe was up to something.

“Do I finally get to see?” I nudged him in the side with my fingers. “I was wondering if you were building another distillery.”

“Fuck no. It’s stressful enough dealing with Finn’s anxiety when someone doesn’t do something perfectly as it is.” He opened the tall gate that had been built into the wall and let me through. “It isn’t finished. This was my bribery to get you to move in if you hadn’t already by spring.”

I stood still, taking it all in, the only first impression I would ever have of it.

Within the walls, a garden had been landscaped to include beds for vegetables and herbs. A rose garden bordered one wall; a greenhouse that looked like an older style, maybe Victorian, had been erected, benches already set up for planting, and there was an outbuilding, purpose unknown.

“Everything’s done apart from benches and a swing seat that are being delivered next week. Want to see what’s inside there?” He pointed at the outbuilding.

“Absolutely. Is that your mancave?”

Roe laughed and said nothing, taking hold of my hand again and leading me to it. It had a coded lock; I followed the numbers as he put them in – my birthday.

“This is for you.” He let me walk in first again.

“Rowan. This - ”

It was a gift. My eyes filled up with tears, seeing one of the nicest, kindest, most thoughtful things anyone had ever done for me.

It was a kitchen, one that was purposefully designed for making soaps and lotions and tinctures. There were two sinks, a large, industrial oven, various units with shelves installed in them; there was also a large rolling cooling rack so I could make more soap at one time, and new moulds. There was nothing fancy about it, but it was absolutely perfect for what I needed.

“It’s a way of making sure our kitchen smells good instead of like rotting feet.”

I turned to him, hearing the rain start, the drops hitting the long window that looked out onto the garden. In summers to come, when the garden was growing, this view would be my favourite. Or maybe my second favourite.

“And another way to bribe me to move in?”

I wrapped my arms around his waist, his arms hugging me to him.

“Yep. But I didn’t need it.”

“You didn’t need Lionel to move back in either.” I reached so our lips could meet, a kiss here in this kitchen feeling entirely apt. “It was just the excuse I needed.”

“Any excuse was welcome.” He returned the kiss. “Now can we run back into the house and open the champagne I’ve had in since Christmas to celebrate.”

“I think I can be persuaded.”

He locked up the kitchen and we ran, laughing through the rain back into the place that was now my home, Roe picking me up before we reached the door and carrying me over the threshold.

“You’re meant to do that after you’re married.” I batted his arm, still laughing.

“Then I’m just getting my practice in.” He put me down with more care than he needed.

I wasn’t fragile. I didn’t need wrapping in cotton wool. Like many people, there would be times when my head was in a place that didn’t have any sunshine or rainbows, but those storms would be weathered, and the rainbow and the sunshine would be on its way.

His mouth was on mine before I could respond, my back against a wall and my legs lifted off the floor and wrapped around his waist. Roe’s hips pressed against me, evidence of his erection obvious.

“Are you expecting any visitors?” I breathed the words out between kisses, his hands pushed under my sweater. We’d been caught before by both Finn – who hadn’t lingered – and Mavis, who’d had a lot to say, most of which had made me wish for bleach for my ears when she recounted something she’d gotten up to in her younger days, the details shouted through our window.

By younger days, we weren’t sure whether she meant sometime in her youth or ten years ago. I wasn’t sure which was worse.

“No.”

My sweater was off, joining my coat which had somehow already ended up on the floor.

“No one expected. Doors are locked. Only Ruby has the spare key.”

There went my bra.

There also went Roe’s attention. The obsession with my boobs had never waned. He dropped to his knees, enough height so he could take a nipple in his mouth, teasing it gently between his lips, his hand cupping the other and feeling its weight.

The back of my head tipped back against the wall, my breasts already starting to feel tight and heavy, the pulse between my legs beating thickly.

Roe’s mouth switched to the other breast, kissing the underside first, raising my anticipation, the amount of pressure too low, all done on purpose because he knew the quickest, slowest and most efficient ways to have me impaled on his cock and coming round it, something he’d never yet failed to do.

My fingers threaded through his hair, tugging with impatience; wetness grew between my legs, the tingling there spreading through the rest of my body. My legs shifted apart, the tugs on his hair becoming sharper. Rowan’s mouth took the second nipple, sucking hard and suddenly, which had me mewling like a cat in heat.

His laugh vibrated through my body, not easing up on the ministrations he was performing. My hands slipped to his sweater, tugging at it, hinting for him to take it off. It was warm inside the house, even in the little hallway that led to the side entrance where we were.

He stood up, my feet back on the floor. I used the opportunity to pull down the zipper on his jeans; Roe doing the same to mine. Pants, underwear, socks, shoes – they were all part of a puddle of clothes on the floor.

I expected my back to be against the wall again, but that didn’t happen. Once more, he scooped me up in his arms,

carrying me through the house to the room that was my favourite, the large living room with the huge fire that was still roaring.

I was placed on the rug in front of the fire, Roe looming over me, his hands on my wrists, stretching my arms. He'd pinned my legs apart which was a promising sign, his thick erection pointing in the direction it needed to go in.

"I love you." I said the words first this time. Usually it was him, getting in first. "I never thought I'd be saying those words."

"I never thought I'd hear them from you. Locking me out like you did." He relaxed his grip on my wrists, allowing me to wrap my arms around him, spreading my legs a little more.

His cock pressed at my entrance and my body shivered, anticipating that gorgeous stretch and the pleasure it would bring.

"Yeah, I'm sorry about that." I probably wasn't. "You knew I was going to do it though."

Another kiss. This one sweet.

"I had a feeling." He pushed into me slowly, filling me up with his cock, the sensation making me moan and my body becoming pliant and needy for him.

I wrapped one leg around his waist, letting him go a little deeper. "This always feels so good."

He withdrew slowly, re-entering a little quicker. I knew this drill, we'd start off slow and easy and end up sweating.

"All of it always feels so good and now you're living here, it'll feel good a lot more often." He bent his head and gave a nipple a quick suck, which made my muscles pulse. Sometimes, he'd make me come a couple of times before he got inside me. Other times, he'd do enough to warm me up well and then have me come when his cock was deep in me. Those were the most powerful orgasms and the ones I knew he liked best.

“You feel so fucking good, Frey. All tight and wet around my dick. I love how you let me fuck you like this.” He lifted my leg that was around his waist higher, pushing it up so he could go deeper, realigning his body.

It hadn't taken long, but I was about to come, just needing him to go quicker, which I told him, almost crying by this point.

His grin was smug. “You're not choosing this time.” He carried on, deep and slow, my breasts bouncing with each thrust.

I felt used in the best possible way, my body worshipped by this man who'd changed my life so much for the better.

A quick bite from him on my neck, one that just might leave a mark but it was still scarf season so we were okay there, and he upped his pace. That was all it took for me to come, my pussy pulsing around his cock, my body bucking uncontrollably.

“That was good,” he said as he slowed his pace down. “But I want more.”

I shook my head. My body felt broken from that.

“Oh no, there's another orgasm coming. I can feel it.” I was being told.

Short, shallow thrusts hit that spot in me. My eyes rolled to the back of my head. I wouldn't care if half of Puffin Bay was watching through the window right now. I would later, no doubt, but not right now.

Another orgasm found me, this one not as deep, but a long, continued flicker, one that pulled Rowan over with me whether he was ready to or not.

We came down from our high, bodies mingled together, the fire still roaring behind us. Our breathing altered from laboured to deep and slow, basking in the post-orgasmic high.

“I'm so glad I got this rug. No carpet burns on my knees.” Roe pulled a random T-shirt that had been in there under me and pulled out.

The sound of the doorbell blasted through the house.

“Bad timing.” He shook his head. “I’ll grab our clothes, unless they go away.”

The bell sounded again. They weren’t going anywhere.

“Two secs.” He walked out at pace, as naked as the day he was born, and returned with our clothes, the bell ringing again.

We pulled underwear on. I pinched his sweater, pulling it over my head to make almost a dress. “I’ll go and clean up. You get rid of our visitor.”

“That’s the goal.” He was in his T-shirt and jeans now, his hair definitely telling the story of what we’d been doing.

I was up the stairs when I heard our unwelcome visitor’s voice.

“Seriously, you couldn’t wait until later?”

It was Finn.

“And you realise you’ve scared every living creature in a hundred metres with how loud you are? It was enough to wake the dead.”

Rowan was laughing. “I’m more bothered by you listening.”

“Only what you did once.”

“See, we’re not the only ones to make the most of a quiet house. I remember when Ruby liked you enough to - ”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

I didn’t hear anymore, deliberately not listening, closing the bathroom door and freshening up. By the time I’d pulled on a pair of sweats and one of Rowan’s hoodies, Finn and Roe were in the kitchen, drinking coffee and looking serious.

“I hear you’re finally moving in.” Finn grinned at me. “Things must be bad.”

I laughed and switched on the kettle. Definitely time for a cup of tea. “Lionel’s moving back so I need somewhere to stay.”

“That’s not why she’s moving in though.” Roe sounded horrified.

“Well, you know - ” I was crushed to his chest, his big arms holding me firm. “There was also some duress involved.”

Finn laughed at us. “Has he finally shown you your garden? He’s had me and Gully working on that even when it’s been dark.”

I turned my head to look at Roe. “Really? You did that yourself?”

“Pretty much. The builders did the heavy landscaping part a few months ago, but we made the beds and built the greenhouse. It’s a restored antique one, by the way, but it’s been restored so it should do what you need it to. Roman’s grandad gave us a lot of advice.” He was serious now. “There’s more to do, but you can have a say now you know about it.”

“Ruby’s been dying for you to find out too,” Finn said, taking a seat on one of the stools at the breakfast bar. “We’ve invited ourselves round for dinner tonight. Gully’s coming too.”

“Excuse me, what?” Roe glared at his brother. “No, no. Freya needs to move in tonight.”

“Most of her stuff’s already here, or that’s what you’ve been telling us for weeks. No, we need to speak to you and Gully and you’ve spent enough time ransacking my fridge so it’s time we returned the favour.” Finn folded his arms and looked serious. “Thane and Fleur are coming too.”

Rowan muttered something under his breath.

I watched, realising Roe didn’t actually have a clue what was going on here.

I looked over at Finn and smiled. He looked slightly nervous, and had an air about him that was just bleeding happiness.

“I’ll cook something. Don’t expect fancy.” I poured my tea. “It will be veggie.”

“Fine with me.” Finn downed his coffee and stood up.
“See you all at seven.”

Rowan tried to spend ten minutes apologising for his brother crashing our evening, not that we had anything officially planned. He showered and dressed into something more appropriate for the weather, given that it was now properly storming outside.

The sea and the sky merged into a myriad of grey, the walk to the shops in Puffin Bay became a drive because there was absolutely no reason to willingly get that soaked.

“Why do you think Finn’s making everyone come round?”
Roe frowned at me. “Do you think something’s wrong?”

I half snorted, which was unfortunate as I was drinking a take-away hot chocolate from Amelie’s cakery, so some of it ended up my nose.

Very attractive.

“I think he’s going to tell us that Ruby’s pregnant.” I ducked back in the car, the shopping in the boot. “He had a goofy look on his face when you were going off on one because he was demanding to be fed.”

“Shit. Really? I thought they’d wait until they’d been on the holiday they’d planned. I knew it would happen soon but – wow. Mam’s going to go into gin overdrive.” He shook his head. “I’ll be an uncle. That’ll be fun.” His face beamed. “And there’ll be a million ways I can wind him up which is even better.”

“Do you mind driving to Lionel’s? I may as well tell him now if he’s back and pick some kitchen stuff up. Then you can plan how you’re going to wind Finn up.”

“Sure.” He indicated left instead of right and headed to Lionel’s, talking about Finn being a dad and the possibility of twins.

I watched the view, being slammed with rain as it was it was still glorious. I couldn’t believe how I was here, on the

island, a million light years away from my old life and ex-boyfriend.

This was peace, or it was until we walked into Lionel's.

Heavy metal was being played at full blast and Lionel and two of his friends – he could've just met them – were jumping up and down on the sofa, playing air guitar and imagining they were members of *Guns and Roses*, which was both hilarious and anxiety inducing.

The music suddenly stopped.

“Housemate! Woohoo! Guys, this is my housemate, Freya and Rowan, her boyfriend. Are you guys joining us? We're going to party!” He circled his arm around a few times, still playing his air guitar.

“Actually, can I speak to you for a minute?” My heart stepped up a notch on its speedometer.

“Sure.” Lionel followed us through to the kitchen.

I swallowed, hating doing anything like this. “I'm going to be moving in with Rowan.”

I saw Roe shake his head out of the corner of my eye. “No, she's already moved in with me.”

Lionel looked from me to Roe and back. “That's cool.” He laughed. “I'm kind of responsible for getting you two together, aren't I? Kudos to me! Maybe you could name your first kid after me. Baby Lionel, or even better, Slash, and say they were still named after me because of my ace air guitar skills.” He played another mimed riff. “So you're okay if Raff moves in? No rush – he's okay at his mum's for a bit longer.”

“That's fine with me. I just need a few days to get my stuff out.” Although I suspected Rowan would have all of it shifted out by midday tomorrow. “I'll take some of my kitchen bits now as I need it for tonight. It might not leave you with much.”

Lionel shrugged. “I'll get take-out.” A loud whoop came from the front room, a crash somewhere in the middle of it.

“I think that might be the sofa. Cool – I’m going to go back in and play. You guys be happy.” He gave us a peace out sign and went back in there.

I looked at Roe. “I think this might be the real reason I’m moving in with you.”

He shook his head. “Nah. It’s because you couldn’t resist me any longer.”

It was cold and dreary, so I made a veggie lasagne and a rogan josh, needing comfort food. Intermittently, I barked instructions at Roe who was almost clueless in the kitchen unless it involved something other than cooking.

By the time seven came, we’d just about finished and cleaned up, wearing sweats and jumpers because no one would be coming to this smart.

“I brought cake.” Gully carried a box with an Amelie’s Cakery logo on it like it was the crown jewels. “Where do you want it?”

“On the breakfast bar,” I bossed. “Then get a drink from the fridge and go and sit in the comfy lounge.”

The rest of them were already in there. All I was doing now was faffing with the garlic bread I’d bought and everything was set to go.

I grabbed a glass of wine and headed into the comfy lounge myself, perching on the arm of the chair where Roe was seated.

Finn stood up and coughed, a pathetic effort to get everyone’s attention and resulting in Gully yelling at everyone to be quiet.

I watched, entertained, feeling part of a family like I hadn’t done for so long, maybe never before.

“Ruby and I have got some news.” Ruby stood up, a glass of lemonade in her hand. We’d all worked out what was coming.

She looked up at Finn, smiling. “We’re having a baby. Rather, I’m having the baby and Finn’s going to pay the price for two minutes of enjoyment.”

“Hey!”

We all laughed. There was noise, congratulations, an expected threat from Thane, Ruby’s brother, and a ton more commotion when she announced that it wasn’t twins.

Gully found me in the kitchen, topping up my wine and switching the oven on for the garlic bread.

“So you’ve finally moved in,” he said, grinning. “My twin is finally happy too. Congrats.” He enveloped me in a huge hug.

“Thank you. It feels good.” It felt very good, in fact.

“Take care of him. He’s a grumpy fucker but he has a tender heart in there that he keeps hidden away.” Gully tapped his chest with his fist.

“I will. No worries there.” I was pulled into another hug, one which Roe walked into.

Hands pulled us apart. “That was lasting too long.” Rowan looked grumpy, true to type.

Gully started laughing. “You’re so predictable. Are we ready to eat? I’m fucking starving.” He started shouting that dinner was ready and the rest of my little, about-to-expand family made their way into the huge kitchen diner, taking seats at the large wooden dining table that was for occasions like this.

We ate. More wine was drunk by Fleur and me, Gully and Finn having a beer. We talked about Puffin Bay and the hotel and Amelie’s, discussing the plans Amelie had for summer in the beer garden and whether she’d ever give in to Roman and get married. Finn and Ruby argued over names for the baby, and I promised to read Ruby’s tarot cards. Plans were made for the three brothers to go to Lionel’s in the morning and rescue the rest of my things, bringing all my potion and soap making stuff over here.

The rain carried on beating down against the windows, the inside cosy and warm, not just with the fire.

The inevitable happened just as we'd had cake. Thane and Roe's phones beeped. A lifeboat crew was needed and they were on call.

They headed off into the wet night, leaving the rest of us in front of the fire, waiting for their return, a return that happened just after midnight, all was well, everyone was safe, just a little wet.

For the first time, I went to sleep in a bed that was mine as well as Roe's, wrapped in his arms, listening to an owl hoot – maybe the same one I used to hear in the other house.

This was my life now. Our lives.

And I loved it.

I'd finally found my home – it just happened to be a person called Rowan Holland.

The End

Want to know more about Freya and Roe in their first few months together? Sign up for my newsletter at www.writeranniedyer.com and receive access to all my bonus epilogues and receive a FREE novella set in my Maynards of Severton series!

Not sure what to read next? Carry on for a sneak peak of Clover's story in Breeze Bridge - this is an opposites attract, virgin, nanny romance set in Puffin Bay.

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Fancy some more small town with another grumpy hero? Meet Scott Maynard, musician, bar owner and long term rival of Keren Leigh - you can catch them both in the very steamy Stirred!

Freeze Bridge



CHAPTER ONE - CLOVER

It was usually a pretty drive across the bridge onto the island. From it, you could see the swell and shimmer of the Menai Strait, the boats bobbing on the tide and the small towns that were dotted about along its coast. It had always been home, even when my parents had divorced and both had moved away from Anglesey, it had remained my home.

I loved coming back here. Even if I'd only been to the mainland for a couple of hours, I relished this drive back across the Strait and back to home.

Especially after today.

Today had been shit. The worst day in a long time, maybe since my parents had told me they were selling out family home and they were both moving back to the mainland. Moving to completely different places, several hours apart, which meant I'd have to choose which one I lived with.

I remembered standing there in the kitchen, both of my parents standing at opposite sides of the room, their eyes on me while they waited for me to choose which one I'd live with full-time.

I chose neither. I decided to stay on the island and lived with my friend Cati and her parents so I could finish school. I chose to study at Menai University, finding year round accommodation and only left the island when I had to.

And yesterday I'd had to.

I gripped my steering wheel a little tighter, annoyance and worry not a nice combination. As of today, I had no job. I was unemployed. Jobless. Without an income. I'd receive a redundancy payment in another few days and I could contest the decision if I wanted, but there was no point.

Since graduating after completing my Masters degree, I'd worked as an editor for a tiny publishing house that specialised

in women's fiction. It was old fashioned and quaint, but successful. Too successful.

This trip back from London, all six hours of it and counting, had been a form of torture I hadn't known existed. All I wanted was to take a flask and my big coat and gloves, and to head down to the beach at Puffin Bay to watch the fireworks and enjoy the bonfire with my friends so I could forget what a shit show my life was right now.

I hit the midpoint on the bridge and slowed, a car pulled over, it's warning lights flashing. Fireworks exploded on the island, a shower of bright, colourful lights.

I loved Bonfire Night. I loved any celebration or event where we all got together. If I didn't pull over to help a stranger, I'd be at the Bay sooner. I'd be eating burgers and hot dogs off the grill, maybe with some chilli on the hot dog, and Amelie, my friend and the owner of the Puffin Inn, had made a spicy rum punch specially for Bonfire Night.

I tapped my indicator anyway and pulled behind the broken-down car. There was a chance that the driver could actually be a psychopath who'd pulled over in the hope that a vulnerable, attractive female would assist so he could bundle her into the back of his car and enact his favourite horror movie.

I'd seen a lot of horror movies. It was a bit of thing – I liked the attempt at being scared. I also liked shouting at the TV and watching the inevitable. This meant I was prepared. Before I got out of the car fished in my bag for my pepper spray and positioned it in my hand, ready to press in case I was introducing myself to the villain of my story – although that was Grizelda Barron who'd told me my services were no longer required this morning, and no one came across two villains in the same day. Unless they were a pair of serial killers working in tandem.

I locked my car and headed over to the SUV. A tall man with light brown hair was staring at a dashboard that resembled a cock pit.

I sighed. I'd lost my job. I was unemployed. Let go. Any of those summed it up well. The little independent publishing company I'd worked at for years had been bought out by one of the big publishers, who had their own team and nowhere on that team was there space for me. I was a spare part.

A phone call would've been kinder. A text message would've saved me the cost of petrol and time, time I could've spent doing something I actually enjoyed.

So I was jobless, had no reliable income and still needed to find somewhere else to live as my landlady's son was coming home in another few weeks and would be taking over the room that I'd rented for the last three years.

But at least I wasn't the poor guy currently standing next to his broken-down car on the Menai Bridge when it was just about to pour down.

Hero or villain? Romantic lead or mass murdered? I weighed up the possibilities and decided I was game for either. I could run quick and that black belt I had in Karate had to come in useful at some point, didn't it? I pulled over in front of him and got out of my little Fiat.

"Run into some trouble, have you?"

The man, who happened to be about six foot something tall and four foot wide, with blonde hair and a face that could stop traffic for all the right reasons stared at me.

"You could say that. Do you happen to have a phone with reception? I need to get to Puffin Bay before eight and have to call a taxi." He shifted from one foot to the other, looking inhumanly awkward. "Thank you for stopping."

"No problem and no, I haven't got reception. This is a dead zone. I'm from Puffin Bay though, so I can give you a lift. Promise I'm not a murderer." I kept it chirpy and bright, despite my mood. I was no mechanic, but this man was going to be spending several bushels getting his car fixed. At least I didn't have that problem.

"That's a really weird thing to say." He frowned, which wasn't a good luck on him.

I ignored the look and the word weird and shrugged. “I’m a black belt in karate. I can probably put you on your arse quicker than you can open a can of beer. Be thankful I only use my powers for good.”

He opened his mouth and closed it again, which was probably wise. I’d had a shitty day but was still happy to do a favour and be kind. Unless the recipient of that favour was going to be an utter *bobolyne*. Like surfer-hulk might be.

“I’m Grayson. I’m not a murderer either.” He held out his hand.

I took it. “I’m Clover. Where in Puffin Bay are you heading?”

He took a deep breath. “Tÿ ar y Bont. That’s its name. I’m not sure how to explain where it is - ”

“You bought the house on the bridge!” I laughed, happy with this for some reason. “I wondered who’d got it. Or are you the contractor?” He looked like he could be a labourer.

“Contractor? Does it need work doing? I thought it was ready to live in.” He looked annoyed again.

I shook my head, feeling the need to try and calm him down as he seemed like the type of man who was going burst a vessel stressing out over everything. “No, no. It’s a great house. It’s just a lot of places near Puffin Bay have been bought recently and people have started doing work to them. Tÿ ar y Bont is great. And you’re not a contractor. Got it.”

“I’m a doctor.” He opened his boot and took out a small suitcase, black of course. “I’ve taken over the practice in Puffin Bay.”

“Oh.” That stopped me. “Oh. I’m Clover. One of your patients.”

“Yes, Clover. You already said. Are you sure you’re okay to give me a lift? Are you well enough? You seem confused.” He peered at me as if doing some sort of visual examination. “Are you on drugs.”

I narrowed my eyes and tried to look as fierce as possible, which I knew wasn't very fierce at all. Still, that look had given sparring partners a very false sense of security.

"I'm perfectly sober, if rather tired. If you'd still like a lift, please get in the car." I turned around and went back to my little bug of a vehicle.

He didn't follow me. When I looked at him in my rear view, he was looking at his phone as if willing it to suddenly start working.

When it didn't, I saw him say something, probably a curse, then he pulled his case down to me, opening the boot and putting it in there, before squeezing himself into my passenger seat.

"This isn't good for your posture, you know, cars this size."

His knees were almost round his ears.

"It's perfectly fine for me and as this'll be the only lift you'll ever have in it, you don't have to worry about your posture. Let's not bother exchanging pleasant small talk, by the way. Offering you a lift was clearly yet another mistake that's been made in the last forty-eight hours." I kept my eyes on the road, an explosion of fireworks going off to my left.

My friends were having a bonfire on the beach, but it would probably be over by now, rain due to set in soon. Still, the food would be there, jacket potatoes and treacle toffee, Amelie's punch and chilli, in the Puffin Inn if the barbecue was rained off. I could go there and tell them about my now lack of employ. Amelie would possibly have some hours she could give me, even if it was housekeeping the rooms she kept above the inn, and I might be able to move into her apartment there too as she'd now pretty much moved in with her fiancé. I would manage.

Something would come up.

It always did.

"I'm sorry."

His apology took me by surprise. Especially as for the last five minutes neither of us had spoken. He'd also not waved an axe at me either, which was another plus.

“Say what?”

“I'm sorry. You were being kind and I've been well, really flipping entitled.”

I felt him glance at me.

“Apology accepted, but let's still not speak.” I had enough to think about and I was really good at focusing on what wasn't important. This man wasn't important.

Which was a point – I didn't even know his name.

I was about to ask that someone pertinent question, because after all, it's probably useful to know the name of your potential killer when his phone rang.

“Finally. Reception.” He stared at it like it was radiating something poisonous. “Hi, Mother. Is everything okay with Luca?”

His mother's voice filled my car, launching into a speech, the sort of which I was very familiar with.

“Hang on, I'm in the car with someone else, and my phone's not working properly so you're on loudspeaker.” He shook his head.

I focused on the road. I shouldn't be listening in, not actively listening in. I couldn't help but hear, could I? But I didn't need to take note. This was our new doctor, an upstanding member of our community and I shouldn't know anything about his personal business, and even I did hear something, I definitely shouldn't share it with Amelie and Ruby.

“Who are you in a car with?” His mother's accent was English rather than Welsh. “I thought you didn't know anyone on that island, Grayson.”

Ah, Grayson. I had a name.

“Long story, you don’t need the info. What time will you and Luca be here tomorrow? The removal van’s getting here at eleven, so I’ll get your room and Luca’s ready first.” He sounded tired. Exhausted. Unlike his mother, Grayson’s accent was Welsh, probably Cardiff or around that area.

“That’s what I’m phoning about. I can drop Luca off and he’s fine, by the way, but I can’t stay. I’m heading straight to Manchester airport. I don’t suppose you could meet me in Chester as I have a flight booked at two. It would be most helpful if you could.” She sounded like she wasn’t going to accept being told no very well.

“Mother, I have the removal vans here at eleven. I have to get them emptied. I don’t have time to drive to Chester and you were meant to be staying with us to help with Luca while I found a nanny.”

A quick glance at him rather than the road and a saw how defeated he looked.

“Your sister needs me in Paris. There’s been an emergency.” Her voice was stern. “I have to head there.”

“What can possibly be the matter in Paris?” His voice grew louder.

There was no way he could think I wasn’t listening now.

A sigh came through the loudspeaker. “Timothy’s broken his arm and your sister’s struggling to manage him and the baby, so she’s asked me to go over and help so they can finish their holiday.”

“Finish? She’s only just started! Didn’t they get there yesterday? How the fuck’s he managed to break his arm? Isn’t Hugo with them?”

There was a burst of fireworks not far off the road. The sound of it was smothered with Grayson’s words.

“Well, Hugo’s playing golf as soon as they get to Avignon.”

“How about Hugo doesn’t play golf and helps with his children instead?” Grayson rubbed his face with his free

hand. "I could really use some help here."

"I know. But you know how hard Hugo works and I've said I would now -"

"You said you'd help me for the first couple of weeks." He shook his head again.

I could feel the frustration and annoyance rolling off him. He was a powder keg about to explode, I'd just rather he didn't do it in my car because it definitely wasn't big enough for that.

"I know, but you can manage. You always manage and Luca's such a good boy. He's so much like you were at that age. You're doing such a good job with him." Her tone was softer now, clearly trying to placate him. Obviously this sort of situation had happened a few times before.

"I can't take him to work with me, can I? Or nip out during an appointment to pick him up from school. For fuck's sake, Mother. Can't you tell Megan she'll have to manage for a week?"

So Megan was his sister, Hugo her husband, they had a child called Timothy and Grayson had a son called Luca. This was useful information.

Probably useful information.

"I've said I'll be in Paris by tomorrow evening. I can't. I'm sure someone will be able to help you with Luca though. When does he start school?"

I could tell this was definitely information she'd already been told but hadn't bothered to remember it.

"Next week. I wanted you here to help him get settled. This is a big thing for him, moving here." Grayson sounded resigned. "Anyway, you'll have to bring him here. My car's broken down and I won't be able to get it until after the removal men have been, so sorry if that ruins your plans."

"It does, really. Anyway, I'll rearrange things. Don't you worry about me." She carried on talking about Timothy and

the broken arm, asking Grayson about fractures and breaks and healing time.

She received one work answer until the phone call was ended, which was about the same time we arrived in Puffin Bay.

“Where are you meeting the estate agent?” Who I knew would be Huw Bellis. The town only had one.

“At the house on the bridge. My new home.” He really was having a sulk, but I could understand why, really.

“I’ll head straight there.” I sighed and shook my head at myself. I shouldn’t get involved. I shouldn’t try to solve other people’s problems when I really had enough of my own right now. “If you give me your car keys, I’ll sort out getting it to the garage here. It sounds like you have enough to do.” There was no way he couldn’t have expected me to not listen in. I wasn’t a taxi driver.

“It’s okay. I’ll sort it.” He glanced at his phone again. “I’ll find a mechanic online.”

“Aron’s the person you want, Garej Aron. Look for that.” I wasn’t going to persuade him to let me help. If the idiot didn’t accept it first time, then I wasn’t going to any more effort.

“He could be some scammer. I’ll do my research, thank you.” His expression was angry enough to make me consider the possibility of an axe.

“He isn’t and the next nearest garage is two towns away, which will cost you more. Plus, when you say you’re the new doctor, Aron will help sort your car quickly because you’re one of us in Puffin Bay. That won’t happen elsewhere.” I was cross now. Aron was a decent bloke and charged a fair price. I’d gone to school with him and we’d been on a few dates when we were in our early twenties but nothing had ever happened. There hadn’t been any chemistry. He’d taken over his dad’s garage when his dad’s arthritis had gotten worse and was doing a good job.

I pulled up at Tŷ ar y Bont, which translated as *the house on the bridge*, which is exactly what it was. A short bridge crossed the narrow river which ran from inland into the sea. It was a pretty house, five bedrooms and with a nice garden, part of which was overlooked from the bridge itself, but there was another area that was private. It was one of the nicest houses in the town with lots of tourists taking photos of it when they visited, as the pictures easily turned out like something worthy of being on a jigsaw.

I'd been in the house many times, as one of my best friends from primary school had lived there until her family had moved to Carnarvon. There were lots of little rooms that had been great to play hide and seek in, or pretend we were in Narnia. It was a beautiful house.

"Here you go. Huw's over there." I pointed to Huw, who was staring at the fireworks that were coming from the beach. The rain had so far held off. If it carried on that way it would be the most luck I'd had all week.

Grayson frowned at me. Now the car was stationary, I could look at him properly, especially as I'd pulled up under a streetlight. He was ridiculously pretty. Shoulders as broad as a mountain, light brown hair and a jaw that was firm and angular. He looked like he should've been an actor or a stunt man instead of a doctor. He was definitely going to turn some heads on the island.

It was a shame his personality didn't tally with his looks.

"How do you know who I'm meeting?" He stared at me as if he expected me to confess I'd been stalking him for months.

I shrugged and managed a smile. "Huw's the only estate agent in the area."

He nodded as if he'd just realised where he was. "I've got a lot to get used to."

"Maybe. But this is a nice place. You must've thought that when you visited."

He looked at me blankly. "This is the first time I've been here."

“What?” That was weird even by my standards. “You’ve bought a house and a doctor’s practice in a place you’ve never been to?”

He rubbed at his face with both hands this time. “It looked pretty on the pictures.”

“It is. It’s a great place, that’s why I’ve never left.” Even I could hear how weird that sounded. “I mean, obviously I’ve left the island, like today, I mean I’ve never moved away.”

“Gotcha.” He was looking at me as if I was the one wielding an axe now. “Small town, one of everything, everyone knows everyone’s business.”

“Especially you. You’ll be the doctor. You’ll see everyone’s *business*.” I laughed at my own joke.

Grayson scowled.

That hadn’t gone down well. Note to self: the new doctor has had his sense of humour amputated.

“Anyway, you’d best meet Huw. I’m Clover by the way. As in four leaf.” I could do with some of that luck.

“Clover. Sounds about right. Thanks for the lift, Clover.” He got out of the car and slammed the door a little too hard.

I drove off, imagining his body under my wheels.

Penalty Kiss

CHAPTER ONE - ROWAN

Nothing could turn a warm, summery Mancunian morning into a shit-tastic fuckery of a mess like a nine o'clock meeting.

With my manager. And agent. Plus, no hint of what this meeting was about, although I could guess. It wouldn't take a genius to work out exactly which parts of the last two weeks they were pissed about, and it wasn't the photos of me doing extra training on the beach where two of the lads and I had been on holiday.

Oh no. There would be no pats on the back for that, or the fact I'd had more goal assists than anyone else last season, or sold more shirts with my name on than anyone else at Manchester Athletic, including Nate Fleming, who was the team's golden boy.

I was about to be torn a new asshole, and then have it rammed without lube.

Nothing good came of Monday morning meetings when you were still meant to be on holiday, enjoying a leisurely morning dreaming up how to spend the rest of the day without being bored. A trip to the gym maybe, or a dip in the indoor pool to stretch a few muscles. Perhaps lunch somewhere given that my usual rigid diet plan was slightly less rigid with just another few days to go before pre-season training started. Didn't mean I could go completely rogue with carbs and sugar, just that I was less likely to get a rollocking off from our chief meal spoiler, also known as the club's nutritionist.

We never asked her out for team meals, or to parties, but I don't think she cared. I wasn't entirely sure what she cared about.

The stadium was the shining diamond in the campus Manchester Athletic's new owners had built when they took over half a decade ago, investing money into an area that needed to be developed. It was now the place I spent most of

my time, enough to wonder why I didn't just live in one of the suites at the hotel there.

I nodded at Mandy, the woman who ran the reception at the entrance to part of the building dedicated to offices and the business side. She didn't like footballers, despite her job existing because of the football team, but then I didn't think she liked most people. Still, I was never rude to her when I saw her on the few occasions I came in this part. In fact, I made a point of being especially friendly to her, because I figured that pissed her off even more.

The team's manager, Guy Babin, had an office on the second floor, with a meeting room next to it. I'd been here exactly four times before: the day I came for talks about joining the team, the day I signed, two days after I scored my first hat trick for the club, and after I ended up in the media for being thrown out of a bar for fighting. That last time was admittedly the most uncomfortable – the fight was with a bloke who just happened to support our main rivals, and it looked bad.

In reality, that fight had nothing to do with what team I played for and everything to do with how he was speaking to his girlfriend. Unfortunately, that wasn't the take the press had, especially after he sold his story to a Sunday tabloid.

The door to the meeting room was open revealing Guy and my agent, sitting opposite each other, a huge, polished rosewood desk in between them. They were both laughing.

Until they saw me come in.

“Rowan. Good of you to be on time.”

Only Guy Babin could make being on time sound like you were late.

I looked at Rhys, the man I paid to have my back. He folded his arms and sat back in his chair, expression grim. He had a suit on too, which made me take a deep inhalation. A cleansing breath, something our yoga instructor would be proud of.

Shit was about to hit the fan, and that fan was about to spread it all over me.

I sat down next to Rhys, bracing myself, not sure what to say. There was no point going on the defensive – that would just make me sound guilty. Or more guilty than I actually was.

“We have a problem.” Guy didn’t sit back. He didn’t look relaxed, but he did look tanned.

I fucking hoped he hadn’t come back off his holiday to wherever it was just to deal with this.

The door opened again, and Genevieve Casson, our Head of Player Support waltzed in, looking like she’d just stepped out of a modelling shoot. “So sorry I’m late. I had to deal with a call from the press.” She sent a look my way. Something that was obviously my fault.

“Not an issue.”

Clearly Guy didn’t have the same standards about tardiness with her.

I glanced at Rhys again, who just shook his head, opened his mouth a few times and then closed it, as if he didn’t have the words to express how utterly I’d disappointed him.

If we’d been elsewhere, I’d have laughed – Rhys was only a couple of years older than me. We’d played on the same football team back when we were kids in Newcastle, only he’d ended up shattering his knee coming off a skateboard, so he’d found another way to be involved in the game.

Guy’s gaze was back on me, his eyes piercing. “Rowan, the last two days have been something of a shit-show. Since Saturday morning, I’ve had phone calls and emails asking me for comments about the story in the press, and the photos of you in the pool with the young lady have added an additional layer of difficulty. We have to look at how this situation is managed.”

He wasn’t wrong, apart from the young lady part. There had been nothing lady-like about the girl in the pool, whose name I’d only found out when I’d seen the picture on social media, but she had been all woman.

I didn't smile at the memory. I wished it hadn't happened.

"I had no idea Jade was going to go to the press." Which was the truth. We'd split at the end of the season when I'd gotten tired of her being so fame hungry. There were more photos of me on her Instagram than there were on mine, and the pressure from her to spend all of my free time doing stuff that involved being seen.

"I did warn you." Rhys always liked to say *I told you so*, usually with a big shit-eating grin on his ugly face, which he was managing to hide right now under the pretence of being professional.

There was no point responding. Jade had made up a story to sell, painting herself in the light she wanted to be seen in, casting me as the villain. I'd read it at stupid o'clock this morning, when I'd been woken by Rhys' assistant telling me I had to get to the stadium ground for this meeting. When I'd asked why, she'd told me to Google myself.

I'd ignored the media while we were on holiday. I hired someone to manage my social media accounts, adding the odd post when it was something more personal, and even though my season had been a hundred-percenter, after ten years as a professional footballer, I'd learned not to read pundits' opinions in the press.

Which meant this morning had been a bit of a surprise.

"Rowan's solicitor is involved already. We're researching if we can sue Ms Young. The timing of the other photos are unfortunate." Rhys reached under the table and pinched what he could of the skin on my thigh hard – a sign to shut the fuck up.

I had no idea my solicitor was involved, clearly something else Rhys was taking care of.

Rhys continued without missing a beat, "But this is all solvable, and we can use it to our advantage."

He was trying to gloss over it.

Guy stared at me in a way that made me feel he was analysing my soul. "You should pursue it with Ms Young and

the paper. You do need to defend your image on this one, Rowan. Goals and assists aren't going to be enough to clear up the image you now have." His accent sounded even more French than usual. "Genevieve, where are you up to with the media?"

Pretty green eyes looked up from the tablet in front of her. "The party line is that Rowan was single – Jade doing a tell-all has actually helped in that case – and entitled to enjoy himself, and that he's also entitled to his privacy." Her eyes narrowed. "Having sex with a woman on a sun lounger in full view probably wasn't your wisest move though."

I rubbed my forehead. "It was a private party. I didn't know her friend was going to take photos and post them."

"That's the problem, Rowan, you can never know when someone's going to do that. You were our record signing, you're on our record wages. We've taught you to always think the worst of people who you don't know well, or can't be vouched for, until you know them better. You're not stupid, but the holiday photos are damaging to your image, as is Jade's interview. We have damage control to do." Guy's jaw stiffened and his eyes had that dark gleam to them that usually made me want to stay well away.

I shrugged. "I understand what you've said – I have shit taste in women and I didn't make a good choice at the party." No point in trying to bullshit my way through that.

Genevieve shook her head. "How can you have sex in front of other people? Never mind, you're a footballer. Therefore, you have a whole different set of rules."

She was right. Money, fame and adoration were a toxic combination. When you heard fans chanting your name in the stadium, saw your name on banners and shirts, encountered women making themselves available for you when you wanted, you couldn't be untouched by it. For a kid who grew up playing footy on the fields of Newcastle, whose mam couldn't afford to buy him new boots, it was a lot.

"I apologise on behalf of all footballers. What damage has been done?" I had the sense not to argue with her. You didn't

argue with Genevieve.

“There’s questions in the press whether you can handle the pressure of your price tag – but that’s been on and off since you joined us.” She checked her tablet. “A lot of backlash from fans about your behaviour on holiday – ‘you’re paid to be an example’, which you are.” She looked up at me, still glaring. “And a lot of negativity from women’s groups following on from Jade’s interview and the photographs. That’s not what you need. Or what the club needs.”

I took another deep breath. She was right. Manchester Athletic portrayed itself as being family friendly and a community-based club. Rory Baines, the owner, had invested not only in the campus, but the surrounding area, regenerating what had been a run-down, historically industrial area of the city, only the industry wasn’t there anymore. Families were encouraged, the club had a ton of junior football schools for kids too.

“We have a few weeks until the season starts...”

That wasn’t a sentence I was going to let Genevieve finish. “We have one week until pre-season training starts. You know how intensive that gets. Whatever you’re about to say, keep that in mind.”

Rhys’ hand patted my back. “I’m sure Genevieve has taken all that into consideration. We all have an interest in how you’re perceived – just like your sponsors.”

I wanted to tell Rhys that I didn’t give a shit about my sponsors, but that wasn’t true. My mam had brought me up on her own – me, my little brother, and our younger sister. My wages and the income from sponsorships made sure the life we’d lived back then was just a bad dream, and the future, especially my sister’s, was comfortable. She had severe learning difficulties and required round the clock support. While our mam was heavily involved, she couldn’t manage on her own, so the first thing my income did was provide for them. I had no intention of their quality of life changing, unless it was for the better.

I swallowed again. “What’s your plan?”

Genevieve glanced at Guy. She'd probably not had chance to run this past him yet. "There are two options. You lie low and keep out of the media, hoping it blows over, go legal with Jade. But that will take longer and after the issue with the fight last season, where we used that tactic, it's going to leave you open to a lot more speculation and scrutiny. We've already had journos digging for comments on your sister, and your ex before Jade." Genny had always managed to stop the media from digging into my family's background. I had no idea how. Maybe she baked them cakes or sent choirs round to serenade them; I didn't know how. I was just grateful.

"What's the second option?" Rhys leaned forward.

She glanced again at Guy. "We work proactively. Get Rowan in front of the cameras but in situations that promote the image we all want him to have. I do know how intensive pre-season training can be and we won't be looking at cutting into any of that."

Guy nodded. "And if you're busy with this, you won't have a chance to get in any more trouble."

"What do you want me to do?"

The look Genevieve gave Rhys did not fill me with joy.

"The answer's no."

Rhys laughed. "You don't have an answer to give. You're doing it. End of. And I think it's a great idea."

"Because you'll have something to take the piss out of me about for the next five years."

"I've already got plenty of things to take the piss out of, Ro. This is just extra."

He helped himself to coffee from the machine in my kitchen that I'd never learned to work. Rhys was an expert at using it. Adding the beans, knowing which setting to use for the perfect coffee, and just the right amount, so he could squeeze his milk in. Precision. Very Rhys.

"I'm not doing it. Anything – I can do the kids football school by myself, and the hospital stuff. Jones doesn't need to

be involved.” I swore this was a punishment.

Rhys sat down at the table that came with the house. Since I’d transferred to Athletic, I’d been living in one of the properties the club owned, renting it off them while I found my own place. My contract was five years, with various options to extend, so buying somewhere was at the top of my to do list and probably something I should be doing this week before pre-season started.

I was about to get a new housemate too. Ryan O’Connell had signed for us last week from Arsenal, and I’d been told he was moving in here since security and all that shit was at its best.

I’d played against him plenty of times but didn’t know him. We’d both been capped by England, but never in the same squad. With the World Cup next summer, we’d both be looking to be involved, so playing together at club level would hopefully boost us both.

Rhys had been my agent since I was twenty-one, and my previous one had tried shafting me with a contract that even a nursery kid would’ve known was corrupt. Rhys had been twenty-three and an apprentice agent. I’d been his first big name. But unlike the first guy, he had more than money as his motivation – he’d spent more time growing up at my house than his own.

Right now, Rhys was far too fucking amused for his own good.

“It’s one week coaching kids, which you’re good at. You never know, you might actually get along this time.” He sniggered, reminding me of the fourteen-year-old version of him who caught me kissing a girl round the back of the garages.

“Dee Jones hates me.” I took a mouthful of the protein smoothie I’d made myself, thinking about the not-so-lovely Dee. “She thinks she’s Miss Perfect, so she’s going to fucking love me being in trouble.”

Dee was captain of Manchester Athletic's Women's Team. We played the same position – attacking midfield – and we both wore the number ten shirt.

No love was lost between us.

Rhys grinned. I could almost see the thought bubbles bursting from his head. He'd been there a few months back when Miss Dee and I had exchanged a few words about her parking in my space.

“I'll remember to wear ear plugs. And bring a first aid kit for after she's finished chewing you up.” Rhys finished his coffee, which must've been hot enough to take off a layer of his mouth. “What did you do to piss her off? Have you figured it out yet?”

I had no idea what I'd done to earn the wrath of Dee Jones. I hadn't slept with her, I'd never said anything negative about women's football – I actually thought it was more skilful than men's football most of the time – and I hadn't done anything to any of her teammates that I was aware of.

It wasn't the parking incident. She'd been unimpressed with me before that, a little like a raincloud that liked to piss on my parade whenever I had something to celebrate, to mix my metaphors.

I scored a brace, she'd get a hattrick. I won man of the match, she ended up in team of the week. I bought a new car; she did an interview where she discussed how cars were killing furry animals.

“I was born.”

Rhys banged down his coffee cup and headed back to the machine, choking on a laugh. “She's a nice person. We've got her as a client now.”

“Really?”

He shook his head at me, turning on the coffee machine again and then heading to the fridge for more milk. “We do take on female clients, you know.”

“I didn’t mean that. Just – *her*. She probably bathes in hand sanitiser to keep herself so squeaky clean.” I finished the rest of my shake. “And you know I’d rather focus on pre-season than have to do all these appearances.”

I saw his sigh, his chest rising, nose flaring slightly. “Rowan, you’ve fucked up. I know Jade was a bitch to go to the press, and I know half of what she said wasn’t true – you didn’t cheat, and you weren’t partying all the time, but you did pretty much ignore her rather than just break up with her...”

“Until I did break it off.”

“Yeah, well. She was desperate to be a WAG. Next time, listen to what I say and don’t go there with women who’re just after one thing. Men are so much more straight forward.” He found a jug I didn’t know I owned, filled it with milk and stuck it in the microwave. Clearly we were feeling classy today.

Rhys had come out when he was eighteen, not that he’d needed to. He’d never had a girlfriend, despite being scouted by a modelling agency, and had politely turned down every girl that had asked him out.

My mum inquired one day if he was going to ever go on a date with a girl called Katy, who lived across the road from us, and was always hanging around in the hope that Rhys would ask her out.

His response? *I’m actually interested in her brother.*

And that was that. Nothing more was said. And Rhys did end up dating her brother for about eighteen months.

“And Mexico – what the fuck were you thinking, Ro? I get you were on holiday, but you’ve been too much in the media. You’ve had your face everywhere. Fucking a girl on a sun lounger isn’t classy, mate.”

The microwave pinged.

I pushed the glass away. He had a point. The media loved a story about WAGs, footballers wives and girlfriends. Some magazines would devote whole pages to them.

“Please tell me only alcohol was involved.”

“Only alcohol was involved. I still don’t touch anything else. You know that.” Rhys’ dad had been a user. Coke had been his drug of choice.

He nodded. “Good. I just needed to hear it.” He sat back down, coffee to his liking. “You need to manage your mouth with Dee. There’s been a ton of shit about how you treat women after what Jade said, and those photos.”

“I know. I will.”

Somehow.

Maybe with superglue.

Stirred

CHAPTER ONE

“I know you wanted to finish on time, but there’s a patient who needed an emergency appointment.”

Bee Patel was Keren’s receptionist, a slender woman who had a great manner with patients, especially those who were nervous at seeing a dentist. However, she had a huge issue with saying no to anyone who said it was an emergency, which meant that Keren’s days were often extended. Not that she had much to rush home to.

“Just the one emergency tonight?” Keren raised a brow. On one occasion there had been three, so one wasn’t too bad.

“Just one. Broken tooth. I think he’s in some pain though,” Bee gave her a big smile, one with perfect teeth. “You want me to hang around to sort payment after you’ve done?”

Keren shook her head. There was no point both of them being late home. Between her and Kiefer - her dental nurse - they could manage. “You shoot. Isn’t it your son’s football match tonight?”

Bee nodded. “It is. And he’ll be wanting his lucky meal.” She rolled her eyes. “Ten-year-old boys. Who’d have them?”

I would, thought Keren. But now was not the time to dwell on what she didn’t have. Instead, she needed to think about what she did have, which was a patient in some discomfort in the waiting room. “Send him through. And wish Rak good luck from me.”

Sixty seconds later a familiar and unwelcome figure wandered through the door into her room.

Scott Maynard.

Six foot three of obnoxious, brooding muscle. His expression was pained and his eyes told her that he most definitely did not want to be here, for more than one reason.

He hated her.

To the point of where he couldn't actually manage to be civil in public and would argue with her over anything, Scott Maynard hated her and had done since she was eighteen and he was twenty-one. And she hadn't a fucking clue why.

"Take a seat and tell me what the problem is," she said, pulling every ounce of professional resolve into her demeanour. She would not be sarcastic; she would not be rude. She would be his dentist and ease whatever pain he was in. And she really wouldn't try to cause him more discomfort even if it killed her.

He sat down, looking tense and uncomfortable. "I've broken a tooth. A molar."

That was all she needed. No other communication would be necessary and as soon as she got his mouth open and her instruments in there, she wouldn't have to listen to him speak.

"Open up and I'll see what I can do."

He did exactly what she'd asked, which she was pretty sure was a first for fourteen years. Keren leaned into him, inhaling the musky scent that she'd always associated with him. God help a man she had a relationship with who wore the same: he'd have to change it.

She shone the small torch into his mouth and saw the problem straight away. Broken molar. Split straight down the middle and it needed extracting and he needed pain relief because right now, it would be hurting like a fucker.

"How brave are you?" she said, removing her instruments.

"Are you fucking joking?" he growled.

She shook her head. "Scott, you do not need to fuck with me right now. You're my patient and not the person I go to war with at least two nights a week. My job is to stop the pain and treat what's happened. Got that?"

He glared at her, total dislike oozing from his eyeballs in her direction. "Got it."

"Okay. You know your tooth's broken. Looking at the state of it, I'd guess you've been having toothache for a while."

“I thought it would get better on its own,” he said. “I hate dentists.” His words were loaded. He didn’t just hate dentists, she knew. He hated this particular one. Her.

She took a cleansing breath. “Pain in your mouth doesn’t get better on its own. And I get you probably didn’t want to see me, but then you need to change dentists. Oral health is really important.”

“Save the lecture, princess. How can you fix it?” His words tore through the otherwise quiet air.

Her patience began to wear. She’d had a long day. She had another long day tomorrow - and the day after that. And what was worse, was that the only thing she had to look forward to was a night out in Severton, probably at Scott’s bar, and her book. Maybe with a bath bomb and a soak beforehand.

“I can’t. That tooth is beyond repair. It’s going to need to come out. It’s infected. I’ll prescribe you antibiotics and when the infection’s gone, we’ll discuss whether you’re having a bridge or a dental implant.” She was totally beyond speaking to him kindly.

“What’s the difference and how do you know I have an infection?” he said.

She noticed that he did look apprehensive and she hadn’t told him the worst. He was going to hurt like a bitch for the next few days. “I’ll give you some information on the differences. And I can pretty much see the infection. I need to get the tooth out and clean it up.”

He gave her a brief nod. She wasn’t sure whether the pain was making it difficult for him to speak or whether he wasn’t speaking because it was her. And right now, she didn’t care.

“I’ll get you prepped.” She threw her gloves in the bin and left him in the room to find Kiefer and give him the good news that they had the world’s grumpiest patient in for at least the next forty minutes.

Stone was the best way she could describe how Scott handled himself while she extracted the two halves of the broken tooth. He’d winced slightly when she’d injected the anaesthetic,

clutching onto the chair like it was a lifeline keeping him afloat and then he'd closed his eyes and let her get on with it without a single flinch.

Keren knew she was good at her job. She was gentle with her hands and confident; she would reassure her patients but would also be firm in terms of what needed to be done. And she was good with the kids. If she followed her dream, she would move to the city and specialise as a children's dentist, even better, children with special needs. And it was a dream she was seriously considering because it looked like having her own children would be off the agenda.

Severton had a serious shortage of single, attractive men who were long-term prospects.

"We've done," she said, hitting a pedal on the chair so it came upright. Scott was pale, his usual swarthy skin whiter than usual with the pain and anxiety. The procedure wasn't nice; she appreciated that. "I want you to pop back in tomorrow morning so I can check how everything is. It doesn't matter what time because I can see you between patients. It's a two-minute check."

He nodded, moving his jaw up and down, trying to get some relief after it had been in the same position for half an hour. "Tomorrow," he reiterated. "Anything else?"

She stared at the floor. There was plenty else. Like *why do you hate me? What did I do? Why can't we be civil?*

"You need a check-up and a scale and polish as maintenance. If I am the problem because you don't want to see me, then there is another dentist starting here three days a week, so you can book in with him," she said. "And if you have pain like I know you have been doing, you need to get it seen to. A week ago, I could've saved the tooth. Lecture over. There will be antibiotics waiting at the front desk." She turned her back and listened to him leave her room, Kiefer explaining payment options although she knew Scott Maynard could afford to pay for everyone's dental treatment this week and not blink an eye.

He was just another patient. And she needed to keep him tightly in that box.

An hour later Keren was slobbering out on her sofa, pyjamas on, dressing gown on and an almighty portion of special chow mein. She surfed between channels showing reality TV programs, although none grabbed her for more than a couple of minutes, and then she perused social media, catching up on other people's lives because she clearly didn't have one of her own.

She'd just finished the takeout when the doorbell rang, it's twee chime enough to make her debate whether she could hide round the back of the sofa and her visitor would fuck off.

Then it rang again, this time accompanied with a not so gentle tap on the door. If she ignored it, she knew damn well that the tap would get louder, followed by shouting and then her neighbour would start to complain about *that Maynard girl* again. The same Maynard girl who had been tormenting Severton for thirty years, because Keren was pretty sure that Rayah Maynard had been born a tormentor.

"What?" Keren snapped as she answered the door, not caring that her dressing gown was open and the bunny print pyjamas were on full show. "Why are you here?"

Rayah was wearing what looked like a trench coat and holding a bottle of prosecco.

"Are you wearing slippers?" Keren said, staring down at her best friend's feet.

"I might be," Rayah said. "But at least I'm not wearing rabbit pyjamas. Jesus, how long have you had those? I swear I remember them at a sleepover when you were sixteen."

Keren looked down at her PJ's. "Yeah, same ones."

"And they still fit?"

Keren looked down again. Her boobs were bigger and so was her butt. She had always been a curvy girl and she had no issue with that. It gave her an excuse to maintain those curves, like tonight.

“They still fit,” she said. “What’s on under the trench, Pervy?” She used the long standing nickname she had for Rayah as it summed her up completely.

“Jamás,” Rayah said. “And I need to come in. They’re not winter ones.”

“Holy mother,” Keren’s eyes bugged at the trench coat. “Have you been flashing Severton again? The neighbours really will start to complain.”

“Not yet, but if you don’t let me in, my nipples are likely to become classified as illegal weapons.” Rayah raised the bottle and poked it towards Keren a couple of times. “And I want to drink.”

“Hard day?”

Rayah rolled her eyes. “Hard doesn’t quite sum it up. If teaching really was just teaching, then it’d be a damn sight easier. Nowhere on the job description does it say social worker or parental coach. How about you? I smell Chinese.” Rayah sniffed the air as she entered in a similar manner as Keren had seen dogs sniff another canine’s backside.

“My last patient was your cousin.” She headed straight through to the narrow galley kitchen to get glasses. She hadn’t intended drinking tonight, thinking she’d leave it till nearer the weekend, but a couple of glasses to numb the pain of having spent time with Scott sounded like a good idea.

Rayah sat on the kitchen worktops, because even though she was thirty, she hadn’t grown up. “I saw him briefly when I went to steal that bottle from his bar. His face looked swollen, so I figured something was up. Not that I asked.”

“Why didn’t you ask?” Keren said, popping the bottle.

“Because he looked extra grumpy and I didn’t want to draw attention to the fact that I was stealing his stock.” Rayah reached out a hand for the glass. “What was up with him?”

“Broken tooth caused by an abscess. I had to extract the tooth and clean out the infection. It wouldn’t have been pleasant for him.” Keren watched Rayah squirm on the counter. She was the biggest baby when it came to dental

treatment. “It’s why you should come for regular check-ups, because prevention is better than cure.”

“Did you tell Scott that or did you just glare at each other?” Rayah said. “He must’ve been in pain if he went to you.”

“Which is ridiculous,” Keren snorted. “I’m a professional. My aim is to help people look after their teeth and oral hygiene and stop them from experiencing discomfort. I’ll treat anyone.”

“I know,” Rayah said. “I believe you had a visit from Severton’s cutest terrorist yesterday.”

Keren grinned. “She’s such a sweetheart,” she said, thinking of Sadie Grace, although terrorist was probably a much better adjective. “Did Jonny remember to leave money from the tooth fairy?”

Rayah nodded, looking a little dreamy. She kept it very well hidden, but she’d had a huge crush on Jonny Graham since Sadie Grace had started in her nursery class eighteen months ago. “Sadie ran to me this morning in the yard and told me she had a shiny pound.”

“When are you going to ask Jonny out?” Keren said. “Instead of staring at his ass whenever you see him walking away?”

“I’m not. I can’t.” Rayah said. “And I know that means I’m going to die a lonely mad cat woman who becomes known as the most prolific purchaser of batteries in Severton to power her vibe, but it’s never going to happen.”

Keren shook her head. They had this conversation at least twice a week. Jonny was a widower with three children, his wife Grace was killed in a hit and run when Sadie Grace was just three months old. He was also in charge of the local fire station and could’ve produced his own calendar to raise funds, which Keren had suggested.

“Still don’t understand why not,” Keren said, because she didn’t.

“Because he’s the best friend of my brother and cousins, which pretty much makes it incestuous. We grew up together – he saw me naked when I was six – and I’m not what he needs.” Rayah shook her head, clearly still trying to convince herself.

“What does he need?”

“Someone hot who will look after his children and be a good wife. And let’s face it, Key, I’m not good wife material. Look at me – hot mess pretty much sums it up,” Rayah stretched out her arms, knocking something off the shelf and almost falling off the counter.

Keren raised a brow. “You’re hot. His kids adore you – you know you’re his go to babysitter...”

“Because I’m single and available when he gets called into work. I’m like a little sister. He hooked up with some woman in Leeds last weekend,” Rayah said, her words tight and her nose wrinkled.

“The man has needs,” Keren said. “I still think you should offer to assist him with them. Think about how you’ll feel if he meets someone and it’s serious. The worst that can happen is that he says no, and you know Jake and that lot won’t interfere.”

Rayah shrugged. “I wasn’t like this when he was married. I loved Grace – and they were so perfect together.” She shook her head. “Let’s not talk about Jonny. Let’s talk about your love life.”

“And that will be a very short conversation, because it died a long time ago. In fact, its gravestone is now covered in moss.”

“You shouldn’t refer to your vagina like that. Moss does not become it,” Rayah said. “And besides, it won’t have healed up and it won’t be eating grass. You just need to find it some penile action.”

“And they let you teach the young of this community,” Keren said. “There is no hope.”

“Have you tried that new dating website? The one I sent you the link to?” Rayah said, completely ignoring the insult. She was used to it. She’d been considered a terrorist herself since being old enough to point.

Keren muttered something under her breath about wastes of time. “The men on there aren’t what I’m looking for?”

“What *are* you looking for?” Rayah said. “Besides someone to knock the moss off your falula.”

“*Falula*? Where the hell do you get these words?” Keren said, leaning back against the counter. “I want someone who doesn’t look as if they’re, well, desperate to see what a naked woman looks like. And let’s face it, most men on dating websites are there for a reason, at least they are when they get into their thirties. You know, they’ve been divorced or they’ve never had the confidence to speak to a woman or...”

“They live in remote communities and it’s difficult to meet new people,” Rayah inserted. “I get what you’re saying. Maybe we need to go out more in Leeds and Manchester.”

“Ray, I’m not likely to meet anyone serious in a bar. We’ve been trying that now for years. Where do most people meet their partner?” Keren said, feeling more and more resolute as to what she was going to need to do.

Rayah shrugged. “You live in Severton. So here it would be at a barn dance or in primary school. Or potentially on the young farmers’ pram push.”

“But in the city, it’s at work. Or someone connected with work.” And the pram push was an excuse for farmers to resort back to being children and create vehicles to push each other round in while drunk. Not the best for finding a potential partner.

Rayah sat up straight and proceeded to knock over Keren’s recipe book holder. “You’re thinking of moving again, aren’t you?”

Keren didn’t say anything, instead she topped up Rayah’s glass with more prosecco.

“Key, you can’t leave. This is your home... You love it here,” Rayah said, using exactly the same tone as she had to persuade Keren to go with Connor Roberts to the after-prom party so Rayah could tag along with his brother.

“I do love it here, Ray. But I’m thirty-two. Time’s ticking by if I want to meet someone and have a family. And if that’s not going to happen, I’d like to specialise in children’s dentistry,” Keren said. “There’s a post opening up in Manchester, working with kids with complex physical disabilities. I’d love to do something like that and there’s nothing to keep me here.”

Rayah pouted.

“I know,” Keren said. “But it isn’t going to change us. We coped through university being at opposite ends of the country. I have to at least consider this.”

“Have you applied?” Rayah said accusingly.

Keren shook her head. “No. It isn’t advertised yet. I know the person in post at the moment is moving to Australia with his wife, but there’s no time frame on it yet.”

Rayah hopped off the worktop and strutted into the lounge with her glass. “I can’t have you leave Severton,” she said. “So I guess I need to find you a reason to stay.”

“That sounds ominous,” Keren said.

Then Rayah’s mouth curved into a smile wide enough to swallow a bus. “Would you let me set you up?”

“No,” Keren shook her head. “We’ve tried that. Twice. Both went horribly wrong. Embarrassingly so.”

“This won’t. Honestly. He’s just moved to Severton and he’s joined Scott’s band,” Rayah said, sounding as if she’d just discovered the solution to end world poverty.

“I can’t see myself in a relationship with a musician,” she said, trying to hide under a blanket on the sofa and hoping Rayah would go away. “Too unreliable.”

“He’s an accountant. I suspect he’ll be reliable.”

“If he’s an accountant, he’ll be boring.”

“He’s joined the search and rescue team.”

“That doesn’t mean he’ll be interesting.”

“He plays guitar...” Rayah was at her most persuasive.

“So does Scott.”

“But Olly is the right age, he’s had a couple of long term relationships. He’s intelligent and good with money...”

“You can’t assume that just because he’s an accountant...”

“He’s just bought the Jacksons’ place on Moorcroft. He’s good with money,” Rayah said, now looking as if she had not only discovered the solution for world peace, but had also worked out how to stop global warming. “And he’s hot. Let me set you up for a drink with him. Just a drink.”

Keren began to flinch. “Why can’t you just ask him to join us all for drinks on Friday and then if we click, I can ask him out?”

“Because that’ll make it sound like *I’m* interested. And he’ll hear you and Scott bickering. If Scott can speak by then. Go on, let me set you up.” Rayah beamed at her.

Keren held her head in her hands and shook her head.

“Even if I say no, you’re going to do it anyway.”

Also by Annie Dyer

The Callaghan Green Series

In Suggested Reading order (can be read as stand-alones)

Engagement Rate

What happens when a hook up leaves you hooked? Jackson Callaghan is the broody workaholic who isn't looking for love until he meets his new marketing executive? Meet the Callaghans in this first-in-series, steamy office romance.

White Knight

If you're in the mood for a second chance romance with an older brother's best friend twist, then look no further. Claire Callaghan guards her heart as well as her secrets, but Killian O'Hara may just be the man to take her heart for himself.

Compromising Agreements

Grumpy, bossy Maxwell Callaghan meets his match in this steamy enemies-lovers story. Mistaking Victoria Davies as being a quiet secretary is only Max's first mistake, but can she be the one to make this brooding Callaghan brother smile?

Between Cases

*Could there be anything better than a book boyfriend who owns a bookstore? Payton Callaghan isn't sure; although giving up relationships when she might've just met *The One* is a dilemma she's facing in *BETWEEN CASES*, a meet-cute that'll have you swooning over Owen Anders.*

Changing Spaces

Love a best friend's younger sister romance? Meet Eli, partner in the Callaghan Green law firm and Ava's Callaghan's steamy one-night stand that she just can't seem to keep as just one night. Independent, strong-willed and intelligent, can Eli be the man Ava wants?

Heat

*Feeling hungry? Get a taste of this single dad, hot chef romance in *HEAT*. Simone Wood is a restaurant owner who loves to dance, she's just never found the right partner until her head chef Jack starts to teach her his rhythm. Problem is, someone's not happy with Simone, and their dance could be over before they've learned the steps.*

Mythical Creatures

The enigmatic Callum Callaghan heads to Africa with the only woman who came close to taming his heart, in this steamy second-chance romance. Contains a beautifully broken alpha and some divinely gorgeous scenery in this tale that will make you both cry and laugh. HEA guaranteed.

Melted Hearts

Hot rock star? Enemies to lovers? Fake engagement? All of these ingredients are in this Callaghan Green novel. Sophie Slater is a businesswoman through and through but makes a pact with the devil – also known as Liam Rossi, newly retired Rockstar – to get the property she wants - one that just happens to be in Iceland. Northern lights, a Callaghan bachelor party, and a quickly picked engagement ring are key notes in this hot springs heated romance.

Evergreen

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without any presents, and that's what's going to happen if Seph Callaghan doesn't get his act together. The Callaghan clan are together for Christmas, along with a positive pregnancy test from someone and several more surprises!

The Partnership

Seph Callaghan finally gets his HEA in this office romance. Babies, exes and a whole lot of smoulder!

The English Gent Romances

The Wedding Agreement

Imogen Green doesn't do anything without thinking it through, and that includes offering to marry her old - very attractive - school friend, Noah Soames, who needs a wedding. The only problem is, their fauxmance might not be so fake, after all...

The Atelier Assignment

Dealing with musty paintings is Catrin Green's job. Dealing with a hot Lord who happens to be grumpy AF isn't. But that's what she's stuck with for three months. Zeke's daughter is the only light in her days, until she finds a way to make Zeke smile. Only this wasn't part of the assignment.

The Romance Rehearsal

Maven Green has managed to avoid her childhood sweetheart for more than a decade, but now he's cast as her leading man in the play she's directing. Anthony was the boy who had all her firsts; will he be her last as well?

The Imperfect Proposal

Shay Green doesn't expect his new colleague to walk in on him when he's mid-kiss in a stockroom. He also doesn't expect his new colleague to be his wife. The wife he married over a decade ago in Vegas and hasn't seen since

Puffin Bay Series

Puffin Bay

Amelie started a new life on a small Welsh island, finding peace and new beginnings. What wasn't in the plan was the man buying the building over the road. She was used to dealing with arrogant tourists, but this city boy was enough to have her want to put her hands around his neck, on his chest, and maybe somewhere else too...

Wild Tides

Being a runaway bride and escaping her wedding wasn't what Fleur intended when she said yes to the dress. That dress is now sodden in the water of the Menai Strait and she needs saving - by none other than lighthouse keeper Thane. She needs a man to get under to get over the one she left at the altar - but that might come with a little surprise in a few months time...

Lovers Heights

Serious gin distiller Finn Holland needs a distraction from what he's trying to leave behind in the city. That distraction comes in the form of Ruby, who's moved to the island to escape drama of her own. Neither planned on a fake relationship, especially one that led to a marriage that might not be that fake at all...

Manchester Athletic FC

Penalty Kiss

Manchester Athletic's bad boy needs taming, else his football career could be on the line. Pitched with women's football's role model pin up, he has pre-season to sort out his game - on and off the field.

Hollywood Ball

One night. It didn't matter who she was, or who he was, because tomorrow they'd both go back to their lives. Only hers wasn't that ordinary.

What she didn't know, was neither was his.

Heart Keeper

Single dad. Recent widow. Star goal keeper.

Manchester Athletic's physio should keep her hands to herself outside of her treatment room, but that's proving tough. What else is tough is finding two lines on that pregnancy test...

Target Man

Jesse Sullivan is Manchester Athletic's Captain Marvel. He keeps his private life handcuffed to his bed, locked behind a non-disclosure agreement. Jesse doesn't do relationships – not until he meets his teammate's – and best friend's – sister.

Red Heart Card

She wants a baby. He's offering. The trouble is, he's soccer's golden boy and he's ten years younger. The last time they tried this, she broke his heart. Will hearts be left intact this time around?

Severton Search and Rescue

Sleighed

Have a change of scenery and take a trip to a small town. Visit Severton, in Sleighed; this friends-to-lovers romantic suspense will capture your heart as much as Sorrell Slater steals Zack Maynard's.

Stirred

If enemies-to-lovers is your manna, then you'll want to stay in Severton for Stirred. Keren Leigh and Scott Maynard have been at daggers drawn for years, until their one-night ceasefire changes the course of their lives forever.

Smoldered

Want to be saved by a hot firefighter? Rayah Maynard's lusted over Jonny Graham ever since she came back to town. Jonny's prioritised his three children over his own love life since his wife died, but now Rayah's teaching more than just his daughter – she's teaching him just how hot their flames can burn.

Shaken

Abby Walker doesn't exist. Hiding from a gang she suspects is involved in the disappearance of her sister, Severton is where she's taken refuge. Along with her secrets, she's hiding her huge crush on local cop, Alex Maynard. But she isn't the only one with secrets. Alex can keep her safe, but can he also take care of her heart?

Sweetened

Enemies? Friends? Could be lovers? All Jake Maynard knows is that Lainey Green is driving him mad, and he really doesn't like that she managed to buy the farm he

coveted from under his nose. All's fair in love and war, until events in Severton take a sinister turn.

Standalone Romance

Love Rises

Two broken souls, one hot summer. Anya returns to her childhood island home after experiencing a painful loss. Gabe escapes to the same place, needing to leave his life behind, drowning in guilt. Neither are planning on meeting the other, but when they do, from their grief, love rises. Only can it be more than a summer long?

Bartender

The White Island, home of hedonism, heat and holidays. Jameson returns to her family's holiday home on Ibiza, but doesn't expect to be charmed by a bartender, a man with an agenda other than just seduction.

Tarnished Crowns Trilogy

Lovers. Liars. Traitors. Thieves. We were all of these. Political intrigue, suspense and seduction mingle together in this intricate and steamy royal romance trilogy.

Chandelier

Grenade

Emeralds

Crime Fiction

We Were Never Alone

How Far Away the Stars (Novella)

About the Author

Annie Dyer lives in Manchester, England. She spends her time finding ways to procrastinate from tidying up, usually through creating characters. Staple foods include chocolate, Pad Thai and whatever hasn't gone off in the fridge.

You can find out more about Annie's upcoming books and the inspiration behind them through her newsletter and Facebook group, Annie's London Lovers.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/AnniesLondonLovers>

Visit her website to sign up for the newsletter and receive access to bonus epilogues!

<https://www.writeranniedyer.com>

