

The Gatehouse Café

K.T. DADY

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Published by K.T. Dady

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Table of Contents

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

About the Author

Acknowledgements

Vivien

The far corner of the living room, right next to the giant cheese plant that never seemed to show any signs of wilting, was where Vivien would cower whenever Brody was in a rage. Sometimes, the shaded area would turn her into the smallest mouse. Unseen. Unheard. Unnoticed by her partner. Her head would stay low whilst her body curled into ball, and there she would pray. To who, she did not know, but maybe someday someone would hear her silent cries and find a way to help free her from the torment she had suffered for the past eight years.

Brody swore and kicked the chipped coffee table. Yet another shaving of wood fell to the beige carpet. One more reminder of his temper. The hole in the kitchen door still hadn't been fixed from the previous month, and Vivien's headache had taken two weeks to pass. As for her psychological scars and trauma, they weren't given the breathing room to heal. Brody made sure of that.

Please don't let him near me. Please make him go away. Please, somebody, help me.

Vivien's breath caught as Brody's fingers slid into her hair, tugging her to a stand. She knew not to yell. That would only make things worse.

'Why do you always have to be this way?' he said through clenched teeth. 'I come home from work, and there you are, playing your music and smiling like there's something to smile about. What's there to smile about, eh, Viv? You hiding something from me?'

'No,' she managed, not wanting to speak at all.

It hadn't taken Vivien long to figure out that whenever she fought back, the torture would go on longer. She also knew that when he was in one of his moods, it didn't matter if she spoke or not. He would even find fault in her silence, but at least the silent route made his temper disappear faster.

Brody squashed her face against the living room wall. ‘You only ever think about yourself. Do you know how selfish you are? How much I put up with from you? Do you know how much better my life would be if it wasn’t for you? I stick around for your sake. I do everything for you, but it’s never enough. You make me sick.’

Vivien inhaled the wallpaper paste still potent from the decorating she’d done three days ago. Her vision faded for a few seconds, then she clasped one hand to her temple and steadied her footing whilst Brody stepped back.

I hate you.

She took a breath and tried to calm her racing heart, but Brody stepped back into her personal space. Saliva hit her cheek as he continued to tell her all about how horrible she was and how his life was terrible because of her.

One day, I’ll be free.

‘Finn Silver.’ His voice faded back into her aching ears.

Vivien’s dark eyes lifted to see his light-brown ones filled with pure hatred. Brody had permanent frown lines, but when he was angry they deepened. In that moment, when they were that deep, she was sure she would be able to see hell itself.

What’s he saying about Finn?

The air left her without warning as she doubled over, dropping to her knees. He pulled his fist back from her stomach and pushed her head to one side as he passed her to sit on the coffee table, with legs open and elbows resting on his knees. ‘Oh, don’t act like I just hurt you.’

Vivien was still trying to catch her breath. Pain had taken a back seat.

It had been so long since she loved him. She wasn’t sure if she really had at all. All she wanted was for him to leave her home. She needed to get out of the nightmare. It was time. It had to be time. She couldn’t believe how she had let this become her life. She couldn’t take it anymore. She needed him to leave her life for good.

Why hadn't she known about red flags before? She had to stop thinking. She couldn't do that to herself. It happened. Now all she could focus on was her escape plan, because enough was enough.

A hand lightly stroked over her long dark hair. If it wasn't him, she would have felt soothed.

'Hey, Viv, you okay?' Brody's voice was calm and soft, as though he had just found her in that state.

Here we go.

It was time for the crocodile tears, the apologies, the part where he made sure she didn't lay blame on him.

Exhausted, all she wanted was to curl up in the corner and sleep. Forever.

Brody placed one hand gently under her chin and raised her head, and Vivien knew not to show tears, hatred, or retaliation. He slid off the table to his knees as she stood, then buried his head into her blue pyjama bottoms, gripping her thighs tightly whilst sobbing uncontrollably onto the material.

His muffled words weren't anything she needed to concentrate on. She'd heard the lines so many times, she could recite them in her sleep. His mastered verse that she had to pander to. Or else. It was nearly over. The routine. The pattern. The well-rehearsed scene she starred in alongside him.

The autopilot movement of her hand resting on his mousey crop as she stared down lifelessly at his crumpled body at her feet wasn't something she took pleasure in.

I hate you.

'It's okay, Brody,' she said softly, stroking his hair.

His watery eyes peered her way, along with that I-win smile that she despised with every fibre of her being.

He stood to his full five-foot-six height and tipped his head up whilst angling hers down so he could kiss her mouth.

Vivien's gut clenched, but she smiled using only her lips as soon as he pulled back to look at her. She knew he was

examining her for clues to how she was really feeling, so she tried hard not to show him.

‘I love you so much, Viv, but you do test me sometimes.’

‘Maybe it’s time you went to sleep. You’ve got work in the morning. You’ll be tired.’

‘I don’t care about sleep. I care about you. Will you come to bed with me?’

Hold it together. You’ve done this before. You can get out of sleeping with him. Remember what works.

She gestured to the mess in the living room he’d caused. The upturned chair, the soil from the yucca plant tossed over by the TV, and the splintered table were a good excuse. Brody hated untidiness, so if she had to clear up after one of his violent tantrums, that was always a good excuse to get him away from her. And seeing how he had the ability to fall asleep at the drop of a hat, she knew she could avoid him for the night.

Brody ran his hands down her hips, then tugged her into his body. His demeanour was one of relief, and as he turned to head to the bedroom, he smiled, as once again he’d been let off the hook for his appalling actions.

Vivien smiled back, knowing that was for the best.

You think you’ve got away with it, don’t you? You look at me and actually believe I’ve forgiven you. You’re so deluded.

He left, and she turned back to the mess that was her life. Her sore shoulders slumped along with her soul. Had anyone told her years ago she would meet someone so crazy, she would have laughed. He was beyond anything she could have imagined.

He needed help, but now she did too, and seeing how he had no self-awareness, it seemed only she would end up in therapy.

She used the dustpan and brush to clean up the uprooted plant her friend Grace had bought her a few years ago. Oh, how she wished she had a soulmate like Grace had. How

wonderful it would be to have somebody love her the same amount she loved them. A simple bit of balance. She had no idea some people didn't allow that in their lives until she met Brody. He seemed to hate balance and harmony.

She still believed nice men existed. Her friend married one, and Grace always had lightness in her face as though she carried no weight at all. She glanced sideways at the wood-framed mirror on the wall.

Happiness really does shine through some people's faces. I wonder what people think when they look at me?

Vivien pasted on a work smile every day in the café she owned, not knowing if people could see right through her. No one had ever said anything. Not even Grace.

The vacuum cleaner would have to come out in the morning. There was no way she was risking waking Brody, who was, no doubt, happily snoring away in the next room. She stopped to stare at her reflection in the television screen, remembering all those nights she would sit up in bed having panic attacks whilst he slept soundly next to her.

Surely, he must know what he is like. He doesn't behave this way in front of other people, so he does have some level of control.

It was time to get away from him. To stop thinking about what made him tick. She couldn't continue life that way. He had no respect for her. All he did was make her life a misery.

There was no way in a zillion years she wanted to grow old with him. Wasting eight years was bad enough. The thought of more years with him was soul-destroying.

The coffee table would have to be sanded down in the morning. She wasn't sure if she had any sandpaper around the house, and there definitely wouldn't be any in her café downstairs.

There. That will have to do for now.

Brody wouldn't moan about anything for the next two weeks. It was part of his pattern.

I'll tell him to move out tomorrow. This is my place. Time to take back control of my life.

She took a long, slow, calming breath, filling her lungs and resetting her heartbeat. It never seemed to matter if he was in the next room, the fact he was in her home at all made her feel suffocated. She needed some fresh air.

The night chill made her wrap her navy dressing gown tighter around her as she trod her dark wellies across a hard field. There was somewhere she could sit quietly for a while. A place where she could breathe and pretend she had a different life for an hour or so.

The sky was pitch black, but Vivien had grown up on the land where her café was situated, so she knew her way around in the dark. She glanced over at Silver Wish Farm, then over at Lucky Riding Stables, her old family home where her sister still lived. There was no way she was going there. Rhett would have a fit if she ever found out her little sister was a victim of domestic abuse. Nobody knew Vivien's dark secret.

In the middle of the Silver land and the Smithson land was a treehouse built almost twenty years ago by Heath Silver for his daughter. Vivien liked to climb inside and curl up on the wooden planks sometimes. She used to play house with her niece back when Willow was little, but since the girl had grown and gone off to university to live her best life, Vivien often sat up there alone, merely to absorb the memories of a better time. She was only twelve years older than her twenty-one-year-old niece, but felt as old as time.

The old wood creaked, but it was sturdy, thanks to Heath's carpentry skills. If anyone could make something wonderful from a piece of wood, it was Heath.

Vivien figured she could get some sandpaper from him or ask him to fix the coffee table. Then she realised he'd ask questions and she'd have to lie about the table's bumps and bruises, just like she had to lie about her own.

She wondered if Rhett suspected anything. She got the vibe her sister didn't like Brody, not that Rhett showed much love to anyone.

It must be nice not being a people pleaser. That's me, isn't it? I'm a people pleaser.

Vivien snuggled down into the chunky red blanket that was already on the floor, where she had left it on her previous visit. It was time to enter another world. She pulled out a romance novel from beneath a small seat and started to read by the light of a battery-operated lantern she had bought at a car boot sale last spring.

January on the Isle of Wight was cold, but Vivien felt warm inside the treehouse, thanks to the blanket, her happy memories, and the lightness in her chest.

Staring at her book, she wished she could meet a man like the one in the story. Oh, how he would be kind to her.

Damp wood and the earthy scent of petrichor filled the air. Vivien inhaled deeply, before completely ignoring the dark world outside, the aches on her body, and the life she wished she could disappear from.

2

Finn

It was one o'clock in the morning, and Finn Silver could not sleep. He'd done the nightshift at work for the last four nights, so was feeling out of routine. He always felt that way when he went back on days. He assumed, years back, that he would get used to the hours he worked as a firefighter, but he never did. He tried to add up his life in day and night hours once, as he truly believed he spent way more hours awake than the average person. When he did sleep, it was only four to five hours.

He huffed to the darkness of his bedroom and flicked back the covers, allowing the coldness of the night to hit his bare chest.

I suppose I could work out.

He had to do something to wear himself out. He had the next day off but made sure his name was down for call-outs for the RNLI that he was a volunteer crew member for. His mum had given up telling him to slow down. He'd always been an active kid. Not much changed as an adult.

He stood in front of his floor mirror and frowned at his abs. He wasn't as big as his older brother, Heath, but definitely not as small as his younger brother, Tyler. He smiled at how much he looked like his brothers, then shook his head and turned to the window.

Silver Wish Farm was in complete darkness. He couldn't even see his parents' house, nor Heath's, but there was the smallest flicker of light coming from his niece's treehouse, and seeing how Willow was away at uni, finishing her last year, that only meant one thing.

Vivien.

He quickly threw a tee-shirt over his head, then pulled on a sweatshirt and sprinted down the stairs to tug on green wellies. He grabbed a blue blanket from the back of the sofa and made

his way across the farm, stopping short of the treehouse for a moment.

There was no sound except for the light breeze disturbing the evergreen and broken windchimes dangling high upon a thin branch. No wildlife made an appearance, not even the resident barn owl, Barney, made himself seen.

Finn glanced up at the dull light beaming through some cracks in the old wood above his head.

She's here to escape him. I know.

Something wasn't right. Finn could tell. She hadn't been the same since about a year after she started going out with Brody, and she sure as hell hadn't been Finn's best friend since Brody moved into the Gatehouse.

He took a silent deep breath and raised his right foot. The first rung of the ladder creaked, and Vivien's head immediately popped out of the partially opened door.

'Finn? What are you doing here?'

He couldn't help but smile. She always made him smile, ever since they were kids. She was two years below him in school, but that didn't stop him carrying her books home every day.

'Saw the light from my bedroom,' he whispered, then climbed up till they were face to face.

'It's late,' she said softly, glancing over his shoulder.

Vivien Smithson had a scent about her that made his strong legs wobble and his steady heart race. He couldn't help himself, he leaned over and planted the softest of kisses on her cool cheek.

'Let me in,' he whispered, smiling at the coyness her beautiful eyes were showing him.

She pulled back, and he clambered inside. 'You're wide awake, chick. Did you try hot milk?'

'I was going to lift some weights, but then I saw you were up.'

She scooted on her knees across the floor and made room for him on her blanket, where he happily sat to her side, covering them both with the one he had brought. ‘That’s not the answer.’

He gestured at her book. ‘And that is?’

She shrugged, and her shoulder brushed against his, so he moved the tiniest bit closer so their arms were touching, which wasn’t hard, since the space they were in was so small.

‘Reading helps me sleep,’ she told him, but her voice sounded way more tired than she was letting on.

‘Why aren’t you in bed? That’s the best place for you, not up here, sitting in this draughty old place.’

Her book closed around her fingers as her head lowered to her lap, and Finn just knew something was wrong. For a start, most people didn’t climb treehouses in the middle of the night to read themselves to sleep.

‘I like it up here.’ There it was again, that little worn-out voice.

He turned his head to face her, then pushed himself away from the wall. ‘Viv, what’s wrong?’

Her eyes were still on her lap, and her hands cradled the book as though it were something special. ‘Have you ever thought about leaving here, Finn?’

He frowned slightly as he watched her fingers start to fidget. ‘What, Pepper Bay?’

She shrugged and nodded. ‘I guess.’

‘This is our home, Viv. Always has been. Why would I want to leave?’ He waited for a response, but it didn’t come. ‘Hey, remember when you used to say you were going to turn the Gatehouse into a café? That was your dream, and you made it come true. Don’t you like owning the Gatehouse anymore?’

She breathed out a faint laugh and moved her book to her side. ‘It’s always been a bit cursed, hasn’t it?’

Finn had to laugh. ‘That’s ancient history. You changed the vibe of that place. Don’t let it haunt you now.’

She shifted further down their makeshift bed. ‘But your great-grandfather built it for my great-aunt so they would live happily ever after. Not so she could rip him off as soon as she got her hands on the place. It’s my family’s property, but it’s on your family’s land. You see, it’s still carrying the curse your great-grandfather put on it as soon as my old aunt left him.’

‘Do you think he should have tried to take it back?’

‘I don’t know, chick. It was a mean thing she did to him. No wonder he built the gate and fence around the perimeter. There was no way he was going to allow her to walk on any more Silver land than that place.’

They both breathed out a quiet laugh, and Finn snuggled down to her side.

‘Our ancestors were nuts,’ he said, pulling the blanket up to her shoulders. ‘I’m glad we’ve always been mates.’

‘Yeah, perhaps someone should tell your brother and my sister. I swear, sometimes they’re like full-on enemies. I’ll never understand them. They have Willow together, but she didn’t bring them together, and my sister has never been with anyone but Heath, with the exception of that Dennis bloke. Mind you, all she thinks about are those horses. That’s her life.’

‘And yours has always been the café. Why are you thinking about leaving Pepper Bay? Or did you mean the island?’

‘I just wonder what other life I could have, that’s all.’ Her voice had gone back to small and broken.

Finn knew there was something she wasn’t telling him, but he couldn’t exactly push her. It didn’t feel right to intrude on her troubles, even though all he wanted was to help fix them for her, especially if it meant she wouldn’t leave. He loved her so much; if she was hurting, he wanted to know why. He just didn’t know what to say.

‘I’m not happy, Finn.’

He curled his fingers around hers beneath the cover and simply held her hand, feeling she needed it holding. ‘What can I do to help?’

Her head turned ever so slightly, and he matched her. ‘I’m telling Brody tomorrow that I want him to leave.’

Finn felt the slightest of trembles run through her body, and now they were building in his. She was afraid to have the conversation with Brody, he could tell. Obviously, it wasn’t the best one to have, but still. She seemed a little too worried, and now Finn was worried too.

‘Don’t you love him anymore, Viv?’ It seemed like the best approach, even though he could sense there was more to it.

‘I don’t think I ever did. Not now I look back. I liked him. A lot. You know, he’s cute. He seemed nice enough, and he certainly love-bombed me in the beginning, but there was always something missing. I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. All I know is, I didn’t marry him or have kids with him. Something inside me knew he wasn’t for me. But...’ She paused, worrying him some more. ‘I stayed with him. Even let him move in with me when he had nowhere to live.’

Finn heard her breath catch, then saw tears fall from her tired eyes. ‘Hey, Viv.’ He quickly grabbed her, pulling her practically onto his lap, and hugged her until she settled. Every fibre of his being told him there was so much more to the story, and it was a whole heap of stuff he wouldn’t want to hear. Remaining calm, he continued to rub circles on her back, hoping to soothe her.

‘I’m sorry.’ She sniffed and wiped her face as she sat back, pausing for a moment to stare at him as though wanting to say more, but then she slid back into her spot at his side.

Finn gently moved the damp strands of hair stuck to her cheek, then took her hands in his. ‘Has it been that bad?’

The way she nodded so meekly told him what he needed to know.

‘Worse,’ she mumbled.

Part of Finn felt as crumpled as she looked. Agitation was rising along with more hate for Brody. ‘Did he hurt you?’ He knew he shouldn’t try to out her that way, but if she was in trouble, he had to help. He needed to make sure she was safe.

She nodded meekly once again, and part of his heart died. ‘I want to tell someone.’

Her broken voice hit him everywhere all at once. ‘You can tell me, Viv. You’re my best friend. Always have been. Always will be. I’ll always be here for you.’

Vivien took a breath as some more tears escaped. ‘It’s hard to say, but... I... it’s just, well... I’m a victim of domestic abuse.’ She slapped one hand over her face to cover her eyes. ‘Oh, now I don’t know if I feel liberated or just sound dramatic.’

‘Hey.’ Finn took her hand back in his, completely ignoring wanting to go to the café to beat the crap out of Brody. ‘It’s going to be okay now. I’ll help you. You want to report him?’

She smiled as she breathed out a laugh that neither of them attached to happiness. ‘You know I can’t do that. He’s a policeman. Everyone at the station will believe him not me. They’re his friends.’

‘We could tell the police off the island.’

She shook her head. ‘No. I just want it to go away. I want him to go away.’ Her sorrowful face turned serious. ‘And I definitely don’t want my sister finding out, so you can’t tell anyone.’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

‘Will you also promise not to get involved yourself? I mean it. I don’t want you getting into trouble with him. He’ll get you arrested. He hates you enough already. Don’t make things easy for him, okay?’

You have no idea how much I want to hurt that man right now.

Finn tried hard to relax his body. It wasn’t easy. He was wound so tightly, something was sure to snap.

‘Finn,’ she warned.

‘Okay. I promise.’ He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed her knuckles. ‘I’m not going to make this about me. Don’t worry. But I can’t let you go back there alone while he’s there. Not now you’ve told me that. Let me come with you. Please.’

‘I plan to tell him after I close up for the day tomorrow. He’ll be home at seven.’

‘Meanwhile, you can stay with me at my house.’

‘I was going home in a bit. It’s still my home.’

‘What’s he doing now?’

‘Sleeping.’

Finn lowered his head a touch and took a breath. Every part of him was tense, and that wouldn’t help Vivien. She had reached out to him. Told him her biggest secret. He needed to step up and be there for his favourite person in the whole world. ‘Will you please stay at mine tonight? I want to know you’re safe.’

‘I’d like to, but if Brody finds out, it’ll make everything worse. I can’t count the number of times he’s accused me of having an affair with you. He hates your guts, and don’t pretend you’ve ever liked him, because I know you don’t.’

Wasn’t going to pretend. I can’t stand the piece of shit. Even more so now. Argh! Come on, Silver. Get it together.

‘It doesn’t matter what he thinks, Viv. He doesn’t get to call the shots anymore. You’re making the decisions now. And when you tell him to leave tomorrow, I’m going to be there, so he doesn’t get the chance to hurt you. Hey, I’ll even help him pack.’

Vivien let go of his hands and started to rub along her arms. ‘You make it sound so simple.’

She’s cold. She’s tired, and she’s afraid. Don’t make light of this.

‘When I was twenty and you were eighteen, you found me lying on my back down by the pond, drunk out of my head. You scooped me up, somehow, and do you remember what you said to me?’

The corners of her mouth lifted. ‘No.’

‘Let me take you home, Finn. I’ll look after you.’

‘I remember now.’

‘It’s my turn, Viv. Let me take you home. I’ll look after *you*.’

Her smile widened just a touch and a small twinkle hit her eyes. ‘Okay.’

Vivien

Sneaking out of Finn's house at half five in the morning to make the short walk over to her own home was one of the most nerve-wracking journeys Vivien had ever taken. Finn was finally fast asleep, and she hoped Brody was too. It didn't matter she was leaving him, if he found out where she had spent the night, he would go ballistic, and she wholeheartedly knew he would find a way to punish Finn.

Come on, Viv. Breathe.

Brody wouldn't wake till his alarm beeped, and that wasn't for another hour. She was always up before him, getting the café ready, and she'd never woken him, but that didn't stop her fretting. She yawned into her cold hand as she approached the side door of the Gatehouse that led to the upstairs of the old log cabin of a building.

Vivien was so tired, having had hardly any sleep in Finn's spare room. She knew full well it wasn't her night-time surroundings that kept her awake. Her stomach felt bruised, as did her head, and she was far too anxious as every hour passed her by. Finn had a clock on the wall that ticked rather loudly, and the noise did little to help matters.

All was quiet upstairs as she entered her home. Finn was right; the place was her dream. She'd had it all figured out since she was fifteen and loved every minute of catering school. The Gatehouse might have been made with love that turned to dust, but she'd made sure when she renovated the downstairs into a café to take away all the meanness her great-aunt had created, and the Gatehouse Café was born.

Vivien huffed out a quiet sarcastic laugh to herself as she stared up at the next level of the wooden lodge that would suit the Alps more than Silver Wish Farm, which farmed flowers, plants, and Christmas trees.

Brody had ruined her dream. Brought darkness into her lovely home. She was so excited when she built everything

she'd been dreaming of. Oh, why did she let him stay in her life after the first time he hit her? How was it possible for her mind to become conditioned to that degree?

She took one step up, then stopped to take a deep breath. She really hated her own home because of him. Many times she had pulled over on her way home and just sat in her car to pass the time, all because she didn't want to go to the place she lived. Her little piece of the world she once adored was now a dark place that shrunk her soul and destroyed her spirit. She couldn't even relax at Finn's because Brody was controlling her mind without even being there.

It was all so clear now. The seeds he'd planted in her head over the years. The way he would build her up just to knock her down, then act like the one saving her. How he took away her confidence, her independence, decreased her circle, and destroyed her self-worth.

It had been a long-drawn-out process that made her feel like a subject rat in a lab. He brain-trained her, and she didn't see it happening. Did it make her a fool, or was he just a master manipulator? She couldn't be sure.

She tiptoed up the stairs and made her way to the bathroom, knowing her morning shower didn't normally wake Brody. The warm water spraying over her failed to relax her aching body and weary mind, but she did use the moment to pretend she was washing away the monster she'd allowed into her life. It was a ritual she'd adopted a couple of years back after reading an article on the subject on self-cleansing.

With her casual work clothes on and some painkillers swallowed, she set about getting the café ready for its first visitors of the day. Mr Farley liked to come for breakfast first thing, so the sausages went on. Dr Tully walked his dog early, so the water bowl was placed outside by the front door, and as it was Wednesday, some of the local sea swimmers had made it their day of the week to pop in for a full English. One of her Wednesday customers loved pancakes with bacon, so she made up the batter ready for when Jude arrived.

Swimming in the sea in January wasn't Vivien's cup of tea, and she was sure the group just sat inside The Old Boat Clubhouse chewing the fat most winter mornings, but she couldn't be sure and didn't like to question them. Sometimes she pondered over the idea of running into the freezing cold water and to hell with it all. Sometimes all she wanted was to run anywhere. The destination wasn't relevant. Freedom was.

She never really did admire her lack of bravery, or adventure. If only her younger self could have a word. Young Vivien was nothing like the woman she was now. Her younger version had energy and spirit. She would do whatever she liked whenever she liked and certainly had loads of fun along the way.

Where was she? Vivien wondered if she would ever feel alive again, rather than simply existing. Thankfully, she had the café to occupy her mind, at least. It didn't fully take away her desire to return to the freedom of her youth, but it was something constant she could rely on.

There was something quiet inside her that didn't wish to be disturbed by the radio. She had lost her joy of music a long time ago. Brody always switched it off as soon as he got home. The radio would often be turned low in the café for the customers, but Vivien zoned out from any background noise.

Before she knew it, the time had flown by, and Brody was by her side, giving her a morning kiss on the cheek, which caused her bruised stomach to flip, and not in any good way. She smiled politely and handed him a homemade flapjack to send him on his way. Thankful he was gone, now she could get on with her day and deal with him later.

She had told Finn seven o'clock, knowing Brody would be home at six. She didn't want Finn getting hurt. If anything happened to him because of her bad life choices, she'd never forgive herself. Hopefully, by the time Finn arrived, Brody would have already left. She just prayed Brody wouldn't refuse to leave. And if he hit her, well, at least it would be the last time, because one way or another, she was getting him out of her life tonight.

Her first customer entered the premises, so Vivien pasted on her work smile and got busy with Mr Farley's order. She exchanged pleasantries as best she could, as he wasn't one for a conversation, then watched him take his book over to the corner table to stare at the small pond outside.

A memory hit her, making her smile. It was the day Finn dug out the hole for the pond, as she was certain the new café needed one, especially as she'd always loved the small pond over by the main house on the farm. Finn and his little brother, Tyler, had a mud fight, then his mum, Fran, came over with hand wipes and ham sandwiches for everyone. It was a good day.

I can't remember the last time I went up to the Silver house and had one of Fran's dinners. She's a good cook.

Vivien suddenly wondered why Finn often came to the café to eat. She'd never asked him if he could cook. She glanced out the window, noticing the wind had picked up and wondered if any more rain was due. A smile filled her as she spotted Finn heading her way. He looked a little windswept, but she thought his hair suited him like that. All dark and skew-whiff.

'Morning, chick. Coffee?' she asked as he entered.

'Please.' He smiled widely, which she matched. She never could help smiling back at him. He had a way of smiling with his big dark eyes that made his face look so friendly.

'You're in early today.'

'Ah, you know me. Can't sleep for long.' There was silence until she handed over his coffee. 'How did you sleep?'

Vivien glanced over at Mr Farley, engrossed in his murder mystery. 'Let me give him his sausage sandwich, then I'll join you for a quick cuppa before Doc turns up.'

Finn sat by a window, and it wasn't long before Vivien plopped herself down opposite him.

'Have you eaten yet?' he asked.

She gestured to her tea. 'This will do for now.'

‘No, it won’t.’ Finn got up and swiped one of her homemade flapjacks. ‘Here. Eat this.’

She broke some off and popped it into her mouth, chewing reluctantly, as she had little to no appetite.

‘And make sure you top up on orange juice throughout the day. It’ll help keep your energy levels up.’ Finn leaned over the table, not that the old man in the corner could hear, they were seated that far apart, plus, Mr Farley was deaf in one ear. ‘Are you in any pain, Viv?’ he asked quietly.

If I told you how I’m really feeling, you’ll be in the same bad mood you were in last night.

‘I’m okay. You not working today?’

‘I’m on call. Plus, I said I’d work in the garden centre with Dad today. Heath’s got a lot on, making doors for someone who happens to want a lot of them, and Tyler’s working all day in the sweet shop, and now Willow’s gone back to uni, I need to pull my weight in the family business, which is fine by me, but I will be glad when Willow finishes her botany course and helps run things around here. Dad gets worn out more and more lately, and Mum does enough as it is.’

‘Willow’s a good girl. It was nice seeing her over Christmas.’ Vivien glanced out at the dreary January day. ‘It always seems quite dismal when the sparkling lights come down.’

‘You used to have lights up outside all year when you first opened. Why did you take them down?’

‘Brody said... Oh, never mind.’

‘Right.’

She controlled her sigh as she watched Finn’s thick lips purse in agitation. A moment of silence passed as they sipped their hot drinks. Vivien could see Dr Tully walking slowly towards the café, stopping at every grain of grass for his tiny dog to sniff.

Finn picked at a bit of flapjack and held it up to her mouth. His eyes said what he didn’t, so she hid the grin tugging at her

lips, then placed her mouth over his fingers to snaffle up the food. Finn swallowed hard, and Vivien was sure his eyes darkened even more. Her cheeks heated slightly at the intimacy of what she had just done. Then Finn smiled warmly and everything went back to normal.

‘You want a hand in here today?’ he asked, nodding over at the counter. ‘I’m great at washing up.’

The thought made her giggle. The first real laugh she had managed since... She couldn’t remember. ‘I have a World’s Silliest Sausage apron back there that would suit you.’

‘It suits you. I bought it for you.’

‘I always thought it was one of those gifts you buy with yourself in mind. See. It suits you, Finn Silver.’ She realised her hand was resting on his, and although he didn’t seem to mind, she thought it best to remove it and keep her hands to herself.

‘Do you want my help or not?’

‘No. You go sell plants or sort the rest of the Christmas trees ready for next year. Some of those small ones will be ready next time around. Are you still getting some from the tree farm in Scotland?’

‘Emerald Tree Farm. Yeah, well, we don’t have enough land to farm all our Christmas trees, and Dad’s been friends with the Hart family up there for years now. It all works out well. We send up a lot of our plants. You know, I’ve never visited Honeydale before. We should go one day. What do you think?’

‘You want me to go to the Scottish Highlands with you?’

The corners of Finn’s eyes crinkled. ‘Don’t say it like that.’

‘No, sorry, that’s not what I meant, chick. It’s just, well, Scotland. I haven’t had a holiday in years.’

‘Hmm, I know. So, how about it. You in?’

Oh, how she would love to run away and not deal with her life, but that was no way to rebuild herself. Nope! Scotland

would have to wait. But then again. ‘When were you thinking?’

‘Anytime you like. You think about it, and when you know for sure you want to go, we’ll sort cover for this place and I’ll book time off.’

She smiled, as those warm eyes were smiling her way again. ‘Oh, Finn, I would love to go.’

‘Great. That’s settled then.’

‘But I have a few things to sort first. Maybe by the summertime.’

‘Whenever time. We’ll make it part of your new plans.’

Vivien tapped the back of his hand as she stood. Dr Tully’s dog was having a drink from the water bowl, so it was only seconds before she needed to get serving. She leaned over his shoulder and smiled. ‘Between you and Grace, I have the two best friends in the whole world. I love you, chick.’ She kissed his cheek as he told her he loved her too.

I’ll be glad when this day is over and I’m finally free to do things like pop to Scotland with my mate whenever I feel like it. At least I now have something nice to look forward to.

She had to stay focused. Brody wasn’t going to go away easily, and he might make trouble for her in more ways than violence. She pondered over the idea of calling the police if he started anything, as he should have that sort of thing on his record. What if he went on to abuse another woman? Perhaps he’d done it before her. She had no idea. She just wished he wasn’t a policeman. She believed he had power over her, as he’d told her often enough, and it was always unsettling.

Vivien sighed inwardly as she smiled at her customer and work took over her weary mind.

4

Finn

Seven o'clock couldn't come around quick enough. All day long, all Finn wanted was to be by Vivien's side, making sure she was safe from harm. He wasn't stupid, he knew Brody could make trouble for him, but Vivien's well-being came first.

Mistake after mistake, that's all Finn made in the garden centre. His dad had sent him home at one point, but Finn just ended up having lunch with his mum in her kitchen.

Fran had given him suspicious looks over the cheese-and-chutney sandwiches, but Finn kept his mouth firmly closed about what was bothering him.

The day dragged, and a lot of it was spent daydreaming about the past. How often he would hang out with Vivien. The laughter, the silliness, the flirting, he thought. That was until she fell for the charismatic police officer, who charmed her off her feet.

Finn really hated that man. He saw through all his crap straight away, but Vivien was blind to the mask Brody was wearing. It was so frustrating in the beginning, watching her get sucked further and further in. There were moments when Finn tried to subtly tell her Brody was a bad egg, but his words seem to fall on deaf ears. In the end, he gave up. After a long, hard chat with himself, he finally let her slip away, knowing she wasn't his to hold.

Heath stopped whistling along to the song playing on the radio when Finn popped in the workshop to kill time.

The orange-and-black plane was the first thing Finn twiddled with, then a vice. His brother removed him away from the workbench, plonking him down onto a small handmade wooden stool.

'Stop touching my stuff.' Heath handed him a bottle of water. 'Hydrate. It might clear your head.'

‘Who says I need to clear my head?’

‘The fact you’re not in the garden centre.’

‘Dad sent me home.’

‘So why are you in here bothering me?’

Finn shrugged and gulped some water. ‘Just passing the time.’

‘Until?’

It wasn’t something Finn could share. He checked his watch, so glad the time for him to go to the Gatehouse Café had arrived, and also pleased he didn’t have any RNLI call-outs to attend.

‘Adios, bro,’ he said, pretending to be cheerful, then left as fast as he had appeared.

The front door that led directly into the café was closed and locked, so Finn made his way around to the side door.

Should I knock? Perhaps call first. What if he’s back already?

Finn decided to lightly tap on the door, figuring Vivien might hear if she was out the back of the café, tidying up. As there was no answer, he knocked louder. Nothing. Bouncing one foot and clenching his fists whilst he waited, he glanced at his phone.

Vivien didn’t answer his call, but he could hear her phone’s muffled ringing coming from inside.

Unsure about his next move, he pressed one palm on the door, raising his brow in surprise as it opened a touch.

‘Hello. Viv?’ he called softly, leaning closer to the door to poke his head inside the small hallway on the other side.

The door was jammed, preventing access. Finn pushed harder, feeling the door pressing against something. He managed to move it a bit more so he could see what the obstruction was.

Vivien was curled up at the bottom of the stairs, passed out.

‘Viv!’ he yelled, using all his weight on the door. He knelt to her side, checked her pulse and airways, then called an ambulance.

Her hair was stuck to the side of her head from blood leaking from a small cut by her temple, and both eyes were dark and bruised as though she’d gone ten rounds with a professional boxer.

Finn tried hard to give aid to the broken leg he could clearly see, but it was tricky in such a confined space.

That door needs to come off so I can help her leg.

He whipped out his phone and called Heath, briefing him on the situation. It wasn’t long before his brother showed up, tools in hand, and removed the door. Finn didn’t have too much time to explain, as the paramedics had arrived. He stood back, letting them do their job, and took a calming breath as Heath pulled him to one side.

‘You’re telling me Brody did this?’ Heath whispered.

Finn nodded, no longer caring about Vivien’s secret. ‘I just found out myself, even though I always thought he was shifty.’

‘Are you sure about this, Finn?’

‘Yeah, she confided in me. Heath, look, I’m not supposed to tell anyone, but when I called you, I was still freaking out about her lying there. I’ve dealt with some things in my line of work, but Viv... I couldn’t breathe properly.’

Heath placed an arm around him. ‘It’s all right, Finn. You did the right thing telling me, but until she speaks, we’ve got no proof he did this. What I’m saying is, don’t say anything else. He’s police. We have to be careful.’

Finn nodded and stepped forward as the paramedics wheeled the gurney back to their ambulance.

Heath patted his shoulder. ‘Go with her. I’ll fetch Rhett and meet you at the hospital.’

Finn climbed into the ambulance and held Vivien’s hand whilst a female paramedic cleaned the head wound and asked questions he knew he had to answer carefully. He told the truth

as best he could. After all, he did find her like that, and there wasn't much else to add at that point. He could see the paramedic wasn't buying any of it, and he just hoped she didn't think it was him who had hurt Vivien.

Vivien groaned and stirred in her makeshift bed. Her hand reached up to her head, but Finn brought it back down.

'It's okay, Viv. You're in an ambulance, but you're going to be just fine.' He kissed her knuckles and released his sigh silently.

'Finn?' she croaked, turning her head to him.

'I'm right here. You're safe. I promise.' He met the paramedic's eyes for a second, then turned back to Vivien. 'You've hit your head and broken your leg. I'm not going to leave your side, okay.'

She offered the slightest of nods, then closed her eyes.

Finn stared up at the roof of the vehicle, needing something to focus on to slow his racing heart.

He'd better not get away with this. She can't lie for him. I won't let her.

There wasn't a violent bone in Finn's body. He hadn't been raised to be aggressive, as his father hated violence, having been raised by a drunk of a man, who hurt his whole family. Benton Silver had made sure his own wife and children lived a life filled with nothing but love. Their home held the happiest of vibes, and that was something Finn always felt blessed about. But now, he felt as though he could actually kill someone, and the thought alone made his hands tremble.

Finn made sure he stayed with Vivien in the hospital, only waiting outside the X-ray room. He spoke to the doctors and had just got Vivien settled in the A&E when her sister came running in.

Rhett's strawberry-blonde hair was tied back in a loose scruffy bun, and the expression on her faintly freckled face was one of someone ready for a fight. 'Viv, what the hell happened?' She grabbed her little sister's hand and held it to her stomach.

Finn wasn't sure if his eyes rolled or if he'd done it mentally when Vivien told Rhett she had fallen down the stairs. He looked at Heath, who had followed Rhett around the curtained-off section.

Heath subtly shook his head.

Rhett went to say something else, but the blue curtain was whipped back, and Brody stepped forward.

'You!' spat Finn. He lifted his arm to swing for the policeman, but Heath grabbed him in time, holding him back. 'I'll kill you. You hear me? You ever come near her again, I swear, I'll do time for you.' He tried to say more, but his brother was dragging him away, and as Heath was a lot stronger than him, he had little choice about which way he was heading.

An older officer was out in the waiting area, where Heath had taken Finn. He approached the struggling brothers, narrowing his eyes at them as Heath let go of Finn. 'What was that about?'

Finn pointed to the way he had come. 'You'd better arrest him, Brian. I swear, I will go to Scotland Yard myself if you lot try to cover this up.'

'Finn!' snapped Heath.

Brian stepped closer to the brothers. 'I'm not stupid, Finn. I know Vivien is in here, and I just heard you yelling at Brody, but if he's the one who put her here, then she's the only one who can press charges. And, no, I don't cover things up.'

Finn scoffed. 'Yeah, right! We all know you lot stick together.'

'I don't appreciate that, Mr Silver. I have always taken great pride in my job. I don't hide behind my badge. I serve it. Now, may I suggest you sit down over there and calm yourself before you end up in a cell for the night. I'll go speak to Miss Smithson.'

Finn went to respond, but Heath shoved him down onto a hard chair.

‘Don’t make things worse, Finn.’

Finn turned sharply, wagging out one hand. ‘How can things be worse, Heath?’

Brian made a swift return, marching Rhett by her arm over towards them. ‘Stay there. Don’t move. I’m not finished with you, Miss Smithson.’

Finn’s eyes were on the doorway that led back to Vivien.

Oh my God, he’s left her alone with Brody.

He shot up, but Brian pushed him firmly back down. ‘She’s with the doctor.’

Heath was looking at Rhett. ‘What’s going on?’

Rhett’s hazel eyes were filled with fury. ‘Viv’s just told me Brody hit her. Pushed her down the bloody stairs. That’s what’s going on.’ She tried to jump out of her chair, but Heath grabbed her. ‘Let me go, Heath.’

‘No. Now, everyone, just stop,’ said Heath firmly. ‘If Vivien is finally telling the truth about Brody, then we need to stay calm and be there for her. So this anger, it stops right here.’

Finn knew he was right. His dad would have told him the same thing. He could hear him in his head, telling him calmness solved problems.

Rhett turned sharply to Heath. ‘What do you mean, finally? How long has this been going on?’

‘I don’t know. We’ve only just found out ourselves.’

‘But she left him,’ said Finn, looking at Brian. ‘That’s what happened today. She told me she was telling Brody tonight that he had to leave her house. She was done with him.’

‘Good bloody riddance,’ said Rhett, wriggling free of Heath’s hold as soon as he loosened his grip.

Brian showed his palms. ‘I’m going back to see her. I will hear what she has to say to me. I don’t want to see any of you near Brody. Okay?’

Heath was the only one who nodded.

Finn stood. 'I want to see Viv. You can take him somewhere else. He doesn't need to be here.'

'That's right,' said Rhett, joining his side. 'She's my little sister, and I'm taking her home with me.'

'Follow me then.' Brian waved them over. 'But any trouble and I'm sticking you in the car.'

Finn rushed to Vivien's side as soon as he saw her. Her face looked so worn, and that was without the bruising. He couldn't think of a time he'd felt more useless. 'Hey, how you doing?' he asked gently, taking her hand.

Her smile was weak but aimed right at him. 'Better now Brody's gone.'

'Where is he?' asked Brian.

Vivien glanced over at a doorway. 'The doctor took him away. I don't know where they went.' She turned back to Finn, and he smiled. 'I'm just glad you're here.'

'I'm not going anywhere.' He watched Brian leave, then heard Heath tell Rhett to help find out when they could take Vivien home.

Vivien glanced down at her set leg. 'This is going to get in the way in the café.'

Finn breathed out a laugh, then nuzzled his nose into the back of her hand. 'I'll help.'

'Can you even cook?'

'I can cook.'

She laughed quietly, relaxing him a touch. 'You eat at the café a lot.'

'I prefer your cooking.'

'Ooh, don't let your mum hear you say that, chick. You know, I haven't had her food for a long time.'

'That's settled then. Dinner at Mum's soon.'

Vivien's chocolate eyes gazed down glumly to her leg. 'My stairs are going to be a challenge.'

'I think Rhett wants to take you back to hers. At least your old room is available there. Oh, wait, there is still a flight of stairs. Unless we make you up a room downstairs. The house is big enough. And I'll come over every day to carry you to work.'

Vivien lightly tapped his arm. 'I don't want to stay with Rhett. We work better when we don't live together.'

Finn laughed quietly, then had a thought. 'You can stay at mine till your leg heals. I've got room downstairs and a loo at ground level. That will help.'

'You'd really take me in?'

'Of course. You'd do the same for me.'

'I would.'

'I'll take you home once we leave here, and you can get some bits, then—'

'I don't want to go back there, Finn.'

He quickly leaned over, cradling her into his arms as she silently wept. 'It's okay, Viv. You don't have to go there. It's okay. I promise.'

Vivien sniffed as she moved him away. 'Can I really stay with you?'

He smiled softly. 'Forever,' he whispered.

Vivien

It had been two days since Brody had pushed Vivien down the stairs. She told Brian she didn't want to press charges, and if anyone tried to make her, she would lie and say she fell. Brian told her he would make sure Brody stayed away, and Heath and Rhett had cleared all his things from the Gatehouse, making sure Vivien's home was a safe zone. Not that any of it mattered. Vivien still didn't want to return.

She stared down at her leg cast propped up on Finn's comfy dark-blue settee. There was no way she could stay at his place forever, even though it was ever so sweet of him to say she could.

The phone on her lap buzzed. It was a text from Grace's sister, Ashley Hadley. Vivien felt eternally grateful to Ashley for taking over the café for a while. Grace was on holiday with her husband, otherwise Vivien knew without a shadow of doubt that Grace would be the one running her business whilst her leg healed.

Vivien's leg wasn't the only problem. The whole café had Brody's scent all over it. She shuddered at her memories and mentally shook her head at herself for allowing his cruel behaviour to go on for so long. It was hard to believe she had lived that life at all.

She sent Ashley a message, then sat up straight and took a breath, trying to shake off the demons inside her that Brody had created. Anxiety, depression, worthlessness.

Arguments with him consumed her thoughts at times. There were words that needed saying. Over and over, she went through scenarios with the man. It was so annoying. She needed him out of her head. He couldn't own that space any longer, but it wasn't easy. It was as though he was still there.

Finn's heavy footsteps came thumping down the stairs, and Vivien smiled to herself because hearing him approaching didn't make her stomach churn with sickness the way it did

whenever she heard Brody's footsteps. She was so grateful for the kindness she had in her circle. Brody was the only one who made her miserable.

Her thoughts turned to her parents. Her father had been strict, especially with Rhett when she fell pregnant with Willow, and her mum was the quiet sort, not very mumsie with her girls, but Vivien still felt she'd had a nice enough childhood and a happy life until she allowed Brody to live with her. That's when everything changed.

Finn winked at her as he made his way to the kitchen. 'Do you want a cuppa?' he called from the other room.

The last one was still sitting on the coffee table, untouched. Vivien could take no more tea. It was all she'd been handed since she'd left the hospital, that and grapes. She'd never seen so many grapes, and people kept dropping off food every five minutes. Well, it felt that way.

Finn's head poked around the doorframe. 'Viv?'

'Oh, no thanks. Erm... Finn, I was thinking, I need to sort myself out.'

He came closer and sat on the arm of the chair to her side. 'What do you mean?'

'I can't stay here, getting in your way. I—'

'You're not in my way.'

'You've taken time off work.'

Finn gestured at the ceiling. 'You need me to carry you up the stairs.'

'Only for a wash. I have the downstairs loo for everything else. Plus, you've made me a bedroom down here. I'm okay. You can go back to work, and I should too.'

He leaned forward and lightly placed his hand on her elbow. 'You can't do much at work yet, Viv. Let your leg heal. Ashley's got it covered. She's got the rest of the Hadleys doing shifts.'

Vivien smiled at the love she was receiving from her friends. 'They're a good bunch.'

'They are, so let them do their thing, and you can watch a bit of telly or something.'

Vivien groaned as her eyes met the large TV sitting in the corner. The last thing she wanted was to watch daytime telly. She hated sitting around doing nothing. It had always been in her nature to be active, and she knew Finn knew that, and by the way he was looking at her, she guessed the thought just hit him.

'Or,' he added, 'we could go out.'

That perked her up. 'Where do you have in mind?'

Finn shrugged and got up to peer outside at the cold, dull January day. 'Well, it's dry, at least.' He turned to face her. 'How about a drive?'

'I want some fresh air. I wish we could walk along the beach.'

Finn laughed. 'In January?'

'Why not?' She returned his smile. 'Take me over to the RNLI station, then you can wheel me along the seafront there.'

'You're just trying to get me back to work.'

As much as she wanted him to get back to his normal life, she didn't particularly like his job or voluntary work. They were both dangerous and often made her worry, but that wasn't something she was willing to mention, in case he called her sappy.

'I'm going stir crazy already, chick.'

'Do you want me to take you over to the café so you can nose about and see for yourself if everything is running to your standards?'

Vivien shook her head as she lowered her leg so her heel touched the carpet. 'I want to go home, Finn, but another part of me doesn't. Not yet.' She looked up at him, unafraid to

show the sadness in her eyes. ‘I feel really messed up right now.’

He moved to her side and glanced over her small head wound. ‘At least that looks better.’

She rested her head on his shoulder as soon as his face was away from hers. ‘I’m tired,’ she said softly.

‘We could play cards.’

‘No. I mean of life.’

Finn gently moved her head from his shoulder and held her chin. ‘Hey,’ he said quietly. ‘That chapter of your life is over. It’s going to be better now, and you will find happiness. I promise.’

Vivien couldn’t help but smile at the gentleness in his voice and the kindness clear in those big dark eyes of his that held all shades of chocolate. ‘I don’t know what to do, Finn.’

He lowered his hand from her face as he gave a slight nod. ‘I’m thinking, one day at a time.’

‘I know I should be happy now it’s finally over with Brody, but I can’t seem to feel that emotion. I’m not sure which emotion I’m feeling, if I’m honest. It’s as though he took my soul and hid it somewhere, and now I’m supposed to find it, but I’m blindfolded and have no idea where to start.’

Finn placed his arm around her and kissed her temple. ‘I just happen to know exactly where you find your soul, Miss Smithson. You can leave that task to me.’

Vivien breathed out a short laugh as she raised her head. ‘What does that even mean?’

‘It means you need to be reminded of everything that used to make you smile.’

‘What, like the long weekend I spent in New York many moons ago?’

‘Well, there is that, but it’s more the simple things. They seem small, but really, they’re what count the most. So, let’s

start by having lunch with Mum. She's been eager to have you over. I know you haven't felt up to it, but how about today?'

Vivien nodded her approval. 'Yes, let's do that.'

Maybe it's exactly what I need right now. Normality. My friends, family, and the simple things that once brought peace to my heart.

Finn gave her hand a light squeeze. 'This is just the beginning of your new journey. I don't know what's going to happen next, but I do know you'll be happy again, because you've already taken the hardest step. You're brave, you know that?'

'I don't feel brave. I don't feel anything. Tell a lie, I feel a bit stupid.'

'You're not stupid.'

'Even when I had him all figured out, I was stuck in that bubble he made, knowing he'd messed my mind up so badly, I didn't have the energy to escape.'

'But you did.'

She looked up, meeting warmth and kindness. It had felt surreal telling Brody it was over, as she was sure at one point she was trapped with him forever. 'I did, didn't I?'

Finn nodded.

'As long as he leaves me alone, I think I'll be okay.'

'You can still press charges.'

'I just want to pretend it never happened. It's exhausting.'

'But Brian can't do anything about it if you let this go.'

'Finn, please. I'm not strong enough for this, okay?'

He tapped her hand and smiled. 'Come on, let's go see my mum.'

6

Finn

Seeing how Vivien had laughed and said no to being carried across Silver Wish Farm, Finn had wrapped a blanket over her legs and wheeled her over to his parents' house for lunch. The old grey wheelchair had sat in the loft for years, as his mum had said it might come in handy again one day, after a knee operation she'd had.

Finn struggled on an uneven pathway that led from his house to the one he grew up in. It was around the side, away from the customers entering the garden centre on their land.

Vivien laughed out loud as he bumped her over a small mound, and he couldn't help but break out into the biggest smile on hearing her sound back to normal, even though he knew she wasn't.

I'm going to do everything I can to make your laughter take a front seat again. That piece of shit isn't taking anything else from you.

Her high-pitched squeal made him bring the chair to a sudden halt. 'Are you trying to tip me, Finn Silver?'

He checked her blanket was still in position as she clutched her crutches to one side. Then he bit in his bottom lip and grinned. 'You want to speed things up?'

'Are you serious?' She paused, then nodded. 'Just to the house.'

Finn whooped, then grabbed the handles and started building up into a sprint, making Vivien, and himself, laugh.

Fran stepped out the side door of her house and slammed her hands on her hips. 'Finn! What on earth?'

He quickly stopped the rolling wheelchair, placing one hand on Vivien's shoulder to stop her from toppling forward.

Fran frowned at her middle child. 'Do you want to break her other leg, son? Hmm? Get inside, the pair of you.'

Finn and Vivien exchanged glances as they passed Fran in the doorway. Both of them trying hard not to laugh. Finn got one of the wheels caught on the doorstep and had to force the chair into a wheelie to get the contraption into the small hallway on the other side.

‘There,’ he said, talking to himself.

Vivien went to use her crutches to stand, but Finn leaned down, offering his arms, which she didn’t seem to mind taking. He swooped her up like a bride and gave her a cheeky wink, which he knew would make her smile, as she always used to tell him to wink at a girl if he liked them.

That was way back in school, and her advice once got him called a creep, and another time the girl asked if he had something in his eye. He liked to think by the grand age of thirty-five he had indeed perfected the fine art of winking. He had practiced enough in the mirror when he was a teenager. The thought made him smile as he carefully placed Vivien onto a kitchen chair.

Fran announced she had made vegetable soup and farmhouse bread for lunch, even though the wonderful aroma in the kitchen had already explained that fact.

A crackling open fire in a large brown-brick fireplace added to the cosiness of the country cottage room, which Finn could see warmed Vivien, just like it always had. He figured she just needed to be surrounded by love again, and his mum’s kitchen was a great start.

‘Ooh, Fran, this is lovely,’ said Vivien, slurping her soup as soon as it was served.

Fran’s gentle blue eyes smiled. ‘I get all my produce from Dreamcatcher Farm. Locally sourced is always the best way to go. The herbs are from here.’

Vivien smiled through her slice of doorstep bread. ‘I’m the same as you, Fran. I use what I can get locally. Everyone who comes into the café appreciates it, and the tourists often want to visit some of the farms afterwards.’

‘Ooh, you should get some of my herbs in the Gatehouse.’

‘I’m not sure there’s much call for herbs in a café, Fran. However,’ Vivien raised her spoon, ‘I could get this recipe from you and start serving homemade soup. Or, you can make it, and we’ll make a deal on the profit.’

Fran flapped one hand. ‘Oh, you can have the recipe. No need to cut me in, Viv. It’s not that hard to make. I’m surprised our Finn hasn’t made it for you yet. If there’s one thing my boy loves, it’s homemade soup.’

‘Finn’s not had a chance to cook for me. People keep bringing food to his house for us. Josephine Walker brought over a beef cobbler, and Nora brought a rhubarb crumble. Joey popped in with some pastries she’d made for Edith’s Tearoom, and Freddy Morland sent us up a pasta dish from The Ugly Duckling. They’re either being kind or think Finn can’t cook. I’m not even a hundred percent sure he can.’

‘Pfft!’ Fran stared at him, and Finn lowered his eyes and made short work of his lunch, which really was delicious. ‘Finn is a good cook. I taught all my boys to cook. It’s important for them to know things like that. You shouldn’t rely on anyone else when you’re grown. I wanted to make sure my kids could survive without me.’

‘Yes, thank you, Mother.’ Finn grinned as she tossed the tea towel at his arm.

Vivien wasn’t smiling with them, more frowning with confusion, and Finn could feel her eyes on him. ‘He always eats in the café when he’s not working.’

Fran’s soft features seemed to soften even more as she looked at Finn. ‘I guess he likes your food too.’

And let that be the end of that.

Finn went to speak, but Vivien wasn’t finished.

‘I only make basic café food.’

Finn shrugged and swiped another slice from the cut loaf. ‘Well, it makes a change from all the Michelin star cooking I do at home.’

Vivien scoffed. ‘I’d like to try some.’

He looked up to meet her raised eyebrows and sarcastic grin. ‘You will tonight.’ Her smile warmed, along with his heart.

Finn spent the rest of lunch wondering what he could cook for dinner that would impress her. He had a lot of recipes up his sleeve, thanks to his mum. Fran had been handed down many herself from her own mother and grandmother. There was no way he was going to push the boat too far out. He didn’t want to appear big-headed or anything.

There was a big old book back home, where he scribbled down his own concoctions as well as the ones his mum gave him. Plus, he always had a well-stocked kitchen, so he wasn’t too worried. He just didn’t want it to seem like it was a date, even though he wished it was.

Even if she did like me that way, it’s not what she needs right now. Do not cross the line.

He gazed over at her whilst she was engaged happily in a conversation with his mum about something or other that was going on over in the next town, Sandly. Smiles were traded every so often across the large oak table, and Finn relaxed back into the friendzone.

Heath walked in, stamping his feet by the door. He changed into slippers and warmed his hands by the fire as he said hello to everyone. ‘It’s so cold out there, and the heating has packed up in my workshop. Again. I really need to get that sorted once and for all.’ He washed his hands before sitting at the table next to Vivien whilst Fran served him some soup. ‘Thanks, Mum.’ He nudged Vivien’s arm. ‘Hey, you. How’s the leg?’

‘Itchy.’

Heath laughed, and Finn felt grateful for his family. His big brother and Vivien’s big sister might often be at loggerheads, but that didn’t stop Heath being friendly with Vivien.

‘I saw Rhett this morning, up at the stables,’ said Heath, before snaffling some bread.

Vivien looked at Finn. ‘Where else would she be?’

It was a well-known fact that Rhett loved Lucky Riding Stables more than life itself. She spent more time with her horses than she did anyone, except her daughter, who preferred the garden centre to the stables.

‘What were you doing up at Rhett’s?’ asked Finn.

Heath’s stern face gave little away for a moment. ‘We were discussing Vivien, if you must know.’

Vivien’s dark eyes widened, and Finn could see quite clearly, she was worried.

‘What’s there to discuss?’ he asked, before Vivien had a chance to speak.

Heath tilted his head to one side. A sympathetic expression filled his face. ‘We just think she can’t stay at yours forever, Finn.’

Finn clenched his fist beneath the table as his jaw tightened. ‘Yes, she can.’

‘I’m right here, you know,’ said Vivien, showing her annoyance in her sharp tone.

Heath shuffled in his chair to face her. ‘Sorry. We just think it’s that old saying about getting straight back on the horse.’

Vivien folded her arms in a huff. ‘Oh, don’t tell me, my sister came out with that one.’

‘It’s true though,’ said Heath, as soft as his deep voice could go. He looked at Finn. ‘And if it were up to him, he’d have you wrapped in cotton wool for the rest of your life, and that’s no good for anyone.’

A tic hit Finn’s jaw as his nostrils flared. ‘I’m not wrapping Viv in cotton wool, I’m giving her the space she needs to heal from...’ He stopped talking, thinking better of it.

A silence fell in the kitchen, only interrupted by the sound of the fire.

Fran taking a deep breath caused all eyes to turn her way. ‘I think you’re both right. Vivien needs some time, but not too

much.’ She smiled sweetly at Vivien. ‘But I think you already know that, don’t you, lovely?’

Vivien slowly nodded as her gaze lowered to her lap, and Finn really did want to wrap her up in cotton wool right at that moment.

‘Well, we’re working on it,’ Finn told his family. His eyes locked with Vivien’s, and he was pleased to see the slightest of appreciation in hers.

Don’t worry, Viv. I’ve got you.

‘I promise I won’t stay at Finn’s forever. I wouldn’t put him out like that. You don’t have to worry,’ said Vivien quietly.

‘Whoa, whoa, whoa!’ snapped Finn, raising his palms and shuffling closer. ‘You’re not putting me out at all.’

‘That’s not what I meant, Viv,’ said Heath, offering an apologetic smile.

Finn glared at his brother. ‘Good, because she’s not.’

Fran reached across the table and curled her hand over Vivien’s. ‘You, lovely, are welcome to stay in any of our houses here at the farm. I hope you know that. We just want to see you fit and well, that’s all.’

Vivien smiled softly. ‘Well, I wasn’t planning on burdening anyone.’

‘You aren’t a burden,’ said Finn quickly. He took a silent breath and gave her a warm smile, hoping his words would sink in.

‘Thanks, chick,’ she mouthed.

He always loved it when she called him that. It made him feel special, even though he knew she used the same term of endearment with Grace. He was glad he’d never heard her say it to Brody. That would have broken him in ways she would never know.

He winked when no one was looking but her, making her smile widen. After his teenage winking disasters, he’d decided to reserve that cheeky action only for Vivien Smithson,

because she was the only one who appreciated him having something caught in his eye.

Vivien

Two weeks had passed and even though Finn was doing everything he could to make Vivien smile, she just couldn't quite get out of the slump she was in. She had many words with herself, and there were a few high moments where she felt fine, but all in all, she was having more bad days than good. Not that she was about to let Finn know, even though she was sure some days it was obvious. It wasn't as though she wanted to hide her thoughts and lack of feelings from him. It was more that she didn't know how to explain it to herself half the time.

'You're emotionally numb,' said Rhett, brushing down Luther, a dapple-grey horse.

Vivien leaned on one of the stable doors, using it to help hold her up along with her awkward crutches. Every day her body felt stronger. She just wished her mind would catch up.

Rhett gestured at a black bucket by Vivien's foot. 'You reckon you can manage that?'

Vivien frowned at the murky water sitting at the bottom, then raised the end of one crutch to try to hook the handle. 'I'd have better luck at the January Fair. Ooh, I wish I could go to that. I miss the rides. In fact, I think I'm starting to miss Sandly. I can't remember the last time I popped over there. Or anywhere. I've been asking Finn to drive me over to the lifeboat station, but he keeps dithering. He knows they'll probably ask him when he'll be back on call. He's taken over two weeks off work already. The fire station won't be pleased if he keeps this up. Tell Heath to make Finn go back to work. Please.'

Rhett's hazel eyes widened as her brow raised. 'Why can't you tell Heath?'

'He's more likely to listen to you.'

Rhett let out a short laugh. 'You think?'

Vivien shrugged and gave up trying to hook the bucket. It was settled. She felt just as useless as Brody would say she was. ‘I think he listens to you.’

‘I think he hates my guts, but you carry on seeing whatever it is you think you can see.’

‘He doesn’t hate you, Rhett.’

Rhett closed the stable door, then collected the bucket to take outside into the open, where the hosepipe was attached to the outbuilding. ‘You know he blames me for everything. So, let’s not involve me in helping you with Finn if it means asking Heath.’

Vivien hobbled her way towards the main doors of the indoor stables. She plopped herself down on a stack of plastic storage boxes and took a breath, as that alone was an effort. ‘What can I do to help you?’

‘Not a lot, judging by the state of you.’

‘Thanks, sis.’

Rhett’s faintly freckled face flushed as she heaved a full bucket load of water around the side of the stables, washing it out completely before refilling.

Vivien glanced at her own arm, tucked away warmly beneath a dark-green woolly jumper, wishing she had half her sister’s strength, in all ways.

Nope. No muscles there. I reckon Rhett would have been able to lay out Brody with one punch. Ooh, get out of my head.

‘I need to work, Rhett. I need to do something, and more importantly, I need Finn to do something. If I can show him I’m perfectly capable of caring for myself, he will go back to work. He’s always been a worrier.’

Rhett pulled out some chewing gum from her blue overalls and popped one in her mouth once Vivien had declined a piece. ‘He’s not a worrier. The man’s a rescue worker. You’re the only one he worries about, Viv.’

Now it had been mentioned, Vivien had to agree. It was only her he seemed to make a fuss over. ‘He’s one of my best

friends. Grace isn't back for another couple of weeks, so I guess he feels he has to fill in for her.'

Rhett pulled back her hair, making it look messier than it was a second before. She wiped her hands down her work clothes and shook her head.

'What's that look for, Rhett?'

'You.'

'What about me?'

Rhett flapped one hand, waving Vivien off the storage boxes. 'You know what, if you can't figure it out by now, then I'm not telling you.'

Vivien heaved herself up onto her crutches, with no help from her sister, who was in a hurry to open the top box to put some grooming equipment away.

'You want some dinner with me tonight, Viv?'

'Hmm? Oh, no, ta. Finn keeps cooking lovely meals each night. Not sure if he's practicing for MasterChef or something, the way he's going in the kitchen. Not that I'm complaining.'

Rhett locked the box and turned to her little sister. 'How long are you planning on staying there?'

Vivien tried to shrug but wobbled on her crutches.

Rhett shook her head. 'You have to go home. You can't let this beat you.'

'It's not that easy,' snapped Vivien. She quickly pulled in her lips, feeling bad for biting Rhett's head off. 'Sorry.'

'You don't have to apologise to me. I just want you back in the café, where you belong. The Vivien Smithson I know wouldn't walk away from that place for all the tea in China.' Rhett took a steady breath, lowering her shoulders a touch. 'Viv, the Gatehouse is your dream. Has been forever.'

Vivien sat back on the boxes. 'I know.' She sighed loudly, then forced herself back up. 'Sod it!' She shuffled around, gaining balance, then gestured across the field to where her old log cabin of a home sat in the near distance. 'You know what,

I'm going home. I'm a lot stronger on my feet now, and I can manage the stairs, only on my bum, but still.' She laughed along with her sister, then headed off.

'Erm, wait,' called out Rhett. 'Take the road, it's flatter ground. Oh, just let me take you over there. You'll wear yourself out.'

'Nope,' called back Vivien, without looking, as the dips in the grass needed her full attention. 'I'll take the shortcut. I can do it.' She stopped for a second to glance back. 'And don't you dare call Finn.'

Rhett raised one hand, then went back to work. Exactly where Vivien should be.

Wobbling along the field that led over to the Gatehouse made Vivien realise she needed to up her fitness levels. She had to stop for a breather every minute or so, and the crutches were starting to get on her nerves. The long cast on her leg was awkward and she couldn't wait for it to come off.

She finally made it to the side door of her home. The closest she had been since ending up at the bottom of the stairs.

The door was open and a ladder was leaning against the frame. Vivien rolled her head up its rungs to meet with a new wall light she knew nothing about. Her stomach flipped as her brain switched to autopilot.

Brody.

Thudding footsteps coming down the stairs sounded like Finn's, and a roar of laughter confirmed it was him.

Vivien peered around the doorframe. 'Finn?'

He stopped short of the bottom step, mouth gaping and eyes wide. 'Viv?'

'Don't look so surprised. This is my home.'

'Erm, yes. I just wasn't expecting you.'

'And I wasn't expecting to find you here. You said you were collecting stock for Ashley, but this part of the building

isn't the café. So, care to explain what you're doing inside my home?'

Finn slowly made his way to her side and gestured up at the new wall light. 'It was going to be a surprise. Sort of. I guess I should have asked permission first, but once I had the thought, I jumped straight in.'

'What are you talking about?' Vivien shuffled her arms and crutches, feeling the need to sit down. She was tired and in no mood for riddles.

Clearly, Finn could see she was worn through, as he guided her over to a bench and helped her to sit. 'You okay?'

'Yes, thank you. Just walking with these crutches isn't easy, and I took the shortcut from the stables.'

Finn sat to her side and placed the aids on the ground. 'You're supposed to be at home, resting.'

Vivien glanced at the Gatehouse. 'This is my home, Finn,' she said quietly.

'Sorry. Ignore me. Erm... so, you're ready to go back then?'

'What I'm ready for is you telling me why you're here, and what's up with the new light all of a sudden?'

'It's not real. Just security.' He raised his palm, halting the words about to leave her mouth. 'Before you say anything, I was just trying to help.' He gestured over at the door. 'It's a secret camera. There's one at the entrance to the café as well.'

Vivien raised her eyebrows as high as they could go. 'Please tell me you were planning on telling me about this at some point? I can't be filmed twenty-four seven. That's the reason I don't have security cameras. Brody would have had me on film every chance he got to gawp at his phone. I can't live like that.'

Finn lowered his head a touch as he reached over to hold her hand. 'Oh, I did wonder why you've never had any security around here.'

‘Firstly, I’ve never felt the need for anything extra. And secondly, Silver Wish Farm has some cameras by the garden centre. I figured they would pick up any criminal activity, if we had any.’

Finn glanced at the café. ‘There’s more. I’ve got a man upstairs installing a panic button.’ He lowered his head as though he were in trouble.

Vivien was too busy hoping she wouldn’t have to press it one day.

‘I just want you to be safe when you return, Viv,’ he said softly, slipping his hand away from hers.

She sighed, drooping her shoulders. ‘I haven’t seen or heard anything from Brody. I guess I’m safe now.’ Her voice was just as quiet as his as they both glanced at the Gatehouse. ‘I hope,’ she added, swallowing hard.

Finn sat up, quickly moving closer to her side. ‘You are. I promise.’ He waved one hand out. ‘This is just in case. At least you would have proof that he won’t leave you alone. But I was thinking, when you do want to return here to live, I could stay over for a while.’ His eyes were on hers, waiting.

Vivien didn’t know what to think or feel. She didn’t want to live a life where she had to constantly worry about Brody turning up. It was bad enough he lived on the same small island as her. The chances of avoiding him forever were slim.

It would be nice to have Finn around, but I can’t rely on people. This is ridiculous.

Finn was smiling softly as she met his gentle eyes. ‘I’ve overstepped, haven’t I?’ He shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, Viv. I never should have entered your home and made those decisions.’

‘No, you shouldn’t, but I understand. Just don’t do anything like that again.’ She turned sharply to him and lightly squeezed his hand. ‘I mean it, Finn. This is my new chapter now, and I’ll not have anyone controlling it. This is my time to enjoy peace. I’m done with men taking charge.’ She pointed at

her home. 'It's helpful what you've done. I will feel more settled, but don't make decisions for me. Okay?'

'Yes. I see now what a mistake I made. I was just in such a whirl, I wasn't thinking clearly. Ashley let me out the back because she wanted you to have security too, but I shouldn't have involved her either. Do you want me to tell the security man to take it all away? It won't bother him. He still gets paid.'

Vivien shook her head. 'No, let's get it installed, but I'm paying.' Finn went to speak, but she shushed him by placing her fingertips over his parted lips. 'No arguments.'

He glanced down at her hand covering his mouth, then he met her gaze, and something about the way he looked at her made his eyes appear darker.

Vivien's stomach fluttered, but that couldn't be right. Finn was her best friend, not someone who created butterflies and moonbeams. Realising her fingers were still touching his lips, she slowly lowered her hand.

Finn stood and helped her to stand. He cleared his throat and turned his head away from her face. 'So, erm, you want to see what the workman has done up there?'

Her hesitation was obvious, but Finn wasn't saying anything. She adjusted the crutches, then gave a tiny nod.

'Okay,' he mumbled, leading the way.

Vivien met the bottom of the stairs and told herself off for being silly. It was her home. A place she once loved so very much. Brody had taken enough from her. There was no way she was about to let him destroy her love for the Gatehouse.

'Hold my crutches please, Finn. I'll use the handrail to help me.'

'Sod that!' He swiped her up in his arms and carried her to the top without once glancing her way.

Vivien breathed out a small laugh as he placed her gently back on her feet. 'I'm practicing.'

He tapped his solid chest. ‘You know I’m a rescue worker, right? If I see someone struggling, it’s my default to help.’

She felt a little sad he had said that, then silently chastised herself for the brief thought.

It’s Finn. It’s what he does. I’m nothing special. Why do I even want to be special? Stop being stupid.

Noise was coming from the bedroom, so she waddled that way to see a plump worker’s bum greeting her. She frowned at Finn and tried not to giggle at the charming sight.

‘How you getting on, mate?’ asked Finn, rather loudly, making the middle-aged man jump.

‘Just finished,’ he replied, standing whilst pulling up his loose jeans. ‘Come in. Come in.’ He waved them towards the king-size dark-wood bed. ‘Let me show you how it works.’

Finn

Finn followed Vivien and the security man around her home whilst the man showed them how to work the alarm and panic button. Vivien seemed genuinely interested in how the system worked, which was a relief. He could have kicked himself for having it installed without her say-so. It was unlike him, and he knew it.

The conversation between the worker and Vivien faded as Finn flopped to the cream settee, leaving them to it in the kitchen.

There is no way I want her to see me as a controlling Brody type. Hell no. That's not me.

Finn was so angry at himself, then at the settee, as thoughts of Brody lounging there with his feet up, ruling the roost, crossed his mind. He quickly got up and went to the kitchen.

Vivien was signing some paperwork, then the workman said a cheery goodbye and left.

‘Everything all right, Viv?’

She nodded as she sat on a blue chair. ‘Yes. It was quite simple. I’ve even got a password.’ Her smile settled his thumping heart. ‘Put the kettle on, please.’

Finn set about making her tea whilst she explained about the panic button by her bed, even though he had heard that part. He didn’t want to interrupt, as her tone was light and relaxed.

A row of cream mugs with farm animals on them faced him in the cupboard. He pulled out the one with a sheep on it and didn’t bother with one for himself, as he had lost his appetite so much, he couldn’t even face a cuppa.

‘You okay over there, Finn?’

He turned, flashing her a smile, then leaned on the worktop and stared out the window. ‘Just waiting for the kettle to boil.’

‘You not having one?’

‘Nah, I’m good.’

Vivien shuffled in her chair, giving him a disbelieving look. ‘Finn Silver, I have known you since the day I was born. I know when something’s up with you. Talk to me.’

Finn shrugged, then started looking around for teabags. ‘It’s been a while since I was up here with you.’

‘Hmm, well, we both know why.’

The tea could wait. The wobble in her voice caused him to sit by her side and take her hand in his.

‘I’m okay,’ she whispered.

Finn kissed her knuckles and nodded. ‘We’ve been through some crap, haven’t we?’

Vivien raised her eyes and huffed out a laugh. ‘Yep. You with your broken heart over what’s-her-face.’

She didn’t break my heart. You did when you started going out with Brody.

‘Hey, I wasn’t that bad.’ He grinned widely and went off to make her tea. ‘You cried more when your hamster escaped and you thought one of the horses had eaten him.’

‘I still don’t know how he ended up in the stables.’ She pointed at the blue floral biscuit barrel as Finn brought a steaming hot cuppa over. ‘How about when you scared the living daylights out of everyone when your dinghy capsized and you nearly drowned.’

‘What do I always tell you?’

Vivien mocked a sigh. ‘That’s why you’re safe at sea with the RNLI, because lightning doesn’t strike twice.’

Finn took a small bow. ‘Exactly.’

‘Ooh, do you remember when we got lost that night trying to find our tent and we fell down that ditch and couldn’t get out till morning? Oh my days, that was scary and funny.’

Finn nodded. 'How can I forget? I broke my finger, and you threw up.'

'Way too much brandy.'

'Yep.' He held up his index finger on his right hand, showing her its slight wonkiness, making her laugh.

Vivien stopped laughing and stared seriously at him. 'I'm thirty-three and you're thirty-five.'

Finn had to laugh at her random statement. 'Yeah?'

'I was just remembering that time we had both broken up with our partners when we were teens, and I said if I was single by the time I reached the grand old age of thirty, I'd marry you, and you agreed.'

I was single when you turned thirty.

'Shame you weren't single then,' he joked quietly, picking a digestive from the biscuit tin, just so he had something to do.

Vivien sipped her tea, smiling over the rim of her mug. 'We could make it forty now.'

Finn glanced up to meet the twinkle in her eyes. 'Yeah, okay.' He leaned forward and dipped his biscuit in her tea before snaffling half of it in one go.

The thought of marrying Vivien Smithson brought back a tiny hunger pang.

'You'll probably be taken by then,' she said quietly. 'It's always baffled me that no one's whisked you away yet. I mean, look at you. You're gorgeous, and kind. And have you seen yourself in your firefighter uniform?'

Finn almost choked on his saliva as he burst out laughing. 'You can't say that to me.'

'Friends tell you the truth.'

Ouch! Friend-zoned.

'It's just weird you've never had many girlfriends, Finn,' she added.

'I'm fussy.'

‘You’re daft.’

‘You love me. That’s all I need.’

‘But, Finn, I—’

‘How about we lose the tea and get something to eat downstairs? Check out Ashley’s cooking skills.’

‘Ooh, I could go for a fried egg roll.’

‘Great start. Come on, I’ll have one with you, then we can go back to mine and watch a film or something.’

Vivien nodded as she reached for her crutches. ‘Sounds like a good plan. I just want to say something before we leave.’

‘As long as it’s not anything to do with you trying to set me up on a blind date or something similar. We both know what a disaster that was last time.’

Vivien snorted. ‘No. It’s not that, but that was funny.’

‘No, it wasn’t. I ended up covered in paint.’

‘Speaking of which. Will you help me decorate this place? I mean all of it. I hate the way it looks since Brody changed everything. None of it is my style anymore.’

Finn glanced at the pale-blue wall that looked better suited to a hospital ward. ‘I remember how you had it when you first moved in. An array of colours. Mum said you should rename the place Rainbow Café.’

‘I like colours, but the café is for everyone, so that can stay neutral. Brody never bothered with downstairs, except for taking down my fairy lights.’

‘You want me to put them back up?’

Vivien’s face came alive with happiness. ‘Very much.’

‘Food, then lights. That’s my list sorted.’

‘And tomorrow, we can start stripping this place of all traces of Brody.’

Finn nodded. ‘I can start stripping the wallpaper tonight while you go online and find what you like.’

‘Okay, but will you promise me one last thing?’

‘Whatever you want, it’s yours.’

She laughed at his casual wink, then turned serious. ‘I need you to go back to work. You’ve taken too much time off. I’ll still be at yours, and we’ll fix this place up in between your shifts, when you’re not tired, that is. Not that you’re ever tired. I promise to take things easy till my leg is fully healed, and I’ll even stay with your parents when you do nightshifts, if it makes you feel better.’ She winked back, making him smile.

‘Hey, I appreciate that, but this isn’t about me and my wants. I messed up big time with the whole alarm system thing, so I won’t be doing anything like that again. I don’t want you making decisions that benefit me. I want you to do whatever the hell you like with your freedom, because you are free now, Viv. Enjoy it. Get your life back, and ignore me. Okay?’

Vivien scrunched her nose. ‘Not okay. You and me are a team. You worry about me, and I worry about you. So, whatever happens next, we’ll make sure we do everything we can to lessen the worries and raise the laughter. We were always good at that.’

He couldn’t argue. ‘Yep, we were.’

‘And still are, it would appear.’ She took an obvious calming breath and smiled softly with her dark eyes. ‘I’m so glad Brody didn’t destroy our friendship, Finn.’

He followed her out the kitchen and held his arms out to her at the top of the stairs, but instead of allowing him to carry her, she hugged him tightly.

‘Hey, what’s all this?’ he whispered into her hair.

‘I’m just so grateful for you.’

‘I’m grateful for you too, Viv. You’re my best friend.’

‘And you’re mine.’

Finn’s heart warmed. He carefully placed one arm around her back and the other under her legs, swooping her up into his chest. There was so much more he wanted to say. His heart

ached to tell her how he truly felt, but the timing was lousy. She needed her friend right now. So he would continue to do what he did best when it came to her.

Her head rolled up his shoulder and she nuzzled her nose into his cheek, and Finn used every ounce of discipline he had about him to ignore her and concentrate on the stairs.

Vivien

Vivien couldn't help but laugh under her breath at her sister and Heath working together to remove and paint kitchen cupboard doors. The only noise in the room was the radio quietly playing the latest pop songs. She left them ignoring each other and went to see how Finn's parents were getting on stripping the bathroom of the brown tiles she hated so much.

Her old bathroom, pre-Brody, had been sunshine yellow with bright green accessories and sweet-scented candles. The blind was light wood, matching the flooring, and her towels were stripy, containing colours of earth and sand.

Brody had done away with the lot.

All Vivien wanted was to make him feel at home, so she agreed to the smaller changes, not realising that, over time, those changes would get bigger and bigger until everything that represented her personality would disappear.

She sighed inwardly at everything she had allowed. She knew now he had slowly conditioned her mind over the years, but she couldn't help but blame herself for allowing it to happen. It was a tough battle she fought within her own walls. One minute, it was his fault, the next, hers. The psychology was so messed up.

Grace came to mind. There was a time when she was dating someone covered in red flags, and Vivien could see it quite clearly. So, what was her excuse for not seeing them when it came to Brody?

I've got to stop thinking about this.

She leaned on the wall outside the bathroom door and took a silent breath.

Finn's dad, Benton, had placed a bunch of towels in the bath and was standing on top of them, prising the squares off the wall whilst Fran tidied the debris away, keeping the mess to a minimum, which they were disagreeing over.

Benton thought it best to wait till he was finished before tidying, but Fran said it saves him dragging it all over the house, which she was sure he would do, as was his way.

Vivien chewed her bottom lip to stop herself from laughing. They had to be her favourite couple of all time. They never seemed to argue, just disagree in a comical way. Benton never raised his voice or had anger in his light-brown eyes, not that she'd ever witnessed, and half the time he wasn't listening to his wife anyway, due to being slightly deaf in one ear.

Thoughts drifted to her own father as she stayed back from showing herself at the bathroom doorway.

Roland Smithson wasn't a bad man. He was just firmly set in his ways, with strict traditions and schedules he expected his family to go along peacefully with.

Her home was quiet. Her parents reserved, and life was filled with routine and structure. And horses.

Vivien had always wished Benton was her dad. She envied Finn. Everything was so relaxed at his house. The Silvers had a cosy kitchen that was the heart of their home. All she and Rhett had was the wind whipping through the stables at all the hours she was forced to be out there.

The kitchen at her childhood home was practical. No dancing took place, not like at Finn's, and there certainly weren't any family meetings or group hugs.

Her father would read his paper in the living room, over by the fire, and her mother would knit in her spare time. The kitchen was there for cooking and saw little else.

Dianna Smithson was a quiet woman, and since the abuse from Brody, Vivien was starting to wonder if that was her mother's true personality after all.

Oh, Mum. I wonder if you lost your voice along the way like I did with Brody.

Vivien glanced up at the loft door above, knowing her old family photos were tucked away in a plastic box up there, where Brody had placed them, as he said he felt uncomfortable with pictures of her parents, apparently staring at him.

I'm going to buy some new photo frames from Doll's Gift House. Yeah, that'll be nice.

She had to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Brody. Her broken leg. The Silvers, Hadleys, and Smithsons working to bring her personality back into her home. Surreal wasn't really the word of the day, but it came close. She shook her head, then limped into the living room to see Finn stripping wallpaper at the far end.

He glanced over his shoulder, his face glistening in the steam coming from the wallpaper steamer in his left hand. 'Has Ashley brought up those sandwiches yet? I'm getting hungry now.'

Vivien smiled his way as she flopped to the sheet-covered settee. 'I think she just went downstairs to do that, or maybe that was Harriet. I don't know, I only caught a glimpse of dark hair.'

Finn downed tools and sat by her side, spreading out like a starfish. He yawned and stretched his back, arching it before sinking into the settee. His lazy smile flashed her way before he closed his eyes for a moment.

Vivien stared at his full lips whilst he wasn't looking, then checked out her fingernails when his lids fluttered open.

'I bet you can't wait for Grace to come home,' he said sleepily.

'I do miss her, but she's having the time of her life, so let her stay away, I say. Besides, she won't be happy when she hears about me.' Vivien sighed. 'I guess the whole island knows about me by now.'

Finn nodded slightly. 'Probably. No one will say anything bad about you though, Viv. Just him. They'll wonder why he's still working.'

'I didn't press charges, that's why.'

Finn didn't respond, and she knew why. No one had spoken much about Brody to her. She figured they were all angry at her for letting him off the hook, but only she understood why.

Peace and quiet were her goals. A new beginning and a home filled with fresh air and positive vibes. Oh, how that man had the ability to suck the goodness out of the air just by coming into a room.

Vivien physically shuddered at the memory, causing Finn's eyes to widen her way.

'You okay, Viv?'

She smiled softly, and as though reading her thoughts, Finn held her hand.

He gestured at the modern white fireplace. 'What do you want to do with that?'

'I've got someone coming round tomorrow to take a few bits away. I'm thinking about installing a wood burner, like yours.'

Finn laughed. 'Everyone loves my wood burner.'

'It's cosy. I like your home.'

'Well, you can stay as long as you like.' He turned his head to meet her eyes. 'You know that, right?'

Vivien smiled as she nodded.

Finn sniffed, then sat up. 'It'll be weird when you leave. I've got used you being around. It's especially nice when I come home from work and my house isn't empty.'

'Are you lonely, Finn?'

He shuffled around in his seat, then stood and rolled his shoulders over, clicking his neck. 'I'm not the lonely type. Probably because I'm always so busy. Just never shared my home with anyone before, that's all.'

'Well, just so you know, you're the best landlord. Ever.'

He laughed and pulled her up. 'You don't even pay rent.'

'I supply scented candles...'

'Which I appreciate.'

They laughed, and he pulled her closer as someone in the kitchen turned the music up louder.

‘Want to dance, Finn?’

He glanced at her cast, then slowly dipped her low. ‘Always.’

Vivien’s smile couldn’t stretch any wider as Finn tried to twirl her around without toppling them both over. Their laughter filled the living room until Ashley popped in to place a tray of food on the coffee table.

‘There’s more in the kitchen,’ she informed them. ‘And Harriet and Jude want to know if they can rip the carpet off the stairs yet?’

Finn steadied Vivien before he headed for the door. ‘I’ll help Jude. Harriet can have her lunch.’ He quickly snatched a ham sandwich, stuffing it into his mouth with one hand whilst the other waved his goodbye over his head.

Vivien sat back down, then reached forward for the food. ‘Thanks for all your help with the café, Ash. You’ve been a real star.’

Ashley flapped a cheese sandwich. ‘Leave off, Viv. You don’t have to thank me. Just lending a hand.’ Her blue eyes twinkled. ‘It’s what we do, right?’

Vivien nodded. ‘I know, but...’ She trailed off, not knowing what to add. Ashley wasn’t just a friend, she was Grace’s sister. Of course she would help if Grace wasn’t around. She was just grateful Brody hadn’t shown his face whilst Ashley was working in the café, as she knew how fiery Ashley was.

Brody had used his taser on Ashley once, insisting it was a misunderstanding, but Ashley had hated him ever since, and now she had even more cause.

Ashley glanced up from her food. ‘Why are you staring at me, Viv?’

‘Oh, sorry. I was just—’

‘Wondering if I’m judging you for staying with that piece of crap.’

Vivien breathed out a laugh. ‘Wow, can you read minds?’

Ashley picked up a bowl of salt-and-vinegar crisps. ‘That would come in handy, but no. I just figured you’d be thinking we’ve all got something to say about you.’

‘And have you?’

‘Nope. I’m just glad you’re okay.’ Ashley paused. ‘Are you okay?’

Feeling slightly embarrassed, Vivien shrugged. ‘I have my moments, but I’m getting there. Life definitely feels a lot lighter.’

‘And Finn?’

‘What about him?’

‘How you getting on at his?’

A smile filled Vivien’s face, which Ashley mimicked. ‘It’s nice over there. Peaceful.’

Ashley went over to the door to grab two cups of tea from the tray Fran was holding. She thanked her, then took one over to Vivien as Fran went off to hand out some more. ‘I always thought you’d end up with Finn, if I’m honest.’

Vivien snorted. ‘We’re just friends. He’s never hit on me. Not once.’

‘You sure about that?’

I think so.

Vivien nodded slightly as she sipped her tea. Ashley’s words had got her thinking back. She was pretty sure Finn had never made a move on her. He was Finn. His usual lovable, sweet self, who gave the best hugs and always knew how to make her smile.

He doesn’t see me that way.

Although now, thanks to Ashley’s comment, she wasn’t entirely sure.

10

Finn

It had been quiet at the fire station all morning until Nora's cat, Sparkle, got stuck in Mr Sawyer's tree again.

Finn was on a ladder, box of Sparkle's favourite treats in hand, trying to coax the defiant black-and-white furball out of the large evergreen. Thin branches tapped at his helmet as a light wind blew. 'Come on, Sparkle. You don't want to stay up here another night.'

The cat was having none of it.

Down below, the other firefighters were chatting away happily to the elderly owner and each other as though Finn and Sparkle no longer existed.

Finn sighed heavily and rested his elbow on a thicker branch, laughing to himself at how often he'd been in this situation with Nora's cat. It was quite possible the moggie simply liked the attention. It was also highly likely old Sparkle could climb down her favourite tree anytime she wanted.

A silent yawn came from the cat whilst eyeing up the treats in Finn's hand.

Finn had once seen a dog whisperer on the telly, and he was pretty sure Rhett's horses completely understood her, but as for the feline language, he felt no shame in holding his hands up to the fact he couldn't for the life of him understand the lingo. However, Sparkle needed to be seen at that moment, so pushing firefighter duties to one side, he gave the cat his best sympathetic smile and went into full therapist mode. 'Look, I know how you feel. I hang out in a treehouse sometimes. You see, I get it. The peace, the quiet, no one knowing where you are. But everyone knows you're here, and your owner won't settle until she knows you're safe. So, how about it? You ready to cuddle up with Nora?'

Sparkle glanced down, then let out a soft meow, which sent all eyes below up the tree.

‘Oh, Sparkle,’ cried Nora. ‘You’re giving Mummy a fright. Do as you’re told and go to Finn.’

Sparkle stretched out one paw, then pulled it back and relaxed.

Finn had to laugh. The cat wasn’t stupid. Stubborn, probably, but vulnerable, definitely not. He narrowed his eyes and scrunched his nose. This wasn’t the time to play psychologist. The negotiator was needed at the scene. ‘Okay, name your price.’

Sparkle purred.

‘Hmm. Like that, eh?’ Finn looked down the ladder. ‘Put a tin of salmon out,’ he called to Nora, who immediately went off to fetch one.

His gaffer, Phillip, grinned. ‘I thought you were more of a tuna man, Finn.’

The others laughed as Finn gave the thumbs-up. He went to retort but stopped when he noticed a police car approaching.

The car pulled up and Brody got out with another male officer. They rudely ignored Phillip’s questions and went straight to the house closest to the tree. The door flew open at once and out charged Mr Sawyer, all fluffy white hair and menacing dark eyes. His arms were flapping, and Finn could see the old man pointing his way.

Nora came back, tin of salmon in hand, and lost her cheery disposition immediately. She dropped the food to the grass and slammed her hands onto her hips. ‘You’ve got some nerve.’ Her sharp tone and full-on scowl were directed straight at her neighbour.

Mr Sawyer marched to the edge of the border that divided their houses. ‘I’ve got a nerve?’ he yelled.

Phillip approached them. ‘Whatever the problem is, I’m sure it can be sorted without shouting.’

It was in that moment that Sparkle chose to steadily walk into Finn’s arms. Finn raised his eyebrows. ‘Your way of

saying you don't want to miss anything, or is the tin of salmon calling you?'

Sparkle nuzzled her nose into Finn's shoulder as the argument below continued.

Brody told Phillip to mind his own business and step away, but the head firefighter wasn't allowing the police officer to give him orders.

'This is a police matter,' said Brody, earning himself a sarcastic laugh from Nora.

She wagged her index finger over at the ladder against the tree. 'That's my cat being rescued. It has nothing to do with you.'

'Oh yes it has,' snapped Mr Sawyer. 'You're trespassing. As usual.'

Nora almost crossed the border. 'As usual? As usual? When have I ever stepped foot on your poor excuse for a garden?'

'Every time you want to get your bloody cat,' he yelled.

'I'm not the one up the tree, am I?' she replied.

Finn thought it best to hurry down and hand over the cat. That way, Nora might go back inside and it would all be over.

Mr Sawyer pointed at Finn as soon as his boot hit the grass. 'I want him arrested.'

Finn widened his eyes. 'What?'

Phillip tried hard to calm everyone down, but Nora was flapping her arms, Mr Sawyer was shouting, the firefighters were having a stare-down with the police, and Brody looked two seconds out from reaching for his handcuffs.

Finn just knew he was in Brody's line of fire, which angered and unnerved him.

He'd better stop eyeballing me.

Finn's heart had picked up the pace and his fists were clenched. He'd never met anyone else who had that effect on

him. It wasn't a nice feeling, and Brody's smug face wasn't helping to calm the building rage.

Sparkle wriggled to get down from Finn's arms, bringing his focus on the policeman to end. He handed the cat over to a relieved Nora, who kissed, then placed her beloved moggie on the grass to gobble up the pink salmon.

Mr Sawyer was still shouting at Phillip, and Nora sticking her two fingers up at the old man didn't help matters.

'They can't keep getting away with this,' said Mr Sawyer. 'She has no right calling the fire brigade every five minutes and inviting them to climb my tree.' He pointed up at the evergreen. 'Look, it's getting ruined.'

The tree looked perfectly fine, and everyone knew that just by one glance.

'So?' said Mr Sawyer, talking to Brody. 'Are you going to arrest him or what?'

'No one is getting arrested, Mr Sawyer,' said Phillip, regaining some authority.

'That's not your call,' said Brody.

'We're firefighters,' Phillip reminded him.

Brody tilted his head. 'And where's the fire?'

'Are you itching for a fight, Brody?' asked Phillip, stepping into his face.

'Are you threatening a police officer, Phil?'

Phillip took an obvious calming breath and removed himself from Brody's personal space.

Brody raised his voice. 'Mr Sawyer has every right to refuse entry to his property, including his front garden. He can press charges if he wants.'

Finn snorted. 'We're the fire brigade.'

Brody snarled his way. 'Removing a cat from a tree is hardly an emergency.'

'It's a call-out,' said Finn through gritted teeth.

Brody rested his hands on his hips. 'I'm just doing my job.'

'And I'm doing mine.' Finn was set to boiling point but trying so hard not to show his true feelings.

Calm down. Don't let him beat you.

Brody was keeping a calm, and a little smug, attitude, seeming to know how to push Finn's buttons. 'The cat needs to stay away from the tree.'

Finn's face fell flat. 'It's a cat.'

'You're disturbing the peace.'

Finn stepped closer. 'I'll remember that next time your house is on fire. Oh, wait, you haven't got one. Where exactly are you living now that Vivien has kicked you out? Hmm?'

Brody was almost in Finn's ear as he quietly said, 'If you think you're going to get away with sleeping with my missus, think again. I can arrest you anytime I like. Let that sink in.'

Finn clenched his teeth so tightly, a twinge of pain shot through his jaw. 'She's nothing to you anymore. Let that sink in.'

Phillip approached, causing the two men to step apart. He tugged Finn to one side as Mr Sawyer started making demands again in the background. 'Reel it in, Silver. Don't make it easy for him.'

'This is ridiculous. He's got no authority here. We're on a job.'

'Just let me sort this. Go and wait over there.'

Finn overheard Nora as he walked away, stating she was going to start a petition to free Finn Silver if he gets arrested.

'The man's a hero, unlike you,' she spat out at Brody, before picking up Sparkle and stomping back inside her house, leaving the empty tin of salmon on the neatly trimmed lawn.

Finn leaned on the shiny red fire engine and folded his arms, watching Phillip calm Mr Sawyer. All he wanted to do was punch Brody in the face and go home. On such a small island, it was obvious Brody had heard where Vivien was

staying. Not that he cared what Brody, or anyone, thought. Still, it was grinding on him that people might be thinking he was taking advantage of Vivien's vulnerable state. He met Brody's glaring eyes for a second.

Piece of shit.

Finn climbed up into the fire engine and flexed his tight fingers whilst waiting for Phillip to return. The last thing anyone needed was a member of the fire brigade getting arrested. Feeling a touch emotional, he rested his head back and closed his eyes.

Vivien will hear about this by lunch. I can't have her worrying about me.

He knew it would probably be all over the island within five minutes, considering Nora had the ability to reach the locals with news quicker than the local rag. As soon as he could, he would call Vivien and explain the situation. There was no way he wanted her having any sort of contact with her abuser on his behalf, and he knew her well enough to know she would break zero contact if it meant sticking up for someone she cared for.

It seemed like ages before the fire truck was heading back to base. Phillip had calmed everyone down, including his own team. Finn felt so bad that the molehill had turned into a mountain because he was there, and Brody was looking for an excuse to mess with him.

Lots of encouraging words came from his work friends, and he agreed with all they had to say, but deep down, it made no difference. If Brody was out to get him, there was little he could do. It was time to watch his back, and keep Vivien even closer.

Vivien

‘Oh, Finn, I’m so sorry.’ Vivien hobbled towards the front door as soon as Finn came home from work.

‘It’s not your fault, Viv. We’ve already talked about this. Please, don’t worry.’ He took his gym bag straight to the kitchen, and Vivien followed as fast as she could manage.

‘If I go home, he’ll leave you alone.’

Finn stopped moving, with his arm half in the washing machine, loading sweaty clothing. ‘We’ve not finished decorating yet. Plus, your cast doesn’t come off for another couple of weeks.’ His voice was so soft, she felt his words more than heard them. He straightened and turned on the machine before facing her. ‘Do you want to go home yet?’

It was a reasonable question. The hesitation to answer was only because she wasn’t sure what she wanted. Part of her felt ready to go back to the Gatehouse. Most of the changes had been made, as everyone had worked so quickly to help her accomplish Operation Banish-Brody.

‘What’s wrong, Viv? You know, apart from the obvious.’

She sat on a chair and started twiddling with a white placemat. How on earth could she tell him she felt so comfortable living at his house, part of her never wanted to leave?

Finn opened the fridge. ‘I’ll put dinner on.’

‘No. Wait. We should talk.’ She leaned her cheek on one fist and sighed. ‘It’s just such a mess, isn’t it?’

‘Depends how you look at it.’

Vivien shook her head at his laidback persona. ‘And how exactly are you looking at it?’ she snapped.

Finn huffed loudly and slammed the fridge door, making Vivien jump. Her stomach flipped, causing her heart to thump. He quickly held up his palms as though he just read her mind

and felt her adrenaline kick in. 'I'm so sorry, Viv. I didn't mean to scare you.' He took one step closer, then stopped. 'I'd never hurt you. Never. Are you okay?'

She swallowed hard and washed away the trigger in her mind. 'It's okay. I'm okay. I'm just a jumpy person now, that's all. I'll be my old self again one day.' She hoped.

Finn sat in the chair to her side. His hand was resting on the table, looking as though it wasn't sure whether to touch hers. 'Have you thought about therapy?'

'I'm okay. Brody hasn't been out of my life five minutes. These things take time. I don't need a professional to tell me that.'

Finn shrugged as his hand slid a little closer to her fingertips. 'Sometimes it helps to talk to someone.'

She met his concerned eyes and reached over to hold his fidgeting hand. 'Got you, haven't I?'

'Always.'

'That's all I need. Things will go back to normal. I just need to sort things with Brody.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I want to tell him to leave you alone. We both know what happened at Nora's wouldn't have if I weren't living here. It needs sorting.'

Finn wasn't looking impressed. His thick lips were pursed, and his frown was so tight it was giving her a headache. 'Phil sorted it. It's done. Over. You don't need to see him.'

'But what if he threatens to arrest you again, for nothing?'

'I'll deal with it.'

'No, Finn, that's not good enough. You could lose your job. He could ruin your life too.' Before she could do anything about it, tears rolled down her cheeks.

'Hey, hey. It's okay.' Finn's strong arms wrapped around her like the best comfort blanket ever.

Holding him made time pass slower. Vivien felt almost sedated. She couldn't be sure if it was the warmth coming from his body or just his presence. Whatever it was, it was nice.

Finn pulled away first. 'How about we get you settled in front of the telly whilst I cook your favourite?'

She smiled as he helped her stand. 'You don't know what my favourite food is.'

'Macaroni cheese, Silver style.'

Vivien laughed. It was true. He made it way better than her and wouldn't give up his secret.

'Come on, miss. Settee for you.'

She did as she was told and waited till he was gone before she whipped out her phone.

Don't call Brody. Don't you do it.

Her finger hovered as parts of her brain battled.

This is for Finn, not me.

She didn't want to contact Brody at all, but how could she allow him to hurt her friends? It felt so different now he was picking on someone else.

Argh! I just want to get on with my life. I don't know what to do. Please, someone, give me a sign.

Finn started singing, and Vivien burst out laughing, then laughed again at the fact she had just belly laughed without warning.

She closed her eyes and listened to Finn putting on silly voices and attempting high notes. The decision to unblock Brody's number had been made. He was staying in the past, and she was getting her life back, and the only people she needed around her were the ones who made her smile.

Finn started coughing, as a high note had almost choked him, by the sound of things.

Vivien opened her eyes as she laughed quietly to herself. She carefully stood and made her way into the kitchen just in time to see Finn throw away a ready-made mac and cheese container.

Finn froze.

‘Ah-ha!’ Vivien pointed accusingly at him. ‘Oh, how the plot thickens.’

Finn’s lazy smile made an appearance. ‘Hey, sometimes I buy cheat meals. Just don’t tell my mum.’

They both laughed, even more so when he grabbed her for a dance, propping her up onto his feet.

‘You’re going to break your toes,’ she said, in between giggles.

‘You’re worth it.’ His soft words and gentle eyes settled so deeply in her heart. It reminded her of how she felt when Rhett used to tuck her up in bed of a night and read her a story.

All those safe and warm moments came flooding back as the kitchen held a soft glow only she could see. Being in arms that held her so tightly awoke butterflies and fireflies and so much more.

Without thinking, Vivien leaned forward and kissed his lips. Something she had never done before.

It was as though time stopped, the radio went silent, and the ability to think disappeared.

No one moved. Not even one twitch of the mouth.

Suddenly, Vivien jumped back, wobbled, then left the kitchen as fast as possible, feeling as though the heat in her face might just explode her brain.

Oh my God. Why? Why?

Had she ruined her friendship? It sure as hell felt that way. She pleaded with herself to calm down and think, but Finn was standing in the doorway, and his expression was unreadable.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she blurted out.

He cleared his throat as he rubbed the back of his neck. ‘It’s okay,’ he said quietly.

But it wasn’t. How could it be? Vivien was trembling. Of all the stupid things she’d done in her life, she’d now messed up her relationship with Finn. Her shaky hand covered her mouth. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘No, it’s not. You’re my friend. Helping me. Caring about me, and I go and...’ She trailed off, unable to think clearly. He went to speak, but she interrupted. ‘I don’t want this for us, Finn. I don’t know what I was thinking. My head’s all over the place right now. I didn’t mean it. Please don’t let my stupidity ruin what we have. Please don’t—’

‘Viv. Stop. It’s forgotten. Okay?’

She had no idea what he really thought about her bizarre behaviour, as his face was almost lifeless. Lowering her head, she quietly told him she was going home.

He slowly approached, gently placed her down on the settee, then kissed the top of her head. ‘Your dinner’s nearly ready. Let’s eat, then watch a film, okay?’

Unsure what to do next, she simply nodded.

Finn offered a cheeky wink before heading back to the kitchen, and just like that, Vivien settled again. He always had the ability to smooth things over, even when it was her fault. Normally, they would laugh about their arguments or awkward moments. They had shared so much over the years that it wasn’t hard to right the wrongs.

Vivien could hear him shuffling about in the kitchen. The radio was turned down, and the smell of the food was wafting her way. His red hoodie was draped over the arm of the settee, almost asking to be worn. She obliged, quickly slipping it over her head. She felt warm, cosy, and possibly a tad in love with her best friend.

No. It’s just because he’s so kind to me. I’m just reaching out in the wrong direction, that’s all. Flipping heck, do I really want to be loved that much?

It didn't matter what she told herself, the feel of Finn's lips on hers wasn't leaving her mind, body, or soul.

Was it merely loneliness guiding her? Or had she really fallen for Finn Silver? With everything going on, she just couldn't be sure.

Finn

The smell of freshly cut wood filled the air as Finn sat in his big brother's carpentry workshop. He stared mindlessly at a small log slice whilst chewing slowly on a bacon roll his mum had made.

Heath washed his hands at a white basin, then joined Finn for lunch. 'I've got thirty coasters to make by four o'clock. Dolly wants me to burn Pepper Bay into each one, then coat them. Do you think we should sell things with Pepper Bay written on them? Or I could put Isle of Wight. Might make cute gifts to place by the till in the garden centre.' He huffed, then nudged Finn's boot with his own. 'Are you even listening to me?'

'Hmm? Erm, yes. Dolly's shop. Gifts. Better than a stick of rock, I guess.' Finn smiled, then finished his food.

'What's wrong, Finn? You seem a million miles away. Is this because of Brody trying to arrest you the other day?'

Finn waved away the question. The last thing he wanted was to talk about that man. Just the thought of him made his blood boil. 'No. I was thinking about Viv.'

'Is she okay?'

'I don't know. One minute she's smiling, then I catch her looking lost. I suggested therapy, but she doesn't feel that's for her. It's just, well, I think she needs more than the café to help her move forward.'

Heath swallowed the food in his mouth, then laughed. 'Just because you have to have every second of your day filled with an activity, doesn't mean everyone feels that way.'

'It would do her good to have more to focus on right now.'

'She's got the interior designing keeping her busy.'

Finn scrunched his nose. 'It's not enough. I told her I'd take her up to Honeydale in the summer, maybe. So that's

something for her to think about, but right now she needs to keep her mind occupied, and picking out paint charts and ordering bathroom tiles online isn't enough.'

'Oh, and what makes you the expert on what's enough for her?'

Finn lifted his eyebrows a touch. 'Please. I've known her my whole life.'

'Have you?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You didn't know about her life with Brody. I'm just saying, you don't know her as well as you think.'

He had a point, but still. 'That's different. Lots of abuse victims hide what's happening to them. No one knows what truly goes on behind closed doors until someone opens one.'

Heath picked up a bottle of water and took a large gulp before responding. 'Look, Finn, I know how much you love Vivien, and I know when it comes to her you can get a little...'

'A little what?'

Heath shrugged slightly. 'Carried away.'

'I'm not getting carried away. I'm just concerned.' The memory of her lips pressed against his caused his stomach to flip.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

That mantra had been whirling in his head since the unexpected, no longer spoken about, kiss.

'You could try asking her,' said Heath. 'You know, see if there's anything she'd like to get her teeth into while she's waiting for the cast to come off.'

'Like a hobby?'

Heath went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water for Finn. 'Let her know she can always come over here and make something if she wants. I'm happy to teach her some carpentry.'

Finn snorted into his water bottle. ‘I’ll let her know. Ooh, she likes reading.’ His shoulders slumped. ‘But that’s something she does already. More so since her leg issue.’ He hated saying she broke her leg, because in his mind, she didn’t do it. Brody did.

‘You can’t save everyone, Finn.’

‘That’s not what I’m trying to do.’

‘Really?’

Finn raised his hands. ‘Hey, I’m a rescue worker. It’s kind of ingrained in me. Besides, Viv’s broken right now. She just needs fixing, that’s all.’

‘Fixing people and saving people are two different things, and you’re in no position to fix her.’

The lines on Finn’s brow crinkled. ‘Why not?’

‘Because it’s none of your business. She will find her own way.’

‘Hey, everyone needs their hand holding once in a while.’

‘That’s right, but you don’t want to hold her hand. You want to treat her like some sort of charity case.’

‘No, I don’t. I...’

Charity. That’s it. That’s what I could get Viv involved in. It might help her heal if she’s raising money for someone else.

Heath’s dark-brown eyes widened. ‘Okay, what just entered your mind?’

Finn shuffled forward to lean on the large wooden table. ‘Charity, Heath. Maybe that’s the key.’ Heath went to speak, but Finn cut him off by raising a hand. ‘Think about it. It’s a known fact that helping others helps you. So, what if Viv helping out somewhere speeds up her healing process?’

‘Don’t you sign her up for anything. Talk to her first. She might not want to cook soup at the homeless shelter.’

‘Yes, I do know, thank you. But it’s a good idea, yes?’

Heath tilted his head to each side. ‘Hmm, suppose. But please try to remember you are coming at the solution from your own point of view. Not everyone is like you. Some people like a bit of peace and quiet and time to themselves, which brings me to the question... Are you going to have time for this?’

Finn gave a curt nod. ‘I have plenty of time.’

‘What, in between work, on call, and your shifts at the farm?’

‘It’s just some charity work, that’s all. Besides, I won’t be doing it, Viv will. I’ll just help get the ball rolling, settle her somewhere, then leave her to it. Don’t look at me like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘You know what. Like you don’t believe me.’

Heath grinned as he stretched his muscular shoulders. ‘I know what you’re like.’ He flopped his arms down onto the table and sighed. ‘Look, Finn, just chill a little, okay. I’m not telling you to not help Viv. I’m just asking you to take a breath. Your mind has been wrapped up in her life since you found out about Brody. You have your own life to live. Just step back and let Vivien make some decisions.’

Finn quickly shook his head. ‘I’m not trying to control her. I’d never do that. I already made the mistake of installing security without asking her, jumping two steps ahead of myself. I learned my lesson. If you’re worried I won’t talk to her about this, I promise you, I will.’

Heath tapped Finn’s shoulder as he stood. ‘That’s good to know. You’re a good man, but sometimes you’re too fast for the rest of us to keep up with. I just don’t want you rushing Viv off in all these different directions, trying to find the right cure, and ending up making yourself ill from the energy you’ll lose on your mission.’

Finn got up to leave. He had a good idea and needed to run it by Vivien before heading back to work on the farm. It could wait till dinner, but Heath was right. When Finn got a bee in his bonnet, he had to act.

‘Time waits for no man,’ his dad often said.

‘Thanks for your concern, Heath, but I know what I’m doing.’

‘And what exactly is that?’

Finn stepped outside into the dull January day, inhaling the crisp cold air. ‘I’m going to make Viv happy again.’

Vivien

The log burner made the living room at Finn's a cosy and happy place. At least, that was the conclusion Vivien had come to, seeing how snugly she felt on the settee with her book.

She wriggled further into the blue blanket draped over her and smiled into the contemporary romance novel she was reading.

The peace and quiet was soothing. Only the occasional muffled gust of wind blowing up outside disturbed the tranquillity.

Vivien glanced at the window, glad to be indoors. If there was ever a time fit for lounging, it was January.

She smiled to herself, feeling content. Something she hadn't experienced in a long time. It was nice to be able to connect the thought of being safe to the emotion. Too many years were spent feeling emotionally numb. Those walls breaking down were a good sign. She decided not to dwell and to get back to someone else's story, but before she got the chance to turn the page, Finn came home.

Vivien glanced over at the wooden clock perched on a sleeper wedged into the wall above the nook where the log burner sat. 'You're back early.'

Finn seemed pleased about something. He quickly closed the front door and sat to her side. 'I've got an idea.'

The fact he hadn't removed his boots or coat told her he was way more excited than he looked. She placed her love-heart bookmark on the page she was about to read and closed the book, still holding it on her lap.

'Here's the thing,' said Finn, looking slightly animated. 'You know that saying about how helping others helps you? Well, it got me thinking. How about if we find something

charitable to do so it helps occupy your mind and, perhaps, that will help with the healing process?’

‘Whoa! That’s a whole lot of thought you’ve been having.’

‘Yeah, I know. I was just having lunch with Heath, and it came to me. He told me to reel it in. Let you decide what’s best for you, but I honestly believe doing something along these lines will benefit you in the long run.’ He relaxed his hands on his lap. ‘Look, Viv, you won’t talk to anyone about your time with... Anyway, I know you’ve got some healing to do, and I don’t mean your leg. When things get to me, I jump into work, paid or voluntary. It helps. I know you’ll be more occupied once you’re back at work, but it wouldn’t hurt to add something new into the mix.’

Vivien slipped her book onto the rustic table in front of her and turned to face him full on. ‘You know there’s such a thing as overthinking, right?’

Finn grinned widely as he lowered his head. ‘You know me. Busy, busy.’

‘And now you want me to be just as busy?’

His gentle eyes lifted, meeting hers, and Vivien needed to get all thoughts of kissing him again out of her mind.

‘What you got in mind?’ she asked quickly, avoiding his eyes.

‘I’m not sure. I thought we could brainstorm. Heath said not to rush you, and I’m certainly not taking the reins. This is your decision. Hundred percent.’

She giggled at his seriousness.

‘What?’

‘Never mind,’ she replied. ‘So, charity, yes? Hmm, there’s the homeless shelter that just opened for the first time this winter. It’s new. They might need helpers.’

Finn unbuttoned his coat, obviously feeling the warmth in the room. ‘Or there’s your sister’s charity for the stables.’

Vivien wrinkled her nose. ‘Nah, she doesn’t like me getting involved. Not sure why. Lucky Riding Stables belonged to my parents too. I think she forgets that part.’

‘Might have something to do with you not wanting to work with the horses.’

‘Yeah, but I would still help out with funding the place. You know, if she let me.’

‘Rhett’s like a one-man band.’

‘Loner, that’s what she is. Stubborn is another word. God help anyone who ever tries to help her.’

‘She takes donations. She—’

‘Ooh, that’s it, Finn. Instead of joining in somewhere, we could raise money for them instead.’ Her hand tingled as he reached over to entwine their fingers.

There had been many times when Finn Silver had held her hand, not to mention the numerous times he’d kissed her head, cheek, knuckles. He was a tactile person, so she’d never thought much of it before, but ever since she kissed him, each touch now seemed highlighted in neon.

She swallowed hard, trying to hide her throat, and got back to the subject at hand. ‘What do you think?’

‘I’m thinking sponsorship, maybe. Bike ride around the island. Triathlon, perhaps.’

‘It’s January, Finn.’

He shrugged. ‘Something indoors then. We could use the café. Hold a bake sale.’

‘A baking competition.’

‘Charge people to apply?’

Vivien sat up straight, feeling as excited as he looked. ‘Ooh, how much notice would we have to give everyone?’ She glanced at the window. ‘No one’s really up for much this time of year. Do you think anyone would bother?’

‘Hey, this is Pepper Bay. One text message on the group chat and we’re set.’

She knew he was right. Their community was small, but they were a close bunch. Still, it was the quiet month after all the madness of December. She was sure people would rather be left alone to recover for a while.

‘What’s with the hesitation, Viv?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not even sure we’ll make much money with a baking competition that people probably won’t want to pay to join. Not just after Christmas anyway.’

Finn chewed his bottom lip for a moment, humming quietly until Vivien tapped his knee to get him to stop. ‘How about we set something up now for February?’

‘That sounds better. People start looking forward then, especially with spring around the corner.’

Finn jumped up, slapping his palms together. ‘I’ve got it.’

She guessed his pause was purely for dramatic effect, seeing how he had his goofy face on.

‘Valentine’s Day,’ he blurted out, looking somewhat pleased with himself.

‘You want to hold a baking comp on Valentine’s Day?’

‘Better than that.’ He joined her side. ‘All of the ice sculptures have been taken away now, so we could ask Dad if we can use the marquee for that day before it’s disassembled.’

Vivien thought about the Silver family’s winter attraction at the garden centre. ‘And what are we going to do with the remnants of the Frozen Forest?’

‘We can use the space to rent out tables for a fete. Some sort of love fete day.’ He raised an index finger in the air. ‘We could charge per table for anyone who wants a stall, and we can charge the visitors an entrance fee.’

Vivien took charge of his finger, lowering it to her lap. ‘We could still do the bake sale and competition over at the Gatehouse as well. The winner could receive a free meal at the

café or something, and anyone who wants to sell their food can pay for a table like the others in the marquee. We could section off part of the café. Move some tables around.'

Finn nodded his agreement. 'Sounds like a good plan. We'd have to run this by my parents first, but I can't see them saying no. Then, we'll get everyone involved.'

'It'll be a good day to raise money as well, what with the day being about love. Let's face it, the world certainly needs more of the stuff.'

He gave her one of his cheeky winks and laughed, causing her to play-nudge his chest. 'Seriously though, who do you want the money to go to, Viv?'

There are so many. How do I...

She widened her eyes as her mouth gaped for a moment. 'A help centre for victims of domestic abuse.'

Finn's dark eyes softened along with his voice. 'That's a great idea.'

Vivien had never reached out to one herself, but she knew they were needed and that there were probably those far worse off than her in need of help.

She smiled with gratitude at Finn. 'Thank you.'

His brow crinkled as his mouth twitched into a curl. 'What are you thanking me for?'

'Some people don't have anyone to help them, but I do. I have lots of good people around me, and you're one of them. In fact, you're the best.' Her voice faltered as she added, 'Always have been.'

He playfully nudged her elbow. 'You trying to make me blush?'

Her gentle smile widened into a full beam. 'Hey, let's see if there's a centre anywhere close. I can call them later. See what they think about us raising money for them. Find out what the set-up is.'

Finn whipped out his phone and started eagerly tapping away.

He's right. Helping others is helpful. I feel better already. I'm not a useless person who only serves tea, and just for the record, Brody, tea is often just what the doctor ordered, thank you very much. Ooh, get out of my head.

Finn gasped quietly, snapping her out of her building resentment. 'Oh, wow.' He showed her the phone screen. 'I never knew that.'

Vivien homed in to read the address on the women's help hub he was pointing out on the screen. 'That's just the other side of the island.'

His eyes twinkled. 'Well, have we got ourselves a charity or what?'

She smiled back, feeling her whole being come alive. 'We certainly have.'

Finn

Finn warmed his hands by the crackling fire in his parents' kitchen as his dad made them both hot chocolate. Benton had not long removed banana bread from the oven, creating the most wonderful aroma in the air, and Finn couldn't wait for the cake to cool so he could have a slice, or two. Probably three.

'It's a great idea, son,' said Benton, adding mini pink marshmallows to the large red mugs in front of him.

Finn had excitedly told his dad about the women's help hub on the island and how he was going to help Vivien raise as much money for them as possible.

The farm's marquee was in action once again, as Benton had agreed to Finn's request to use it as part of the fete.

'I'm proud of you, Finn. You've handled this situation well.'

Finn frowned as he took a mug and sat at the table. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

Benton swiped one hand over his grey beard as he looked down the bridge of his nose at his son. 'I was worried for a while that your only reaction to what happened to Viv would be to fight Brody.'

Unsure how to respond, Finn started faffing about with the breadboard, knife, and cake, knowing full well hazel eyes were boring into the top of his head.

'Finn, you haven't been raised to be a violent man. Don't you drink his poison. Haven't I told you boys that enough?'

'He grinds on me, Dad.'

Benton slid the breadboard away from Finn and proceeded to slice the banana bread. 'I know how it works, son. Anger can get to us all, but he's in an evil place, and you're not to dip your toe over there.'

Finn glanced down at the slice of cake pushed in front of him. He twiddled with the warm edging before pinching up a small amount to place in his mouth. His eyes closed for a moment, appreciating the flavour. It took him straight back to his childhood, as his mum had made it quite often for Sunday tea. Unlike his father, Finn had wonderful childhood memories.

Years ago he found out his dad had been raised in a violent home, and he was sure his father's story wouldn't have come to the surface if the Silver family hadn't made the news.

Campbell Silver, Benton's little brother, had killed his wife by pushing her down the stairs at Silver Wish Farm. A year later, Benton moved back into the main house and changed the farm forever.

Benton met his son's gaze across the table. 'Let's put Viv to one side for a moment. How about you tell me what happened at your appointment yesterday? You haven't mentioned it to your mother or me.'

It wasn't as though he'd cancelled on his dermatologist at the last minute for no good reason. Vivien was his priority, not another mole.

His dad's eyes widened a touch. 'You didn't go, did you?'

'I rescheduled, that's all. It's no biggie. I'm going next week.'

'Finn, why?'

'I just had a lot on.'

Benton's hands were tightly clasped together, along with his eyebrows. 'You had skin cancer, son. You know how lucky you were that it hadn't spread, and you certainly know to get your moles checked as soon as possible if you suspect anything.' His finger shot out angrily. 'You do not put anything or anyone before your own health.'

'Dad, it's just another week.'

'Every moment counts with cancer.'

Finn sighed inwardly. Part of his decision to delay his appointment was because of how scared he was last time when he was told a mole was cancerous. It wasn't something he cared to experience again.

'Your mother's been worried sick. That's right, she won't show you, but she's been holding her breath, waiting on news, and now I have to tell her she'll have to wait another week.'

Finn raised his palms in defence mode. 'I'm going next week, okay. I'm not going to skip it again. But, come on, even you can see how busy I've been this month.'

'Oh, well, be sure to tell that to the Grim Reaper when he comes knocking.'

'Dad, it looks okay, and—'

'That's not your decision to make. You told me it bled. You go see the dermatologist and let them tell you what's going on.' Benton pulled his phone out of the fruit bowl sitting the other end of the table. 'I'm going to call Dr Tully. See if he can get you seen sooner.'

'Dad, no. It's a hospital appointment. He can't change that. Besides, it's one week.'

'What's one week?' asked Fran, entering to make herself a cup of tea.

Great!

There was no way Benton was about to hide anything from Fran. They shared everything. Finn had already braced himself before his dad had told his mum.

'Oh, Finn,' she said, raising a hand to her mouth.

Finn scraped his chair back as he abruptly stood. 'Can you two stop looking at me as though I'm a disappointment? All I did was postpone. I'm still going to get my mole checked out, okay.'

Fran's bottom lip trembled, making Finn instantly feel like crap. 'Last time was such a worry,' she said quietly, showing all her unease. 'Are you scared, my lovely? Do you want me

to come with you?’ Before he could answer, she turned to Benton. ‘I’ll go with him. He’ll be all right.’

Finn tapped his chest. ‘I am all right. I don’t need my hand holding.’

‘Well it seems as though you do,’ said Benton, still clutching his phone, looking as though he was itching to call their family doctor.

Fran sniffed and lifted the kettle to add some water. ‘Does Vivien know you skipped your appointment?’

I see what you’re doing there, Mother, but it’s not going to work.

‘My medical procedures are none of her business,’ he replied, adding a forced smile, as he didn’t appreciate the emotional blackmail.

Fran glanced over her shoulder. ‘I bet she’ll think it her business when she finds out you only missed your appointment because you’re too busy running around after her.’

‘Mum!’ He was done with his parents tag-teaming him. He made for the door, tripping over his own foot, he was in that much of a hurry.

‘Your well-being is just as important to us as Vivien’s is to you, son,’ said Benton.

Finn halted and lowered his head. ‘I’m going next week, Mum. Feel free to tag along if it makes you feel better, but I really don’t think we have anything to worry about.’

I hope, because I haven’t got time to be ill. Not when Vivien needs me.

Fran cleared her throat, gaining his attention. ‘I’ll call Vivien. She can go with you. I’m sure she won’t mind.’

Every part of Finn seized up. He didn’t want Vivien involved in anything negative. That’s not what she needed. She didn’t even know he had skin cancer once upon a time. He sure as hell didn’t tell her. Brody had just moved into the

Gatehouse, so the last thing Finn wanted was to be around Vivien, let alone confide in her about his fears.

‘Why do you two keep bringing Vivien into this? She’s just staying with me for a while as my guest, so I don’t see how she’s relevant in this conversation.’

Fran and Benton both raised their eyebrows as high as they could go. Fran even added a grin.

‘We’re your parents, Finn. What, you don’t think we see the way you look at her? You’ve had the same dreamy look since you were kids. We know you love her. So, if she’s what we need to get you to go get your mole checked, then she’s what we’ll use.’ Fran crossed her arms, indicating that was that.

Their sneaky tactics were starting to amuse more than anger him. But still, he’d rather Vivien wasn’t involved.

‘She’s got enough on her plate, Mum. I don’t want her worrying about me. And she will worry, especially if you go around telling her I had skin cancer once before.’

Fran stepped towards him and took his warm hands in hers. ‘Friendships are a two-way street. You’re supposed to be there for each other. Let her be there for you the way you are for her. You don’t have to wrap her in cotton wool. She’ll probably feel better knowing she can help you out from time to time. Let’s face it, you rarely let anyone do anything for you.’

He watched his mother turn to the worktop to make her tea. His stomach felt empty again, and the banana bread was calling him, but the worry about his mole and now Vivien worrying about him was playing havoc with his digestive system.

‘Anyway,’ said Fran, without looking at Finn. ‘She’ll be wanting an explanation.’

Finn’s brow crinkled. ‘Why would she want an explanation? She doesn’t know anything.’

Fran raised her phone in the air, without turning to see Finn’s scowl. ‘She does now.’

Vivien

The quiet comfy corner of the book shop in Pepper Lane was just what Vivien needed, and it wasn't even book club night. Squished into a large pink beanbag, trying hard not to read the same line over and over, she hoped the owner, and good friend, Anna Reynolds, would let her stay for a bit longer after closing time at four.

Anna was pottering around upstairs in The Book Gallery, where the artwork was on sale, so Vivien was alone downstairs in the shop, surrounded by books and loving the smell. What she wasn't loving was not being able to concentrate on the cosy romance in her hands.

Oh, flipping heck, Finn. You can be so annoying.

Ever since Fran had told her Finn had rescheduled a hospital appointment, she couldn't settle her mind. He had purposely avoided her all day and didn't answer her text.

With all the skulduggery and shenanigans going on lately, she didn't have the mental energy to add more onto the forever growing pile. Things were getting out of hand. Brody had declared war on Finn, lord knows what was happening with her business under someone else's watch, and her stupid leg was way beyond irritating the life out of her.

All she wanted was a normal life. The one she assumed all her customers had. They appeared happy enough, with their daily routines and worry-free faces. She felt as though she knew their backstories, their now stories, and could see into their future stories as well.

Many times she'd plop her elbow on the counter and wonder what kind of life a customer had. Making up happy scenarios as she stared would make her feel a bit better about her own misery, as it would give her hope.

Vivien Smithson and hope had become as close as eggs and bacon. It was all she had most days, doing her the world of

good. For some reason, she always believed her life with Brody wasn't how her story ended.

One day, she'd be the one sitting in someone else's café, eating a fry-up, and the owner would wonder about her, and they could wonder away, making up as many stories as they could manage. Only she would know the truth about her life. And that truth was that she was happy, loved, and soaring high as an eagle.

When that day would come was anyone's guess. She didn't feel ready to jump the nest just yet to see if she could fly, but at least her nest was clean of all bugs now, so that was a start.

Kissing Finn Silver wasn't something she had seen in amongst her daydreaming, but it had happened, so there was no point going over it again. And if he was hiding from her for the day, she needed something else to occupy her mind other than hospitals, the future, or Brody going mad.

After way too much fidgeting and lack of patience, waiting on the women's help hub to email her back, she had hopped in a cab and found her sanctuary in the book shop. It was safe, warm, and always made her smile.

Anna had helped her onto the beanbag and made her a cup of tea before heading upstairs. Vivien was pretty sure she was stuck in the beanbag forever, because she couldn't see a way out, not with that big lump of a cast still on her leg, bugging her.

She scrunched the edges of her book and gritted her teeth, letting out a low growl. There was no point checking her phone. Finn was hiding out somewhere.

Giving up on the book, Vivien snapped it shut, then folded her arms in a huff just as Anna came down the stairs.

'Oh, you look so fed up, Viv. Is it because of your leg?'

'No, it's Finn. He's doing so much for me, he's forgetting to look after himself.'

Anna flopped to a yellow beanbag opposite Vivien, swiping back her dark bob from her forehead. 'Aww, he's a good man.'

‘I know, but he can’t just drop everything. Do you know how much time he took off work to look after me?’ She didn’t let Anna reply. ‘Too long.’ She sighed, dropping her shoulders. ‘I know he cares, but I care too. About him, that is. He matters as well.’

Anna smiled softly. ‘Everyone knows what you went through, Viv. A lot of people are worried about you right now.’

‘I know. I also wish no one did know. It’s not like I told anyone.’

‘Whispers carry in the wind around here.’ Anna breathed out a quiet laugh. ‘I remember when I first moved here. Everyone knew about me within five minutes.’

Vivien remembered too. ‘Honestly, I didn’t believe the rumour about you being homeless before moving to Starlight Cottage.’

‘Oh, it was true.’ Anna shuffled in her seat whilst twisting her mouth to one side, looking deep in thought for a moment. ‘Although, people around here didn’t know just how bad things were with my ex. So, if you ever want to talk about anything, just know I have some experience with those types of men.’

Vivien’s heart went out to her immediately. ‘Oh, Anna. I’m sorry. No, I didn’t know that. I heard he’d kicked you out of the book shop you both owned back then, but that was all.’

‘I only had a small share. Turned out, not even that in the end.’ Anna looked around her and smiled with warmth. ‘I’m just so grateful every day that I met Jake. It goes to show, you never know what’s around the corner.’

Anna’s golden retriever, Max, waddled over and slumped down to Vivien’s side, resting his head upon her lap.

Vivien stroked the dog, wanting to bend over and kiss him but not being able to move much.

‘Max knows when people are sad,’ said Anna. ‘He’s giving you one of his cuddles.’

‘Thanks, Max. I certainly need one.’

They both smiled at the sleeping dog, then Anna asked Vivien how she was coping.

‘Everything feels a bit weird at the moment. One minute I feel positive and raring to go, the next, I’m tired and run-down. Sometimes I don’t feel anything at all. But I’m working on myself. No one sees that though.’ She tapped her temple. ‘Inside job, right?’

Anna’s blue eyes twinkled. ‘Right.’

‘This cast comes off soon, so I think that will help matters. Plus, the Silvers and Hadleys are helping to revamp my home, and Finn and I came up with a fundraising idea to help a local women’s help hub that happens to be over the other side of the island.’

‘Ooh, I’d like to help. What’s the plan?’

Vivien gulped some warm tea, then explained the ideas they had come up with so far. ‘So, you see, Valentine’s Day is perfect for everyone to share the love. That’s what we want to focus on. Love. Giving. Caring.’

‘Put me down for two tables in the marquee.’ Anna pointed at the ceiling. ‘I’ll get Scott to run the art table and I’ll do the books. There’s no way I’ll be baking. No one needs that inflicted upon them. Although, since having my little girl, I have dabbled in some fairy cakes. Weren’t too bad. Jake ate most of them, but he doesn’t count. He’d eat mud pies if I made them, you know, just to be polite.’

‘How is Jake? I don’t see him much.’

‘He’s okay. If he’s not working in London, he spends most of his time with me and our Harper. He’s at home now, probably prepping dinner.’ She glanced at the big clock on the wall behind the counter. ‘Depends what we’re having. I’ll tell him about the Valentine’s fete. See if Café Diths can donate.’

Oh, to be a millionaire coffee shop owner like Jake Reynolds.

‘Thanks, Anna, that’ll be great. I’m going to talk to all the shop owners down here, and I’m going over the pub in a minute to ask the Sparrows if they’d donate a free meal to a

raffle or something. I think I'll have my dinner over there while I'm at it.'

'You can eat with us if you like. Jake won't mind.'

'I'm okay, but thanks. I haven't been in there for a while. Saying that, I don't feel as though I've been anywhere much since Brody moved in with me.'

Anna smiled softly. 'It's odd, isn't it, when you can't see the red flags?'

'Red flags are invisible when you don't know what they look like.'

'Now we have a PhD in them.'

Vivien snorted. 'Yep!'

Anna lightly tapped Vivien's knee. 'Hey, just know, none of it was your fault. It's not even personal, when you think about it, because they treat all their partners that way. We just picked the wrong men, that's all. Can't always be helped. They tend to wear masks to hide their personality disorder, and it can take a while for it to drop. With my ex, it was actually pretty quick, in the grand scheme of things.' She shrugged, then settled back into her beanbag, creating crunching noises.

'It took me ages before I started to look at Brody and think, ooh, Granny, what big eyes you have.'

Anna burst out laughing as she nodded. 'I know, right?'

Vivien inhaled deeply. 'Oh, Anna, what a life, eh?'

'At least you're out of it now. And you didn't wait around for someone to save you. You found your courage and became the hero of your own story. That's something I'm proud of about myself. Jake came along afterwards with his help. I was already on my way. Just slowly. He sped things up a touch. A lot.' She grinned widely, and Vivien could see love in her eyes.

'It must be nice to find someone lovely and kind.'

Anna gave a slight nod. 'Finn Silver is lovely and kind.'

Vivien laughed. ‘He’s my best friend. Well, and Grace, but she’s off with her hubby, travelling. It was her Charlie who made me finally walk away from Brody. When she lost her memory, and he did everything he could to show her he was the man who loved her, it just got me thinking. If that were me, Brody would have used it to his advantage.’ She shook her head to herself at the thought. ‘I realised there was no way I wanted to spend the rest of my life with someone like that. He destroyed my soul. Grace’s second chance motivated me to take mine. New year, new me.’

‘We stick around a lot longer than we should. But these things happen when they happen. Those monsters make us so weak, we forget how strong we are. Something at the back of our mind must remember, because we did it. We moved on, Viv, and I have the best life now, and you will too.’

‘I hope so.’

Anna creaked to a stand, holding out her hand to help Vivien. ‘One step at a time. You’ll get there, and my goodness, it don’t half help when you have loving people around you.’

Vivien clasped her hand and stood, waking Max. She took a moment to stare at her hand linked with Anna’s. ‘I certainly have a lot of love around me, and, yeah, it does help.’

‘Just know you can add me into your circle. I’ll always be around for a chat, if need be, or any help I can give you. I know how rocky the healing road is, and I know how much damage abusers do to your mind. You just take it at your own pace, you’ll get there. I bet you feel free already, like you can breathe.’

Vivien nodded. ‘That was one of the first things I noticed. It feels so good, doesn’t it?’

‘The best thing I ever did was cut all ties with my ex. I honestly have moments where I can’t believe how much my life has changed all because I took what last piece of energy I had left and came here. I’m so proud of myself and so grateful for the life I have now. There are cruel, messed-up people out there, and I’m so glad I’m not one of them, and I’m thankful I have such a wonderful husband.’

Finn flashed through Vivien's mind. She needed him to be okay. He was a huge part of her loving circle. He was the heart, and she suddenly realised he was in her heart, way more than the friend he had always been.

Finn

The Frozen Forest was no more. The ice sculptures had been taken away, the small trees replanted, the animatronic woodland creatures packed away, and Tyler's blue-and-silver postmaster costume was back in the wardrobe. The white marquee was now just an empty space.

Finn walked down the makeshift tunnel that led from the marquee to the gift shop in the garden centre. For Christmas, the short tunnel would have silver strips dangling down and fake snow falling, which made a good photo spot for the visitors and looked good on social media accounts.

'I'm thinking love hearts, Ty. What do you think?' he called out to his little brother.

Tyler poked out his bottom lip to blow a piece of his dark hair that had flopped down to cover his eye as he carried a trestle table inside. He glanced over at the entrance to the tunnel and nodded. 'Yeah, but no glitter. I found a bit under my fingernail the other day. I swear it's been there since Christmas.'

Finn bellowed out a laugh. 'That means you need to wash more.'

Tyler started to unfold the table over by a side wall. 'I shower every day, thank you very much.'

Finn came out of the tunnel to gaze around him. 'What can we put on the walls? We're only set up here for Christmas.'

Tyler went outside to fetch another table.

'I wonder if we can make use of Santa's sleigh?' Finn called out.

Tyler's dark eyes were wide with amusement when he quickly returned. 'And how exactly would that work? Santa got a side gig now, has he? Eros might have something to say about him trespassing.'

The potted rose bushes and a new handmade sign would make the entrance more attractive, so that wasn't an issue for Finn, but inside looked dull now the festive contents were gone.

‘Why does everything always look strange once you pack away the Crimbo bits, Ty?’

Tyler carried on setting out tables. ‘We could change the lighting. Make it warm. Pinkish. Take out this cold blue look. It'll be better once everyone has their stalls set up.’

‘We could bring back the penguins. Have a small feature in the corner by the tunnel. One penguin giving the other one a pebble. That's a thing, right?’

‘I think so.’

Finn rubbed his palms together in glee. ‘Yes, this is shaping up nicely.’

Tyler was looking out the door. ‘We could cover Santa's sleigh with some of that red material. Add some pink and white cushions. Hearts. Blankets. That'll make a good photo spot.’

‘Yes, and we could put it outside the Gatehouse. That way, people can snuggle in it with a hot chocolate.’

‘Ooh, you're such a romantic, Finn.’

‘Oh, hush.’

‘No prizes for guessing who you want to snuggle there with.’

Finn wasn't biting. His brothers had teased him about Vivien for years. He was used to it and mostly ignored their childish behaviour.

He's not wrong though.

‘You can snuggle with your girlfriend, Ty.’

Tyler's dark eyes lowered to his feet. ‘She's not around that day.’

‘What do you mean, she’s not around? It’s Valentine’s Day. Where’s she going to be?’

‘Work.’

Finn’s brow crinkled. ‘She works in an office. I’m sure she’ll be free for the night if she can’t come to our fete during the day.’

‘It’s a work trip. She’ll be away overnight.’

Sounds a bit fishy to me. She didn’t spend time with him at Christmas either. I’m not saying anything. He won’t want to hear what I’m thinking.

‘Never mind, Ty. I’ll snuggle with you.’

Tyler laughed as he straightened his tall, lean body from leaning over a table. ‘I’ll hold you to that.’ He creaked his neck and rubbed his lower back, making Finn shake his head.

‘At twenty-seven, you should be fitter.’

‘I’m fine, thank you. We can’t all be keep-fit addicts like you.’

Finn patted his abs and grinned just as Heath walked in, carrying a load of foldaway chairs.

‘What are you two grinning about?’

Tyler pointed at Finn. ‘Loverboy over there, admiring himself.’

A joint effort of a snort and a scoff left Finn. ‘Loverboy?’

Heath grinned as he started placing chairs by tables. ‘Tyler reckons you only came up with the Valentine’s fete to woo Viv.’

‘Woo?’ questioned Tyler. ‘I never used that word.’

‘It’s for charity,’ Finn reminded them.

‘Sure,’ they both sang out.

Finn shook his head at them. ‘Come on, you two. Think love and start designing this place. We’ve not got long to pull this off.’

‘How’s Viv doing?’ asked Heath, losing his smile.

The atmosphere in the cool marquee changed as both his brothers showed their concern.

‘She’s getting there.’ Finn gestured at a table. ‘Having this to think about is helping. She’s making calls today, getting everyone involved. I’ll find out later who’s on board.’

And no doubt listen to her tell me off for postponing my hospital appointment.

‘Go and join her for dinner in The Ugly Duckling,’ said Heath, eyeing the doorway. ‘She’s in there now.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘I was just talking to Anna on the phone about an order she has with me, and she mentioned it.’

Finn chewed the inside of his mouth whilst contemplating. There were ups and downs to living in a small community. Everyone knowing your business was quite annoying at times. Other times, it came in handy, like right now.

Would she want me to join her for dinner?

‘Stop overthinking things, Finn, and get yourself down the pub,’ said Heath, grinning. ‘I’m going home for my dinner in a minute.’

‘Mum’s doing mine,’ said Tyler.

Finn pulled his car keys from the pocket of his jeans and grabbed his coat off a table by the door. ‘I’ll leave you to it then.’

‘Never mind us,’ called out Tyler. ‘We’ll just be here, making love-heart paperchains.’

Finn laughed to himself as he hopped in his old blue car and headed to Pepper Lane.

No one was allowed to park down by the quaint shops or small shingle beach, so Finn pulled up in the car park by the tram stop and walked down the slope to the white pub with the dark-wood beams.

The warmth hit him first, then the smell of beer and something delicious wafting over from the kitchen. Whether Vivien was there or not, he decided he would eat, as his stomach rumbled.

Two tall Victorian streetlamps flanked the back door at the far end of the pub, which led to the beer garden. Finn glanced that way before seeing the fireplace was alive and kicking with a cosy fire on the go. Then he spotted Vivien's cast sticking out at a table over that way.

Every inch of him smiled. She'd always had that effect on him. Sometimes, it felt intrusive and unwanted. No one should be in charge of his feelings but him. Pointless words, he would tell himself whenever he thought that way. She had him hook, line, and sinker. That's just the way it was. Giving himself a headache over it was a waste of time. So many years had passed by and nothing had changed. Vivien held his heart, and now his lips. He really had to stop thinking about that kiss.

It was quite a busy evening inside The Ugly Duckling, with all hands on deck behind the bar.

Finn caught the eye of one of the owners. He gave a nod and a smile to Ed, then frowned when Ed's stern gaze gestured over to Vivien.

People would often remark how Ed Sparrow looked like a pirate, with his one gold tooth in amongst a row of white, a diamond stud in his left ear, and shiny bald head that always appeared to glow, but Finn knew the man had a huge heart, loads of love for his family, and had more of a jolly sailor persona. So when Ed went serious, it meant something was wrong.

Finn followed Ed's green eyes whilst stepping away from the small gathering of men in front of him. Suddenly, every part of him turned cold.

Brody!

As Finn hurried to make his way to the other end of the pub, his chill had rapidly changed to boiling hot. He came to

an abrupt halt when he saw Ed's wife, Elaine, sitting by Vivien's side. Her presence alone calmed him somewhat.

Brody snarled, barging Finn's shoulder on purpose as he walked away.

Finn's fist clenched and his arm swung out before he could think about his actions, but a huge hand caught him mid-swing, bringing his arm down.

Brody didn't even know he was about to get punched in the back of the head. He carried on walking towards the front door to leave, taking his waft of eau de narcissist with him.

Finn's eyes rolled up the large muscular arm to see Nate Walker, a local dairy farmer and Ed's son-in-law.

'You don't need to get yourself arrested,' said Nate. He practically shoved Finn down onto the chair opposite Vivien and Elaine.

Finn didn't argue with the mountain of a man. He was too busy trying to calm his racing heart. What would his dad say if he was arrested for fighting?

Stop drinking people's poison. That's what he would say.

He took a calming breath and looked up at Nate, who offered a curt nod.

'I'll get you a drink, Finn.'

Vivien gained Finn's attention as Nate went to the bar. 'Are you okay?'

He glanced at her, then Elaine.

Elaine smiled gently. 'It's all right, love. We were all with her.' She patted Vivien's shoulder as she stood. 'I'll leave you to it.'

Vivien picked up the menu off the table and flapped it. 'Finn?'

'What just happened?' he asked.

'Nate just stopped you getting into a whole heap of trouble, that's what.'

Finn stood to check Brody had left. There was no sign of him, so he sat back down at the same time Vivien reached over the table, trying to grab him.

‘I’m okay, Finn.’

He met her eyes. She seemed fine. Shame he wasn’t. It didn’t matter what his dad would say or how he’d been raised not to fight, something inside his agitated body was deliberately ignoring the education. ‘What did he say to you?’

Vivien

Vivien glanced over her shoulder, purely out of habit. Ever since Brody moved in, she found herself glancing over her shoulder a lot. Walking on eggshells was another habit he had introduced to her, but that wasn't something she did around Finn. Around Finn Silver, she could breathe.

Finn's hand slid across the menu to hold hers tapping there. 'Talk to me, Viv.'

'He came over as soon as I sat down. It wasn't as though I could run away.' She frowned at her broken leg. 'He was annoyed because he said people have been whispering about him. Saying he's an abuser.'

'He is.'

'I don't know how this got out, Finn. I never said anything about him.'

'So what if you did. You're allowed to tell your story.'

Vivien used her free hand to twirl the paper straw in her glass of lemonade. 'He said he didn't push me down the stairs. He said I barged past him, bounced off him, then stumbled. Apparently, it was my fault.'

Finn's eyes widened as he shook his head. 'As long as you don't believe that.'

She moved closer, not wanting the whole pub to hear their conversation, not that anyone could, it was so noisy in there, what with the dinnertime rush on. 'Of course not. I know what happened. I was there. It's just how his brain works. Helps him sleep better, I guess.' She shrugged and started to read the menu, even though she knew it off by heart, seeing as she had stared at it long enough.

'What else did he say?'

Vivien shook her head. 'Nothing. Elaine appeared, sat next to me, and gave me this lemonade. Brody was about to leave

when you came along. I didn't even see Nate till he grabbed your arm.'

Finn let go of her hand and slumped back in his chair, rubbing his arm as though just remembering it was there. 'I felt so wound up, Viv.'

'Yeah? I felt sick.'

He quickly shot forward and took her hand again. 'You okay?'

'I am now, but when I first saw him, my stomach flipped, and not in any good way. I just wanted to leave. Run away. I also wanted to say some things to him. Stick up for myself, but Elaine sat down, and I didn't want a scene.'

'Brian said he would get him to stay away from you.'

'He has stayed away, but he was already in here with his mates. It's a small island, Finn. I knew I'd bump into him at some point.'

'Yeah, but he doesn't have to get in your face.'

Maybe I could move. That might be best for me. I can't talk about that right now.

She flicked the corner of the menu. 'Let's eat.'

His eyes widened. 'You want to eat?'

'My appetite is back now you're here.'

And I said that why?

The corners of his mouth curled. 'Good to know I'm useful.'

'Well, you won't be if you're locked up. Will you please promise me you won't let Brody wind you up?'

Finn flapped one hand in the direction of the front door. 'It's not easy, Viv. He's so smug.'

'I know, but I'd prefer it if we both had zero contact with him. Just ignore his existence. Now, can we change the subject?'

He pursed his lips and nodded, taking the menu for a browse.

‘I’m having the chicken roast,’ she told him, already feeling better and looking forward to eating out with Finn.

I wonder what he’d be like on a date.

He met her staring eyes and smiled. ‘I’ll have the same.’

She watched him glance at the bar and hesitate. ‘I’ll be fine, Finn. I’m right here, and you’re going five steps away from me to order the food. And look...’

Nate approached and handed over a glass of lemonade to Finn. ‘Here.’

Finn’s eyes narrowed at the paper straw and umbrella sticking out of the tall glass. ‘What, no olives?’

‘Go and order our food, Finn. I’m hungry.’

Nate took his seat as soon as he stood. ‘I’ll keep you company, Viv.’

Vivien smiled as Finn went to the bar. ‘Hey, Nate, am I really the talk of the town?’

He rubbed one hand around the back of his dark, greying hair. ‘Yep.’

‘Anna said that too.’

‘It’s no one’s business but your own, but I’ll tell you this, Viv, he’ll never touch you while I’m around.’

‘Thanks, but he’ll probably have me done for slander at this rate.’

Nate leaned closer. ‘Just between you and me, I heard the station is trying to relocate him off the island.’ He tapped the side of his nose. ‘All on the quiet.’

Oh, I hope so. Please, please, let that happen.

‘Thanks for stepping in with Finn,’ she said quietly.

Nate’s thick lips pursed as he smiled softly. ‘Finn’s got a good life. He doesn’t need it ruined.’

Vivien's eyes welled. 'It's my fault.'

'No, it's not. He cares about you. We all do. Look, Viv, truth be told, if my missus was here just now, she would have hit Brody.'

Vivien snorted. The thought of Tessie and her fiery temperament made her laugh. 'The small ones are always the worst.'

Nate laughed. 'Tell me about it. She got your message, by the way, about the charity fete. She's all over that. This time tomorrow, she'll have half the island coming for the day. You'll see. You'll raise loads of money. Good cause too.'

'Tell her thanks. I only came in here to talk to her parents about it. I thought I'd have some dinner while I was at it, but then, well, you saw.'

'Yeah, Elaine beat me to it.'

'Thanks.'

'No thanks necessary.'

Vivien didn't want to talk about Brody anymore. She desperately wanted him gone from all thoughts and conversations. 'So, how's things up at Pepper Pot Farm?'

Nate's taupe eyes twinkled, showing his happiness. 'Yeah, all good. The girls are doing well, and Tess has really made our business a success. You should talk to her about adding the Gatehouse Café onto the tour list.'

'What tour list?'

'The one Hotel Royale has.' It was obvious she didn't know what he was talking about, so he explained. 'They do coach tours for the tourists. Some days, they come down here and have lunch in the pub or a cream tea over at Edith's Tearoom. Tessie got them to add in a tour up at our dairy farm. You could talk to the Silvers. See if they want in. They've got the garden centre selling plants and gifts, there's Heath's workshop, people love a bit of handmade, then they can have lunch at yours. Worth a thought.'

It would be a good idea. If I stay around.

Vivien smiled politely as Nate stood to give Finn back his chair.

‘See you two later,’ said Nate, heading back to the bar.

Finn sat down. ‘Food won’t be long.’

‘And while we’re waiting on that, let’s talk about hospital appointments. I’m having my cast off soon, and I hear you’re going to see a consultant about a dodgy mole.’ She grinned as Finn’s shoulders slumped.

Whatever decision she came to about her future, one thing was for sure. Finn Silver’s death by skin cancer wasn’t going to be part of it. Not on her watch.

Finn

The smell of hospitals wasn't one of Finn's favourite scents. It wasn't even on the list.

Time had slowed to almost a standstill whilst sitting on a hard chair by himself, waiting to be called in to see the consultant.

Vivien was supposed to be by his side, but she was busy having the cast on her leg removed, which as luck would have it was at the same time as his appointment. He figured she'd be up to see him soon, as she'd probably be finished by the time someone bothered to acknowledge his existence.

Stupid mole.

Finn shuffled in the chair. His backside felt numb, and his left foot was starting to cramp inside his trainer. All he wanted was to go downstairs and sit with Vivien, or go home.

The last time he had a mole checked, it was whipped out and sent off for testing. He had no idea that was going to happen and was totally unprepared. Everyone had assured him there wasn't anything to worry about, but his family wasn't exactly medically trained, so he didn't listen to them. That mole had haunted him. It wasn't something he'd given much thought to before.

This time, Finn was fully prepared for anything. If the mole had to come off, so be it. If it was cancerous again, there wasn't much he could do. He tried hard not to allow it space in his already overcrowded mind, but there it lurked, tormenting him. It was new and darker than his others, and as soon as it started bleeding, he had panicked. He was still silently panicking.

The timing was making it worse. Not that there was any good time for him to be told he had skin cancer again. But he could do without problems of his own right now.

His name was called, making him jump slightly. He took a breath, then entered the consultant's room.

After a load of questions, his mole was examined using a dermatoscope, and the dermatologist told him straight away that it wasn't a mole. It was a blood vessel, and there was no cause for concern.

Finn sat there for a moment, processing. He'd been sure it was going to be bad news. He was expecting the consultant to cut it out and send it off for tests, at the very least.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I'm certain,' said the dermatologist.

Finn checked his moles regularly after having caught his skin cancer early. He knew how lucky he was last time that it hadn't spread, so he was very particular about his skin. Paranoid would sum it up. He even took photos.

The consultant was happy enough to discharge him, and Finn realised he couldn't sit there all day questioning the man's education. He may have only looked around the same age, but he obviously knew his stuff.

Relieved and a tad numb, after being so sure his life was about to come crashing down around him, he smiled. And with Brody out of the picture, there wasn't anything to get in his way of helping Vivien rebuild her life.

The dermatologist was pleased Finn was responsible and instructed he kept doing what he was doing. Sunscreen, regular checks, and reporting any worries.

Finn was itching to get out the room. The hospital, in fact. Banana bread flashed through his mind. His mum said she would make some ready for his return, knowing it would cheer him up a touch, if nothing else. It was his go-to comfort food, and no one knew that quite like his mother.

If Fran had her way, she'd wrap him in a blanket as soon as he walked in and place him on the sofa in front of the telly, with his feet up and a comic to read.

He had to laugh. It was pretty much how he had been treating Vivien. Only she had romance novels instead.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket as he left the consultant's room, thinking his mother would want news straight away, but he saw Vivien sitting in the waiting area, flicking through a worn magazine.

She immediately looked up and smiled, warming him completely. 'How'd it go?' she asked quietly.

He sat by her side and told her his good news. 'It's not a mole. Something called an angiokeratoma. Basically, a blood vessel. So, yeah, I'm good.'

Vivien flung her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. 'Brilliant.'

A couple of other patients glanced their way, but Finn ignored them. Vivien's arms were holding him in a loving embrace. The whole world could watch. He didn't care.

He gestured at her cast-free leg as she sat back. 'How's that feel?'

'Like freedom.'

'I guess that could be the word of the day.'

Vivien agreed. 'I can walk again, but it feels a bit weird. I'm down to one crutch, for now. My leg feels weak, and I keep thinking it might snap if I take a step. I came up here in the lift.' She laughed quietly. 'Thinking about you helped keep my mind occupied.'

Finn nodded. 'Same.'

Vivien took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. 'Hey, do me a favour, will you? Please tell me from now on if you're going through anything. I want to be there for you the way you are for me. Had I known you had skin cancer years back, I would have been by your side. You know that, Finn.'

He glanced at the fake plants over by the small window opposite them. 'You had a lot going on.'

She lightly tapped his chin, moving his face back to hers. 'Since when has that ever come between us? This is us. We've always helped each other.'

You never told me about Brody all those years. Shut up, Silver, you can't say that.

'Come on, let's go get some lunch. I haven't eaten all morning,' he said.

'Ooh, a sausage sandwich dripping with brown sauce sounds good. We can go back to mine and I'll make us one.'

'Or we can just pop in the café downstairs and then you don't have to cook.'

Vivien shrugged. 'I don't mind.'

Finn stood, creaking his tense neck to either side. Finally, he could inhale a decent breath. His lungs had felt restricted since he woke and everything had got on his nerves, from the toothpaste hitting the floor instead of his brush, to the cold water splashing his top when it came out of the kitchen tap, hit a teaspoon in the sink, and fired straight at him.

He viewed the mini-disasters as signs, getting him ready for the bad news coming his way. Now he could see them for what they were. His nerves interrupting his concentration.

'Let me just send Mum a quick text, then I'll carry you downstairs.'

Vivien burst out laughing, causing others to stare. 'You will not.'

He winked her way, then put his phone back in his pocket. 'In all seriousness. Can you walk properly?'

'I have to go to physio for a bit, and I've been taught some exercises to do, but all in all, yeah, I can walk with some aid. It's going to take some more time to fully recover, so I have to take things easy. My leg needs to regain its strength. They tested me downstairs, and I did okay with the one crutch. I'll rebuild slowly.' She huffed out a quiet laugh. 'Seems to be a theme.' Her eyes lowered to the flecked-grey floor.

We're not doing sad today. We both got a win. Time to smile, Miss Smithson.

Finn waggled his fingers at her. 'Come on, let's see you in action. I'm expecting a hop, skip, and a jump. Think you can manage that?'

Vivien stood whilst laughing. 'I'm not doing any of that, thank you very much, but I will hold your arm, if that's okay?'

He flapped out his elbow and kissed her head as she hooked her arm around his. 'You sure you don't want to skip?'

Her laugh was muffled by his top as she pressed her mouth into his shoulder on their way to the landing outside.

The lift was large, resembled steel, and smelled like disinfectant. They stood alone inside, not speaking, just smiling and glancing at each other every so often. The air felt charged to Finn each time she smiled his way. He pulled her arm closer to his chest and raised her hand to kiss her knuckles, because something had to give.

Kiss her. Just turn and kiss her.

A sudden jolt snapped him out of his moment. The lift stopped but the door didn't open.

'Oh no,' cried Vivien. 'Is it stuck?'

Finn pressed a couple of buttons, but nothing happened. He tugged at the door, but it remained firmly in place. 'Looks that way.'

'That can't be right. This is a hospital. You can't have broken lifts in here.'

Finn pressed the help button and spoke to the crackly voice coming through the speaker. 'The lift's stuck.'

The voice told them an engineer was in the building and would be five minutes.

Finn turned to see Vivien's face pale. 'Five minutes, Viv. That's all.'

She pointed at the closed door. 'This is why I prefer the stairs. I never trust these things. It's only because of my leg—'

‘I thought you did it for exercise.’

‘That too.’

‘It’s okay. We’ll be in the café in no time.’

She flopped against the wall and sighed. ‘I’ve lost my appetite.’

Finn knew she hated enclosed spaces and could clearly see she was struggling way more than she was letting on. He knew her better than he knew himself, and it was time to keep her in a calm zone. He tapped the floor with the tip of his trainer. ‘Come and sit with me.’

Vivien’s nose scrunched. ‘What?’

He gently guided her down to the coldness of the hard floor, careful of her leg. ‘Come on, I want to show you something.’

If there was one thing Finn knew how to do, it was keep panicked people calm. It wasn’t his first time stuck in a lift with a claustrophobic.

Vivien was settled on the floor, with her bad leg stretched out in front of her and her crutch to her side. She stared at the metal wall and shook her head. ‘What are we doing? The crackle said five minutes. We don’t need to sit down.’

Finn gestured at the wall before them as he sat by her side. ‘I want you to pretend you’re somewhere relaxing. This is a room and what we’re looking at is a television or snowflakes falling gently outside the window or—’

‘A wood burner tucked away in a white-brick alcove that has a dark sleeper built into the wall above. You’re right about the snow. It’s light with a blue hue and falling ever so gently outside. There’s a Christmas tree in the corner, covered in multicoloured lights, and hot chocolate is sitting in large red mugs on the rustic table.’

Finn’s arm pressed closer to hers. ‘Sounds cosy. Also sounds like my living room.’

She met his eyes. ‘I love your living room.’

‘Even though it doesn’t have any bright colours?’

‘I wouldn’t change a thing.’

Finn’s heart rate had accelerated just from her eyes gazing into his. His breath caught in the back of his throat as his lips parted slightly.

‘Maybe the kitchen,’ she added, breaking eye contact.

‘What’s wrong with my kitchen?’

‘Nothing. It just needs cheering up.’

‘Well, perhaps you can decorate it one day.’ He shuffled round a touch. ‘Speaking of which, your home’s ready now, but if you’re to take it easy for a while longer, you can still stay at mine.’

‘Would that be okay? I’d like to.’

I don’t want you to ever leave.

‘Sure,’ he replied.

‘It’s been nice staying at yours, Finn. Been a breath of fresh air, if I’m honest.’

‘Well, there’s no rush. You can stay as long as you like.’

‘I should start paying rent.’

Finn scoffed out a laugh. ‘You can pay me back by decorating my kitchen.’

‘You’re on.’

‘Good. Now that’s settled, let’s talk about you going back to work. I know you’re itching to get in the café.’

Vivien playfully leaned into him. ‘I’m not a workaholic. Saying that, I do miss working. But I’m going to be sensible. I’ll speak to Ashley about staying on, and perhaps I can help out with some light duties.’

‘Sitting down duties.’

‘Something like that. There’s still lots to organise for the Valentine’s fete, so it’s not as though I won’t be a busy bee.’

‘A sitting down busy bee.’

Vivien snorted. ‘Stop putting me on my backside.’

Oh, now there’s a thought.

They snuggled closer, staring at the metal wall in companionable silence until a thud on the door made them both jump.

‘Won’t be a sec,’ shouted the deep gruffly voice on the other side.

‘Okay,’ called back Finn. He took Vivien’s arm, helping her to stand. Their bodies were so close, even more so when she looked up and her mouth was nearly touching his. All he had to do was lean down slightly and—

‘There you go,’ said the engineer, opening the door. ‘Sorry about that. Heard it was playing up, so I was on my way. Lucky for you, eh?’

Yeah, cheers, mate!

Vivien’s lips were no longer accessible, as she had turned away as soon as the door clicked open. So, as far as Finn was concerned, it wasn’t lucky for him at all, thank you very much. He took her arm back in his and headed for the café, chastising himself for not taking his opportunity sooner.

Vivien

A trembling lip wasn't what Vivien had been expecting when she finished her phone call with her friend Grace. She was so looking forward to Grace coming home, but it was quite out of the blue to feel downtrodden just because Grace had said she was staying in Canada for a while longer than planned.

Oh, stop being silly. You're fine. It's fine. Everything is fine.

Vivien couldn't blame Grace for enjoying her stay with Charlie's family. Grace had been through a lot before Christmas. There was no way Vivien would begrudge her a break, even a long one. One that seemed to drag on forever.

I wish I were in Scotland with Finn right now.

The thought of disappearing from reality was tempting. She pondered over the idea of moving there altogether. Thoughts of a fresh start far away from Brody seemed like a good idea. At least Finn would be safe. Part of her wanted to tell Finn about her idea to move away, but he'd probably talk her down, or Rhett would, if she found out.

Anna Reynolds made new beginnings seem doable. After all, she'd moved from London to the Isle of Wight, and her life turned out all right. There was no telling if Scotland would work out as a new destination, but Vivien was keeping it as an option just in case.

Sitting in the kitchen in the Gatehouse Café, slicing cucumber, Vivien ran through all her options, as there had to be another life for her somewhere that didn't involve Brody on any level.

I could pay someone to run this place, then I'd still have an income. Benton's friends with the people in Honeydale. At least I'll settle faster with friends of a friend around me. Could work. Or I could sell the Gatehouse.

Her shoulders slumped at the thought. Finn's cosy living room had turned into one of her favourite places, but the

Gatehouse held her heart. She totally adored every inch of the place, even more so now it resembled how it used to look pre-Brody.

Vivien decided to finish her task, then go over to the marquee to do some final touches before Valentine's Day arrived.

Normally, something like the event she was hosting would excite her from head to toe, but her happiness level still couldn't decide how to behave.

She finished up, washed her hands, wrapped herself in a thick padded coat, told Ashley she was heading out, then made her way over to the side of the farmhouse. A smile hit her immediately as she could hear music coming from inside the marquee.

Fran was inside, singing along and doing the twist with her youngest, Tyler.

Vivien watched them from the doorway, wishing she could join in. She glanced at her leg.

Her smile widened as Finn came into view. Pink ribbon was draped over his head and a large red love-heart was dangling around his neck, practically covering his chest. He was lost in his own dance, and Vivien warmed at how much fun the Silver family were.

Thoughts of her own quiet, more reserved parents came to mind. Rhett was often told to turn her music off, let alone down, and neither sister had ever seen their parents dance together, or alone, or even hug.

A rumble in the sky made Vivien turn to look up at the dark clouds heading her way. The weather reports had been mentioning storms for a few days, but so far the Isle of Wight had been lucky.

Oh, you can get lost. Valentine's Day needs to be dry.

A hand on her shoulder brought her head back to the doorway.

'Storm's brewing,' said Finn quietly.

‘I hope it holds off.’ She turned to face him full on. There were so many words she wanted to say. At least talk to him about the possible plans for her future. She had already come to realise he was the only reason she was still there.

Finn’s brow wrinkled. ‘What’s on your mind?’

‘What makes you think there’s something on my mind?’

‘Your face is telling me.’

She breathed out a small laugh and went to ask him if they could talk, but his pager buzzed.

‘Call-out. Got to go.’ He gave her a quick peck on the cheek before sprinting to his car.

Vivien glanced at the dark sky, wondering who the hell was in danger out at sea in February. ‘Stay safe,’ she shouted at his departing vehicle, but he was too far away to hear.

Finn’s call-outs always made her edgy. She stepped inside the love fest and explained to Fran where Finn was.

Fran lowered the volume on the radio, and Tyler stopped dancing and got back to laying tablecloths.

It was bad enough Vivien worrying about Finn on duty, she could only imagine how it felt for his mother, especially as she had three sons all signed up with the RNLI. At least Tyler had a land job with them.

Fran waved her over to the table and sat down. ‘Come on, help me. I’m just making some more strips for the tunnel of love, as Tyler keeps calling it.’

Vivien sat opposite and picked up a piece of pink ribbon. ‘Have you ever thought about moving away, Fran?’

‘You got that on your mind?’

‘I don’t know. I just feel so off lately.’

‘Perhaps you need a holiday.’

‘Grace called earlier. She’s staying longer with Charlie’s family in Canada. I guess that’s making me feel like getting away.’

Fran stopped sewing hearts onto ribbon and looked up. 'I've got friends in a few places who would put you up for a week, if you fancy.'

'Finn already mentioned going to Scotland at some point. I just wish I was there now.'

'So, what's stopping you? And don't say the Gatehouse. It's all in hand. Once this charity event is over, go, I say.'

She makes it sound so simple. Now I know where Finn gets it from.

Fran's gentle smile widened. 'I keep telling Ben we need a holiday. So, we planned one for this summer. Willow will be home from uni by then, ready to take on this place. It'll be a good time for us.'

'Ooh, where you off to?'

'Normandy. Just a week, as Ben doesn't like to be away for long and doesn't like to be too far away from home. Still, it's better than nothing, especially as I can't remember the last trip we took, it was that long ago. I swear he thinks this place would fall apart if he wasn't here.'

Scotland suddenly seemed closer and closer, as visions of Finn driving them up there filled her mind. There was something so relaxing about the thought it stayed with her for the next couple of hours, keeping her company whilst Finn was away.

Her plans to stopover in certain cities along the way gave her another to-do list that she was sure Finn would add to once she told him. It was better than the talk she was going to have about moving. Without him.

Grace and Charlie had not only unknowingly inspired Vivien to get out of a toxic relationship, now she was motivated to take a holiday.

Smiling inside the tunnel of love, Vivien couldn't wait for Finn to come home. She twirled as best she could in amongst the ribbons and took a selfie to make herself smile. It was good to feel the happy emotion building.

The horses where she grew up were often her audience when she made up dance routines. The odd cartwheel wasn't unheard of, neither was the splits. Rhett would always interrupt mid-show, telling her Dad was coming.

Glancing at her healing leg, Vivien thought it best not to try any moves, even though tempted. She laughed to herself and took another picture.

Heath's deep voice boomed through the marquee, bringing Vivien out of her tranquil state of mind.

She poked her head around the entrance of the tunnel to see him approaching his mum. Fran's face fell, and she quickly headed outside.

Tyler waved Vivien over.

'What's going on?' she asked him. 'Is it the storm? Has it caused some damage outside? I bet it has.' She went to march, or rather, in her case, limp off, but Tyler caught her arm.

'Finn's been taken to hospital. He got pulled in the water trying to rescue a boat overcrowded with migrants trying to get to the mainland.'

'Oh my God! How is he?'

Tyler shook his head. 'We don't know. Heath's taking Mum over there now.'

Vivien hurried as best she could towards the door. 'I'm going too,' she called back to Tyler.

Heath's car was already gone, and Vivien was afraid to drive because her leg wasn't fully healed. She stood in the pouring rain, getting soaked through to the bone, not knowing what to do. The thought of Finn fighting for his life flashed through her mind, causing acid to hit the back of her throat.

Tyler pulled her back into the shelter. 'The best thing you can do, Viv, is go back to Finn's and wait. Someone will call if there's any news. He might want a nice hot meal when he gets in. Help warm him up. What do you say? That's something to help pass the time.'

There wasn't much else she could do. Her heart was beating so fast, she had to lean on the doorframe for a moment to steady herself.

Tyler draped her coat over her shoulders and persuaded her to go home.

Vivien gave herself a mental shake, then headed to Finn's to get showered and changed into her PJs, then make a stew, ready for when he walked in the door. Because Finn Silver was definitely walking in through his front door. He had to.

Time ticked on, and, annoyingly, no one had called with an update. Vivien figured no news was good news, because that was the saying. Her leg had got plenty of exercise, with all her pacing, and each time the lightning struck the sky, she peered out the window to see if it had masked the sound of a car arriving.

The rain was belting down, and darkness surrounded Finn's house, making the cosiness inside even more welcoming. Not that his home felt anywhere near tranquil whilst he was in hospital. Nothing felt right with Finn away, and Vivien had well and truly figured out her feelings for him.

Fermented stew sat in the large pan on the cold oven, untouched by Vivien, as her appetite had washed away in the storm. The smell of the food still lingered in the air, filling the living room as well as the kitchen.

She decided to light the scented candle on the rustic coffee table, simply because the flickering light of a candle always brought her hope.

It was around her fourteenth birthday when Bert from the RNLI, who didn't look half as old as he did now, told her a story about how women on the coast would light a candle in their windows to help guide their sailor husbands home. The story had stuck since that day and candles had made her think of Finn ever since he signed up to become lifeboat crew. It was something she deemed silly and kept firmly to herself, but all the same, whenever she knew he was at sea, she'd light one.

Brody never said anything about her candles, which was a blessing to her. Not being able to act on her superstitions would have woken her anxiety no end.

She picked up the small pewter storm lamp holding the stump of white wax and placed it on the side table by the windowsill, feeling better already.

‘This will guide you home, Finn,’ she whispered, glancing out into the night.

Headlights flashed through the mist, hitting Vivien straight in the eyes. She blinked, then raced to the door. She heard some muffled sounds in the near distance, then it went back to the noise of the rain falling. Impatiently, she waited for someone to appear, preferably Finn. But after another five minutes of spray dampening her pyjamas, she hotfooted it back inside and went upstairs to get changed into some dry nightwear.

Finn

The numbness in Finn's forehead was starting to wear off and the stitches there were itching. He closed his eyes for a moment, leaning his head against his front door frame.

It had been a chore to get his family to all go home after bringing him back to the farm from the hospital. Five minutes peace was all he needed.

Thunder rumbled, and the light drizzle of rain he'd encountered on the way home had eased. He felt cold, tired, and couldn't get the image of the terrified people he had helped earlier out of his mind.

The waves were high, and the boats were being tossed around as though they weighed nothing. So many people had been piled into a rubber dinghy and just thrust out to sea, pointing towards England.

Finn inhaled sharply, remembering the panic, the cries, the baby huddled in its mother's arms. A shiver ran the full length of his spine.

Finn had seen such situations on the news many times. Being involved in the scene was something else. Something that would stay with him forever. Half his mind questioned their stupidity whilst the other half understood their desperation. Still, it didn't change the issue. His job was to save people at sea. No matter their circumstances.

He took a calming breath and opened his eyes, staring at the wooden door before him. Life felt very ordinary for a moment, and he couldn't help but think of the unfairness of it all.

Entering his home, the first thing he noticed was how cosy the living room looked. The wood burner flickered, as did the candle by the window. He wondered if it had been placed there for him. Bert had told him a story once upon a time about wives putting candles in windows for their sailor husbands. The old story made him smile. Perhaps Vivien held up with tradition and superstition, or maybe she just liked candles.

Either way, the sight of it down to its last piece of wick warmed his weary heart.

I'm so grateful to have a home.

He smiled weakly, then closed the door on the cold behind him. Removing his coat whilst kicking off his boots, he wondered where Vivien was.

'Viv?' he called.

'Finn?' Her voice was faint and coming from the direction of the stairs. 'I'm coming down. Give me one sec.'

He approached the bottom of the staircase and looked up with amusement at her slowly taking one step at a time. 'Hey.'

She stopped in the middle and frowned with concern. 'Oh, your head.'

He gestured towards his hair. 'Just a few stitches. I'm okay.' It was obvious he wasn't entirely okay, considering how deflated his tone was. All he wanted was to curl up in bed and sleep away the nightmare he had just witnessed.

Vivien picked up the pace, almost toppling herself down onto him.

'Whoa! Slowly, Viv.' Finn caught her at the bottom step, and before his brain had time to kick in with instructions on what to do next, he picked her up.

Vivien's legs wrapped around his waist and her head flopped to his shoulder. 'I was so worried about you. Nobody called me. I didn't know what to do.' Her words were shaky and dampness hit his neck.

'It's okay,' he whispered.

Her head shook slightly to each side. 'It's not,' she whispered back.

Finn felt the wetness from her tears slide across his cheek as her head turned slowly on his skin. He turned with her, stopping when their lips lightly brushed. A whole heap of worn-out fireflies fluttered sleepily inside his stomach.

‘Finn,’ she mumbled on his mouth, before pressing her face closer.

Every last ounce of energy his tired body had made an appearance, allowing him to carry her up the stairs to his bedroom. Not once did her mouth leave his, and Finn deepened the kiss as soon as he rested her backwards on his bed.

Vivien’s mouth trailed along his jawline, then over his cheeks, and Finn closed his eyes, absorbing her delicate touch.

For so long, he had dreamed about kissing her, holding her, spending the night in his bed with her. Having a weakened body and a pounding headache weren’t part of the process though.

As if reading his mind, Vivien gently rolled him onto his back and sat up to remove his clothing. ‘You need to rest, Finn.’

He closed his eyes whilst she stripped him to his boxers, feeling the comfort of her loving touch relax every part of him. Light kisses were peppered over his stomach, chest, then neck, and Finn felt as though he were suddenly lying on the softest cloud, floating high in the sky. He opened his eyes to see her smiling down at him, and sleep was no longer a necessity.

I love you so much, Viv.

His hands reached into her hair, lowering her mouth onto his, where he kissed her as though his life depended on it.

Vivien let out a faint groan, and Finn raised himself so she was straddling his lap. He lifted her arms, taking her pyjama top along for the ride, and Vivien’s bare chest was suddenly pressed against his, causing Finn to hold onto her that little bit tighter.

They stayed in an embrace for what seemed like forever, but then Vivien moved so she could make them both fully naked. As soon as she regained her position on his lap, joining them completely, Finn felt as though he’d just drunk a magical potion that enhanced his battery life.

Every soft, warm kiss they shared, each slow and steady move they made, and all the love they were revealing took Finn deeper and deeper into the dream life he had with her. Never in a million years was he prepared to ever let her go. Not now. Not after this. All he wanted was for their connected bodies to stay locked for all eternity.

‘You feel so good, Finn,’ she whispered close to his ear, causing his whole being to fall apart. ‘You’re what I need.’

His half-closed eyes opened fully, staring over her shoulder as she continued to kiss his neck.

But am I what you want?

His mind was too exhausted to ask questions. To her or himself. Whatever was to become of their friendship next wasn’t something he had the energy to discuss. The one piece of strength he had left in him wasn’t going off in that direction. It was needed for the here and now.

Finn tilted his head and cupped her face, bringing her mouth crashing down onto his, then he traced his fingers down her back, resting them on her hips whilst she stayed locked with his lips. The warmth of her tongue swirling in his mouth and her body coming undone on top of him brought him to the place he had dreamed of for so long.

Finally, he had made love to the only woman he had ever loved. As he rested his head on her shoulder, he hoped he’d have a repeat performance at some point. But their relationship had to be more about want than need, because he wanted her so badly to stay in his life as his partner until the end of time.

Vivien nudged her nose into his cheek, releasing the smallest of smiles from the corners of his mouth. ‘We can do that again in the morning, if you like,’ she whispered.

‘I like,’ he just about managed to say, as his head pressed heavily into her body.

Vivien helped lower him backwards onto the bed, then lightly brushed back his hair, avoiding his head wound.

Finn groaned quietly, closing his eyes.

She kissed his cheek. ‘Get some sleep.’

He gently held her in place as she went to roll off him. ‘Stay in my bed, please.’

Vivien slowly moved to his side and snuggled under his arm. ‘I’m not going anywhere, Finn. Just sleep now.’

He wanted to say more, but exhaustion owned the moment, taking his last thoughts, words, and worries.

Vivien

‘Yay! No more rain.’ Vivien closed the window in Finn’s bedroom and hugged herself. She hobbled to the bathroom and poked her head around the door, pausing for a moment to check out Finn’s fine figure behind the glass shower screen. ‘Finn, it’s dry out.’

His laugh rumbled amongst the trickling water. ‘I know. I was awake before you.’ He peered around the edge of the glass. ‘Hey, will you be my Valentine?’ He winked, then wiped the soap out of his eye.

Vivien could do nothing but roar with laughter at the plastic bag covering his head. ‘What are you wearing? And yes.’

He glanced upwards. ‘I’m not to get my stitches wet.’

‘You could have had a bath.’

‘But I love showers. Come on, get in here with me.’

Vivien wagged a finger at his makeshift shower cap. ‘That’ll end up on the floor.’

‘You’re worth it.’

She shook her head as she headed towards the sink to brush her teeth. ‘Nope, it’s not happening. You hurry up and get out here.’

‘Ooh, now you’re talking.’

‘I meant because we’ve got a big day ahead of us. People will be arriving soon for the fete. We need to be prepared.’

Finn went back to showering. ‘We’ve got loads of time. And we’re definitely having a large breakfast before we start.’

Vivien rinsed away the toothpaste in her mouth. ‘I’m not sure I can eat,’ she mumbled, her mouth under the tap.

The shower turned off, and Finn stepped out, wrapping a white towel around his waist. He used a hand towel to dry his face, then whipped off the plastic head cover. ‘Have you any

idea how hard it is trying to wash your hair without getting parts of your head wet?’

She glanced at his damp messy locks, then moved closer to inspect the row of stitches on his forehead.

Finn quickly pulled her in for a kiss.

Vivien giggled on his warm lips. ‘I’m all minty.’

‘Don’t care.’

She melted into him as he deepened their kiss, and before any more concerns about the Valentine’s fete going wrong on every level filled her mind again, she tugged his towel free and pressed him up against the only bare wall in the room.

‘I thought we didn’t have time,’ he mumbled on her lips.

‘Can we make some?’ she asked cheekily.

Finn picked her up and cradled her in his strong arms. ‘Always.’

* * *

Vivien felt as though she were walking around on air all day at the Valentine’s fete. She really did need to shake Finn off so she could concentrate on everything. He was in her mind, heart, and all over her body. The thought of his touch kept her warm. She had definitely fallen for him hook, line, and sinker.

She stared at the small pond outside her café, wondering if it were possible for her to enter a whole new relationship already. If she could even be happy. Finn made her happy. He also made her feel safe. There were no eggshells, no holding her breath as soon as she heard his keys in the door, no overthinking about her next move. She didn’t even have to take her phone everywhere with her for fear of it being examined.

I think I need therapy. Maybe it’s best if I rid myself of some of the conditioning Brody did. I can’t bring baggage to Finn’s door. It’s not fair on him. I want him to have a normal partner. Not someone messed up.

She sighed heavily. Unsure once again of her mixed emotions. The fact she had so many gave her the idea to talk to someone, and after speaking with the women over at the women's help hub, she felt less alone and more understood. Some of them had seen counsellors, so why not her?

Everything was so good with Finn, she didn't want to be the one who ruined it. Ruined him. His smile was the best thing since sliced bread. There was no way she was going to be the thing that made him lose his sparkle.

Vivien turned on the spot to gaze over at the café. She could see Finn inside, helping Ashley set up for the baking competition.

Tables were lined with cakes and bakes, and the tea and coffee machine hadn't stopped knocking out hot drinks all day. Pretty heart bunting lined the big windows, and she could hear love songs, thanks to Tyler's playlist and strategically placed speakers.

She watched the youngest Silver brother enter the café.

Poor Tyler. What kind of girlfriend says she's not available on Valentine's Day?

Both Vivien and Finn thought it odd, but neither wanted to plant seeds in Tyler's head. For all they knew, the woman's work was important, but they quietly agreed with each other that something felt off about the matter.

Vivien checked the pond once more. After the abundance of rainwater, she wanted to make sure the fish hadn't swum off into the sunset. They seemed perfectly happy, slowly mooching in their wet environment, which looked a lot clearer than normal. She wondered if Finn had been down at some point to clean the pond. Maybe Benton. He was always faffing about with his own. She turned, giving the Gatehouse the once over, remembering when she first took it on.

Oh, you needed a lick of paint then, didn't you, girl?

She smiled at the memory. What an adventure it was. The hustle and bustle, excitement and nerves, the finances and

plans. So much, but all doable, and she did it. She made her dream a reality.

The smile on her face faded as something about the café was lost now. Brody had taken parts away as easily as a thief. Would therapy fix that? She couldn't be sure. Regret consumed her for a moment. Brody was the only person she'd ever met who she wished she could unmeet. It wasn't sadness picking at her, but disappointment.

So much time wasted. So many bad memories.

The thought of moving hit her again. She quickly shrugged it off, needing to focus on the day. There was cheer all around her, even with a chill in the air and a dark sky above. She turned on her heel and went over to peruse the stalls inside the marquee, determined to give all her attention to love.

Anna waved her over to her book stall and immediately handed her a paperback. 'Here, we're reading this at book club next. About time you came back.'

Vivien flipped to the back to scan the blurb. 'Ooh, thanks.' She tapped her jeans. 'I left my purse indoors. Okay if I pay you later?'

Anna shook her head. 'No need. It's on me.'

A huff of a laugh came from the chair behind Anna. Her husband, Jake, raised his head from the book he was reading. 'You're privileged. Even I have to pay.'

Vivien smiled his way. 'Hello, Jake.'

'Hello, Vivien. Well done on setting up this event. I think it's wiped away everyone's winter blues.'

Vivien thought about poor Tyler. Valentine's Day had given him more blues. 'Thank you,' she replied. 'And thanks for donating to the raffle. Tickets are selling fast since you added a weekend in London to the mix.'

Jake seemed to shrug off the comment. 'Oh, my brother's friend owns a hotel. Plus, it's no hardship to pay for a couple of train tickets.'

No hardship to pay for anything when you're a millionaire.

Vivien held back her grin. 'I just saw Josh in the café. Did you know that Joey is the cake judge? It was Ashley's idea.'

Anna nodded. 'Can't think of anyone better than my sister-in-law.' She patted her stomach. 'I love her baking.'

Vivien had to agree. 'Everyone loves her baking. That's why Edith's Tearoom is such a success.'

Jake cleared his throat. 'Erm, I think you'll find my grandmother made that place a success. She taught Joey everything she knows.'

Oh, gosh, yes, I'd forgotten about Edith. I guess that means I'll be easily forgotten about too if I sell the Gatehouse.

'Sorry,' she said to Jake.

He smiled warmly, and Vivien could see how one of Jake Reynolds smiles could make anyone feel forgiven.

Wow, could a man possibly be any more attractive?

Finn came to mind, raising her temperature. A subject change was needed.

'Where's Harper?' Vivien asked, scouting the surrounds of the stall for Anna and Jake's daughter.

Anna gestured across the room to the stall filled with handmade candles. 'Well, she was over at Dolly's, but she kept tampering with the display, so Scott's taken her outside to see the cow.'

Vivien was pretty sure there wasn't a cow on the agenda. 'What cow?'

'Nate brought one of his over for the kids to see. Thought it would be educational for them,' said Jake, breathing out a quiet laugh.

Anna tapped his shoulder, shushing him. 'I'm surprised you didn't know, Viv.'

'Where is it?' Her thoughts turned to the flowers and plants growing in the fields. Benton would have a fit if his wares were gobbled up.

Anna flapped one hand towards the door. ‘Oh, away from the garden centre. Somewhere over by the café. Around the back, I think.’

Vivien knew the back of the Gatehouse was on Smithson land. The thought of Rhett coming across the field to see a cow mooching there made her laugh. ‘I wonder how it will get on with my sister’s horses?’

‘Probably all right,’ said Anna. ‘Seeing how Rhett is doing pony rides over there. I might have a ride myself later.’

Jake suddenly looked concerned. ‘Anna, you can’t go on a horse in your condition.’

Vivien widened her eyes as Anna frowned at her husband.

‘Oh!’ said Jake, his azure-blue eyes sheepishly dropping back down to his book.

Vivien stepped closer to the table. ‘Oh my goodness. Really? It’s okay. I won’t tell,’ she whispered, glancing to her side to double-check no one was there.

Anna pursed her lips. ‘We’re not supposed to be telling anyone yet. It’s too early.’

‘I promise, your news is your news. It won’t come out of my mouth.’ She reached across the many books to lightly squeeze Anna’s hand. ‘I’m so happy for you though.’

‘Thank you,’ said Anna, giving her husband a warm smile, which he returned with a higher wattage.

Vivien thought it best to leave them to it. Plus, she had so many people to mingle with. She said goodbye and headed off to talk to the other stallholders for a bit.

Dolly gave her a banana-scented candle for free, amusing her somewhat, as Vivien had never smelled banana in a candle before. Tyler gifted her a small bag of cough candy from the sweet stall he staffed, and she bought herself a wicker basket simply because it was super-cute.

Skipping off like Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, Vivien headed to the garden centre to check if it was as busy as the rest of the farm.

Tessie Walker was inside. Her long red curls were the first thing Vivien noticed as she browsed the daffodils. Tessie was small, but her hair always gave her away in a crowd.

‘Hi, Tess. Buying some spring flowers for your farm?’

Tessie’s moss-green eyes sparkled with a happiness Vivien wished she possessed. ‘Hello, Viv. I was just looking for some snowdrop bulbs. It’s not till I see them pop up every year that I remember to plant some. Well, I’m determined to buy some this year.’

‘They’re just over here.’

The two women leisurely made their way to the bulbs, chatting politely about the fete.

Tessie nudged her arm as soon as they came to a stop. ‘Hey, what’s the latest on you and Finnigan?’

‘There is no me and Finn.’

‘You don’t have to lie to me, Viv. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, and now you have the same look whenever you glance his way. I caught you earlier.’

‘Oh, is that right?’

Tessie laughed. ‘I always thought you two were a match.’

‘It’s just because we’re best friends, that’s why people think that. You of all people should know that much. Look at you and Nate.’

Tessie twirled a strand of her hair around her finger as her mouth twisted to one side. ‘Yeah, but I did end up marrying him.’

‘What’s it like, Tess?’

‘What, being married?’

Vivien shook her head. ‘No. Taking your friendship out of the friendzone.’

‘Hmm, well, it was weird in some ways, but me and Nate are like you and Finn. We’ve known each other forever, so in some ways we just fitted.’

‘Weren’t you scared it might fail and then you’d lose the friendship as well?’

Tessie nodded. ‘A little. I think, the thing with close friends is, they’re already so much a part of each other’s lives, they just gravitate towards a deeper relationship. I honestly didn’t see it coming for many years. He was just Nate, but then, one day, my feelings for him grew.’

That’s how I feel.

Vivien smiled. ‘I’m glad it worked out for you, Tess. I love you and Nate. You always look so happy.’

I want that.

Tessie snorted a laugh. ‘You should see us after a full day’s work when we’re both exhausted and I’m trying to wind down with one of my favourite shows, and he’s lying next to me on the sofa, snoring. Happy isn’t the word that springs to mind then.’

‘Oh, I bet you love those moments really.’

‘Hmm, just don’t tell him that.’ Tessie seemed to hesitate before adding, ‘You know, after Henry died, I didn’t think I’d ever fall in love again, let alone with my mate. My point is, Viv, life changes. You won’t always be in the place you are now. If you do have feelings for Finn, don’t overthink it, that’s my advice. If you think he’s worth a chance, then go for it. Don’t let your past dictate your future.’

‘It’s hard shrugging off the past sometimes.’

Tessie smiled warmly, holding Vivien’s hand. ‘I know our situations are different, but it took me years to heal from Henry’s death. Trauma is trauma, and it takes as long as it takes to recover. Somehow, you just learn how to cope, and you will. One day, you’ll feel okay about life again.’

‘Thanks, Tess.’

‘Come on, let’s get these snowdrops, then grab a coffee, ready for the cake competition. Our Robyn has entered a lemon and blueberry, even though Joey’s her aunt so can’t judge her. Still, we can have a slice afterwards.’

* * *

After the cake winner was announced and the raffle was over, most gathered over by the barbeque, ready for some tasty sausages. Benton and Fran were hosting the grill, and the aroma wafting around Silver Wish Farm was enough to make anyone's stomach rumble.

Vivien made sure the vegans and vegetarians were well catered for in the café. Josh Reynolds was helping with that, alongside Ashley.

The buzz in the air was one filled with love, laughter, and fun. Vivien couldn't help but smile at how well the day had gone. She'd hardly seen Finn but knew they had a romantic dinner planned at home later that night. Not that she was too bothered. They could eat the leftovers of the day on a blanket in the field by the cow and that would be good enough.

The thought made her smile, then Finn's arms snaking around her waist made her heart flutter. He kissed her cheek, then nuzzled his face into hers.

'You have raised so much money today, my beautiful Valentine.'

'We have. You helped, Finn. Don't forget that.'

His soft voice was close to her ear, tingling her skin. 'We make the best team, don't we?'

She turned in his arms, not caring who could see they were together. 'We do.'

He pecked her lips and winked.

'You and that silly wink.'

'You love my silly wink.'

She had to smile. It was true. She loved it more than she'd ever said. She loved him more than she'd ever realised. 'I do, and I love—'

'Finn Silver,' said a deep voice, disturbing them both.

Every part of Vivien fell flat as soon as she saw Brody standing there. He didn't need a smug grin or dead eyes. He

didn't need to give her one of his looks or move into her personal space. His presence alone sucked all air from her lungs. The man was a walking, talking bout of depression, and she had yet to figure out the cure.

‘What?’ snapped Finn.

Vivien's guts churned as she scanned Brody's police uniform. She already knew trouble was afoot. ‘What do you want, Brody?’ she asked softly, thinking it best to defuse the building tension. Finn's arms were still around her, tightening slightly, and she got the feeling he was telling her not to be so polite.

Heath suddenly appeared. ‘What's going on?’

Brody hadn't taken his eyes off Finn. ‘We'd like you to come down to the station for questioning.’ It was then that he glanced at the male officer to his side.

‘What for?’ asked Heath, before anyone else could get a word in.

Finn huffed. ‘I'm not going anywhere.’

‘It doesn't look good if you refuse,’ said Brody, tapping his belt.

People were watching now, and Vivien hated that Brody was spoiling everyone's day. His presence alone had just unravelled all the happiness she had slowly built up during the course of the day. All that hard work, and just like that, it was gone.

‘Can't it wait till tomorrow?’ she asked, once again trying for polite.

Brody's deadpan expression flashed her way. ‘It's a serious matter.’

‘What is this about?’ demanded Heath.

Brody stared at Finn. ‘We have reason to believe you might be involved in people smuggling, Mr Silver. We'd like to ask you some questions about the boat you brought in that was crossing the English Channel.’

Finn huffed out a sarcastic laugh. ‘Are you for real?’

‘This is ridiculous,’ said Heath, waving a man his way. ‘Bert, the police want to talk about the migrant boat that came in.’ He turned to Brody. ‘You know Bert’s the best one to talk to about this matter.’

Brody gave a curt nod to the older man who ran things at the local RNLI station, who was glaring his way. ‘Not when Mr Silver’s name has been brought to our attention.’

Vivien stepped forward. ‘Brody, no. You’re trying to hurt Finn on purpose.’ She rolled back her shoulders and lifted her chin. ‘Well, I won’t let you.’

He smirked. ‘I’m the police. What are you going to do?’

Those words weren’t anything new to her ears. He’d lorded them over her many times, making her feel powerless.

‘Ignore him, Viv,’ said Finn, gently tugging her behind him.

‘You can’t ignore me, Mr Silver. I’m here to bring you in for questioning. What I need to know now is, are you refusing?’

‘Yes,’ snapped Heath.

But Finn shook his head. ‘I’ll go with you. I’ve done nothing wrong.’

Bert stood closer to Finn. ‘I’m coming too, and I’m calling a solicitor. You’ll not question him without one. Do you hear? I don’t care who you are. Everyone knows Finn helped save those people. That’s his only involvement.’

Vivien’s heart sank as Finn walked towards the police car.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t be long,’ Finn told her.

Brody brushed past her arm as he walked around to the driver’s side. ‘Happy Valentine’s Day, Viv,’ he whispered.

A shiver ran the full length of her spine, churning sickness in her stomach. All she wanted was to grab hold of Finn and run.

The car pulled away, followed by Heath's car, then Benton's, and Vivien just stood there, alone, not knowing what to think or how to feel.

Ashley's arm came around her shoulder. 'Come on. Finn will be back in no time. Meanwhile, let's go over to the firepit and write Brody's name on a piece of paper and then toss it into the flames. With a bit of luck, it might hex him.'

Finn

Feeling worn through and utterly fed up, Finn was finally released from questioning at the police station. His blood was still boiling and his hate for Brody was at the highest level.

The pale grey walls of the enclosed interview room felt claustrophobic even to a firefighter. Finn was sure there was a switch that brought the walls inwards until the person inside could no longer breathe.

Brody's smugness stayed obvious. He was in total control of the situation, causing Finn to remind himself over and over to remain calm and tap into his own control skills. One thing Finn knew was how to remain calm during a crisis. It was just a tad tricky under any circumstances involving Brody.

There wasn't much else that could be said that hadn't already been raked over. Bert had provided all the official reports from the lifeboat station, and Finn knew the RNLI had no connection to the smugglers sending desperate people across the English Channel. The whole claim was ridiculous and would no doubt end up on the news.

Bert was fuming, and Heath and Benton weren't allowed any further than the waiting area of the police station. A local solicitor was called, but still the interrogation went on for way longer than it should have. Not that it should have happened at all.

Brian appeared and took Brody out of the interview room. Moments later, Finn was told to go home by the older officer, who also added a misunderstanding had taken place.

'Oh, not to worry then,' said Finn sarcastically, glaring straight at Brody as he departed the room. They both knew exactly what had just occurred, why it had happened, and the type of misunderstanding it was.

As everyone was heading off, Brody tugged Finn's arm.

‘I’m watching you,’ he said through gritted teeth, tightening his grip.

Every part of Finn wanted to fight the man, but he flashed a tight smile. ‘Yeah, hope you’re watching when I marry Vivien.’

Brody’s grip increased as the heat from his mouth blew into Finn’s ear. ‘She’ll never be anyone’s but mine.’

Finn couldn’t help himself. He wanted to wind up Brody the same way he was trying to get to him. ‘She’s already mine.’ That wasn’t how he felt at all. He was unsure how Vivien felt about him, but even if she declared her undying love, he wouldn’t think of her as his. He saw her as her own person, doing what she wanted and with who.

Brody scowled his way. ‘We’ll see.’

Finn wanted to wipe away the saliva that hit his cheek, but he didn’t want to show that any part of Brody had reached him. He produced a fake grin as he jolted his arm free. ‘I’ll send you an invite.’

Finn headed for the door that led to the waiting area, all the while feeling contaminated by the police station and consumed with rage because of Brody.

Heath’s tired eyes blinked his way a couple of times. He stood, stretching his back, then gestured at the front desk. ‘You done?’

‘Yeah. Where’s Bert and Dad?’

‘They were tired, so I sent them home. It’s late. Come on, let’s get you back.’ Heath tossed an arm around Finn’s shoulder as they left the building.

Finn glanced back. ‘What a joke!’

‘Tell me about it. My phone’s been ringing off the hook all evening. The whole island and its sister wants to know what’s going on.’

They reached Heath’s car, and Finn rested his hand on the door. ‘I’ll tell you what’s going on. Brody, that’s what. He’s trying to cause problems for me because he’s jealous.’

Heath pointed across the roof. 'I hope you didn't give him cause.'

I'm not telling you what I said. Why the bloody hell did I say anything?

Finn huffed as he clambered in the car. 'I don't need to give him cause. He's a psycho.'

Heath started the engine, warming the car. He shook his head in disbelief. 'Of all things, Finn. People smuggling.'

'Tell me about it! Oh, and, apparently, I'm the only one whose name was brought up.'

'By who?'

'No one, Heath. He made it all up. Probably paid some druggie to lie about me. He's insane, and he's got it in for me because of Vivien.'

Heath's hands were gripping the steering wheel. 'Well, everyone knows you're a top bloke, Finn. No one will buy into any of that crap he's spouting. And Dad's getting legal advice in the morning to take this above Brody.'

'There's not much to be done. I was just questioned. Brody can easily defend himself on that one. Someone whispered my name to him, he called me in, no evidence was produced to charge me, Brian came in, he let me go. There, just like that, Brody can flex his muscles and then walk away. He knows it, we all know it, that's the point he was trying to prove today.' Finn clenched his fists and yelled out, 'Argh!' He composed himself quickly and took a breath.

Heath raised his brow. 'Feel better now?'

'A bit.' Finn glanced out the window. 'Brian said there had been a misunderstanding. I didn't even get an apology. Wait till I tell Bert. He was fuming the last time I saw him. He'll be livid now. First, Brody wants to arrest firefighters on duty, and now the RNLI on a call-out. Seriously, Heath, someone at that station must know he's a nut-job.'

'He'll get his soon enough. Let the police deal with him.'

A loud scoff shot out of Finn's parted lips. 'They don't care. He's one of them. They're keeping it hushed so they don't end up on the news.'

'I think Brian is on to him.'

'Well, I hope someone does something about him, because I'm losing my patience.'

Heath glanced his way before looking back at the road. 'Just keep it together, okay?'

'Hmm.'

'Finn, I mean it. Don't let him beat you.'

Finn shuffled in his seat and flapped one hand at his brother. 'There's not much I can do. He'll have me arrested for over-watering the plants at the garden centre next.'

Heath smirked. 'Shame we haven't got a giant Venus flytrap.'

'The only trap he should be in is prison.'

'I agree.'

'I'm so glad Viv's not with him anymore.'

Speaking of which...

He pulled out his phone and switched it back on to call Vivien. They were supposed to be having a nice Valentine's night.

The fete was well and truly over, the night had set in, and a text from Vivien told him she had gone back to hers for the night, she was going straight to bed, and she would speak to him after his shift tomorrow.

Great!

'You okay?' asked Heath.

'Viv's sleeping at the Gatehouse, and I've just remembered I've got work first thing. Oh, my head's really not in this, Heath.'

'Just let it go for now, Finn. Things will feel better after a kip. I think we all need one, and I'm glad Viv's gone home.'

She needs to get back to normal, and so do you. Work will sort you out tomorrow.'

'I doubt it. Everyone will want to talk about what happened, especially my boss.'

'They already know the truth. Anyone who knows you knows the truth. Just go home, get your head down, and Dad's solicitor will sort things in the morning.'

'There shouldn't be anything to sort. It was a misunderstanding, remember? This is madness. All I want... all Vivien wants is a peaceful life.'

'There's a saying: If you want peace, sometimes you have to go to war. We won't let Brody bully you, Finn. We'll all stick up for you. He'll be the one who is investigated soon enough.'

Finn rubbed his tired eyes, making them sore. He flopped back to the headrest and sighed deeply. 'Why do some people like drama? It'll never make sense to me.'

'Like you said, he's a psycho. He'll be brought down one day.'

Finn glanced sideways. 'Do you think I should call Viv?'

'No. Let her sleep. You can see her after work tomorrow.'

'What am I going to do, Heath?'

'Nothing. Everything will be fine. If he keeps trying to arrest you, it'll stick out like a sore thumb, and it might be the evidence Brian needs to sort him out.'

'Someone needs to sort him out.'

'Yeah, but it won't be you. It's not how we were raised.'

'We were raised to stick up for ourselves.'

Heath shook his head. 'You know what I mean, Finn.'

'It's hard, okay. I really want to smack him one.'

'Then you'll definitely get arrested, and what good will that do anyone, especially Viv?'

Finn sighed, trying to calm his mind and thumping heart. It was all well and good Heath being sensible, but Finn had the worst gut feeling that this was only just the beginning.

Light rain hit the windscreen, blurring the view until the wipers started. The noise of the car on the wet road was all that was heard for the rest of the drive back to Silver Wish Farm.

Vivien

The quickest route Vivien found to the Scottish Highlands was a flight from Southampton to Glasgow, followed by two trains, then a cab. By the time she reached Honeydale, she was exhausted and just wanted to flop on her bed and sleep for as long as possible.

She wished she could have enjoyed her trip. Taken in the scenery, at least, but she was so focused on escaping her life in Pepper Bay, she didn't care about the beauty around her. Within ten minutes of being on her laptop, she'd booked tickets, called a cab, and thrown some bits into a case. She couldn't even breathe on the ferry, thinking someone would spot her and drag her back home.

The Black Hat Inn, where she decided to stay, was comfortable enough, and the owner, Winnie Hart, was friendly, even in the wee small hours of the morning.

Benton and Fran had talked about Honeydale so much over the years, Vivien felt as though she knew the place and the people, so the old medieval inn didn't feel too unfamiliar. Although, at that point, she didn't care if she was in a barn, she was that tired.

There was far too much swirling around in her mind. Her leg was aching, her back was stiff, and a headache was keeping her staring up at the white ceiling above her double bed.

Vivien had switched her phone off as soon as she boarded the ferry a couple of hours after Finn went to the police station. Enough was enough. There was no way she was going to allow Finn's life to be ruined because she'd made the poor decision to get into bed with Brody.

Rhett wouldn't even know she was missing for a few days. They didn't exactly live in each other's pockets. It would be Finn who noticed first, not that she left for attention.

Do not hate me, Finn.

She took some deep breaths and rolled onto her side, glancing over at the window. There was a blue hue to the outside and a light blowing of wind.

‘I’m in Scotland,’ she whispered incredulously to the cosy room.

She pulled the quilt up to her neck whilst mentally shaking her head. Everything felt surreal. One minute, she was enjoying Valentine’s Day at Silver Wish Farm, the next, she was making calls and buying tickets to get out of there as fast as possible.

Vivien wondered what Finn would say once he realised she’d left. She hoped he was home already, fast asleep.

‘I’m right, you know,’ she told the room.

If I’m not there, Brody’s got no reason to pick on anyone.

She thought about Ashley looking after the café until other arrangements could be made. Selling was an option, but so was having someone manage the place.

Vivien sat up, tucking her hands beneath her thighs. A chatty brain and heart palpitations ignored her exhaustion. It was a lot, changing her life. Moving to the Scottish Highlands wouldn’t be too bad. Lots of people lived there happily, she assumed.

Over and over, she convinced herself she had made the right choice. Thoughts of people she knew who had moved away from their hometowns flashed through her mind. Grace’s Charlie came all the way from Canada, and Ashley’s partner, Harrison, moved to the island from London. See, it was easy. Loads of people moved about. She could too, because what else could she do? Brody would continue to find ways to destroy her. She was sure. Removing herself from the picture was the best way.

A sudden flurry of light relief entered her lungs. She was far away from the monster. Far away from her old life, and she was free.

Vivien clambered out of bed, cocooning herself in the large quilt, and walked over to the window. She pulled up the frame

and inhaled a big gulp of icy air, and a slow smile crept on her face, warming her.

I'm free.

The urge to yell that out was held back by the fact it was late and she was pretty sure her host wouldn't appreciate being woken by the sound of someone screaming.

It was quiet outside, and not much could be seen of the rolling hills and back garden of the inn. An outbuilding was close by, and a few solar lamps struggled to illuminate a pathway. Vivien wondered what it would be like during snowstorms.

There was a lot of stuff back home to deal with, but the initial thought of starting over somewhere new had lifted her deflated spirit. She felt as though she stood a chance. At first, parts of her brain told her she was running away, but now a different part was telling her she was just finding solutions to her problems. And Brody was one big fat problem.

'I'll manage,' she told the night. With her chin raised, she left the window ajar and went back to bed. The cold air had refreshed her stale mind and given her some respite. She wanted to breathe it in all night.

I'll look for somewhere to live. Maybe get a job. Something part-time, perhaps.

Staying put seemed more and more doable by the minute. The Gatehouse Café was an old dream. She could have new dreams. Ones no one had tainted. She smiled on the inside about having untouched dreams.

Her dad had always told her to know when to quit. No good came of being the fly at the window banging its head against the pane over and over. 'Never be the fly, Vivien.'

'I found another way out, Dad,' she whispered.

Had her parents been alive, she wouldn't have ended up with Brody in the first place. Never in a million years would her dad have allowed someone so controlling into her life. There was only room for one person like that. Him.

Vivien didn't think badly of her father. He was set in his ways and liked things just so. A strict man with strong morals that suited only him. She'd never thought too deeply about her upbringing. Rhett had more issues with the man, fighting him at every turn.

Even though Vivien was alone somewhere new, she wasn't lonely. She didn't miss her parents much, and her sister wasn't exactly her best buddy. The only people she felt remotely close to were the Silver family and her friend Grace.

Sorry, Gracie.

Somehow, she hoped the wind would carry the unspoken apology all the way to Canada. In the last few years of being with Brody, she had stopped hanging out with her friends during their spare time. She could now see how isolated she had become.

A slow hushed breath left her parted lips as fragments of a wasted life suddenly hit her hard. For so long she'd gone in the wrong direction. No wonder something always felt off. Perhaps someone up above had been trying to tell her she was on the wrong path, or maybe watching the Silver family for so long had taught one part of her brain what love actually looked like. She couldn't be sure what it was, all she knew was life didn't feel right in the years she'd spent with Brody, even during the times he was nice.

Healing was going to take time, she knew, but the back and forth about who to blame was annoying. Being conditioned by someone was down to them, but she couldn't help feel responsible for Brody's actions.

It wasn't all bad. Had he struck her on their second date, she would have bolted. But his moves had been slow and steady, calculated and controlled. He was the perfect predator, gaining his degree in the art of manipulation somewhere along his journey. Around others he was so different to how he was at home with her. Helpful, caring, friendly, everyone's mate. He seemed so perfect at first. Said all the right things, was loving and kind, but then, bit by bit, there were slight changes.

It wasn't hard to remember the changes. Looking back, she could see the build-up. At the time, she didn't notice the dripping tap, not until her sink had overflowed. By then, well...

'No more.'

Her head shuffled on the plump pillow. She was tempted to switch her phone back on and talk to someone, perhaps even text Grace. But she decided against it and closed her eyes. Everything could wait. And as for Finn, it was time for her heart to let him go. It was the only way he'd be safe, and free.

Vivien had made a bad choice. Never again. Now she was making a good choice. One that would benefit her and the people she cared about.

Finn

Two hours before his morning shift started, Finn had arrived at the fire station, ready to go. He got busy checking equipment, working out in the gym, and helping to prepare breakfast.

It was early, dark, and quiet. No one pottering around had asked him questions, making him wonder if word hadn't spread yet. Not that he cared. He was trying for work mode. Clear his head, stay in his lane, and get on with life as best he could.

Ignoring the likes of Brody wasn't going to be easy, he knew, but at least he could try. He wasn't raised to be confrontational, and everything he had said to Brody at the police station in private was still aggravating him.

Time and time again, Benton had told his sons not to drink other people's poison, and now Finn had done just that. He was feeling the consequences. His stomach churned enough all night, reminding him.

Finn jumped up into the passenger seat of the fire engine, polishing everything around him, even though it was clean. Working hard had always served him well. He was going to make sure his mind was kept occupied, then later, he'd talk to Vivien about future plans.

Thinking of her settled him. The sweetness of her face, the way she laughed, and how gentle her kisses could be.

I do want to marry you, Viv.

The alarm waking the station jolted him out of his daydream. He wasn't set to start his shift so got out of the way whilst the team around him rushed to ready themselves.

'Let me come. I'm bored,' he said to Phillip.

'Seeing how Robertson went home early with his wife going into labour, hop on.'

It wasn't until Finn was sitting in the back of the fire engine that he heard they were headed to a fire at the Gatehouse Café.

Even with sirens blaring and hardly anyone on the streets that early, Finn felt the vehicle wasn't moving fast enough. He leaned forward, as though that would increase their speed. His stomach was in a million knots, and the clear head he had moments ago was back to cloudy and throbbing.

They arrived to see the flames were high, ripping through the old log cabin of a building.

Finn froze for a moment. His eyes were wide as his mouth gaped at the sight. All noise disappeared, and time seemed to mean nothing.

Ashley touched his arm. 'Finn, I came to work and found it this way,' she shouted above the chaos. 'I don't know where Viv is.'

Vivien.

Everything came back to him in a jolt. She'd spent the night back home. Finn grabbed breathing apparatus and ran around to the side door of the café. He was about to enter, but Phillip yelled at him to obey orders.

There were no orders. Nothing mattered. Vivien was inside. He had to rescue her. All voices faded.

The stairs were sparkling in between clumps of thick smoke that hid the top landing.

'Vivien?' he called out, racing to the top.

The fire was out of control. The heat hit him, forcing him back a step. It was obvious to an untrained eye there was nowhere for the firefighter to go. All access was covered with creeping flames and crackling wood. Half the ceiling had caved in, and even though firefighters outside were spraying the roof with water, the fire was still holding its own.

'Vivien?' Finn called into the blaze. 'Vivien?'

Phillip's voice came over the radio, telling Finn to get out now, that he was disobeying orders and putting himself in danger.

Finn knew he was beat, but he couldn't leave. She was in there somewhere. How could he just leave her? His yells made no difference. The fire roared, water dripped down on his uniform, and suddenly hands were tugging at his arms, pulling him away. He screamed, he yelled, he fought them off, all the while not hearing his own voice, not seeing who was around him.

Outside was awash with people. The Silvers were there. Rhett had appeared, and paramedics were on standby.

Finn's head was frazzled. He grabbed at a hose and started to run to the fire-eaten main doorway. Phillip was still yelling at him, and others had joined in, but Finn was a one-man band in that moment. All training overshadowed by fear.

I have to get in there. I have to.

His head swirled along with his stomach. It was all too much. He couldn't get inside the café. Being made of wood, it was consumed so quickly. One giant breakfast for the flames and one ginormous bonfire for Silver Wish Farm. As smoke as dense as pea-soup filled the air. Everyone was pulled back, as the odd gust of wind blew the fumes and sparks their way.

Heath and Tyler had hoses on from the garden centre, keeping the sparks from igniting the grass around them. Fran and Benton tossed buckets of water from the pond onto the gate that divided their land from Rhett's.

The police had arrived, and Brian was questioning Ashley about the early morning's events. She had little to tell, as it was alight when she pulled up. All she could do was call the fire brigade and inform the Silvers.

Nobody could save the Gatehouse, that was obvious, but the firefighters stayed for hours until the last flickers were doused.

Finn was on his knees over by the pond, where his helmet sat upside down on a rock. His head in his hands and his voice lost to cries. There was nothing left inside him. His soul had died in the fire. No beats hit his heart. No blood filled his veins. Numbness controlled.

Fran tried to lift him from the ground but wasn't strong enough for the deadweight, so Benton and Heath took an arm each and slowly led him to the main house.

Ashley was telling Brian the café had hidden security inside and out, and Finn heard his mum tell the police officer to check the footage with Phillip. Maybe they could find out early how the fire started.

Finn mindlessly checked his pocket for his phone, forgetting he was in uniform.

'Will it be on your computer at home, Finn?' asked Ashley softly, placing her hand over his.

He turned to see watery eyes and the devastated face of Ashley looking down at him.

Footage of Vivien trapped in the inferno wasn't something he could handle. Somewhere amongst the debris was her body. His hands trembled as he tried desperately to free his mind of the visualisation.

'I'll take you,' said Heath to Brian and Phillip, grabbing the spare keys to Finn's that his mum had sitting in a glass bowl on the windowsill in the kitchen.

Finn sat quietly whilst they left. He could sense people around him and could hear muffled sounds but not much else registered. The only thing he felt was guilt.

I didn't save her.

Tall walls engulfed him, trapping air trying to reach his lungs. Acid hit the back of his throat, causing him to sprint to the downstairs toilet. Retching into the white bowl, he wished he could die too, right there, in amongst the bile. His sweaty palm rested on the toilet handle as it slipped down to flush away the contents of his stomach. He watched the water wash away all that he had left inside of him.

She's gone.

A strangled cry that sounded far away came out of his mouth, echoing into the pan. A body huddled over his back, cradling him close into their warmth.

‘Let it out, son,’ whispered Fran. ‘You let it out.’

Finn’s breath was so far removed from him, all that followed his cry was a hushed gasping sound.

They sat on the floor in the small blue-and-white ornate bathroom. Finn had no idea how long for. One minute, he felt cold and shivery, the next, overheated and fatigued. His mum stayed by his side, asking every so often if he’d like to move to a bedroom or the settee.

Fran managed to get him to kneel up at the sink to rinse his mouth. She removed his jacket and dabbed his temples with the corner of a hand towel she’d dampened.

Finn couldn’t even be grateful for his mother’s touch, as his mind wasn’t able to process emotion.

Heath’s voice was soft as it came to the opened door. ‘Hey, I’ve got some news.’

‘What is it, son?’ asked Fran, just as softly.

‘The footage showed Brody entering the café and starting the fire.’

Finn was sure that was what Heath said, but it sounded unreal.

Fran had one hand over her mouth. ‘Oh, no.’

‘Brian’s put word out to pick him up,’ said Heath, still with his indoor voice. ‘Brody’s done this time.’

Sickness hit Finn’s cramping stomach again. He took a deep breath before glancing at his brother. ‘He killed her?’ The words barely came out.

Heath’s lips were pulled in as he slowly nodded. He bent to rest a hand on Finn’s shoulder, then straightened. ‘I need to see Rhett.’

Fran nodded, then leaned over to kiss Finn’s head.

‘Mum.’ He gasped for air. ‘Mum, I can’t...’

Fran grabbed him, rocking him in her arms. ‘It’s okay, baby boy. It’s okay.’

Vivien

Winnie Hart had cooked up a storm of a full Scottish breakfast, and even though Vivien had little appetite, after having five hours sleep, she ate the lot out of good old-fashioned politeness.

Sitting in Winnie's kitchen, out the back of the pub restaurant, Vivien had a déjà vu moment. She raised her eyebrows at the thought of having had a previous life in Honeydale.

'It's rare I get a guest in February,' said Winnie, making more tea. 'Well, alone, that is, on Valentine's. I'd have you down as one of those runaway brides if it weren't for you being a friend of the Silvers.'

Vivien gave a small smile. Part of her felt like a runaway. She'd have to call someone soon to let them know her plans.

Five more minutes pretending I live here.

'Do you want to talk about it?' asked Winnie, plonking herself down at the large table, handing over a mug of steaming tea.

Vivien glanced at the woman, who looked around her age. 'Oh, my story is long and depressing.'

'Yeah, a lot of people have one of those.'

Vivien blew the steam from her mug as she grinned. 'I want a fresh start.'

'Yep, that's familiar around these parts too.'

'Oh yeah, what's your story, Winnie?'

'I didn't run anywhere. I'm from here. Born and bred and wouldn't have it any other way. However, I do have a woeful tale in my past.'

'Now I'm intrigued.'

Winnie ran her hands through her dark locks, quickly tying them back into a messy bun. ‘You first.’ Her blue eyes twinkled as she winked, and Vivien immediately thought of Finn and his daft wink.

‘Ex-partner.’

Winnie snorted. ‘That’ll do it.’

Vivien lowered her eyes to her tea. ‘Mine’s horrible.’

‘Mine lived a double life. Here with me. Somewhere else with his family. I don’t need to go into that. Pretty much speaks for itself. See, you can sum these things up without digging too deeply.’

Swallowing hard, Vivien gave a slight nod. ‘Mine’s a bully. A domestic abuser. There are other names I could call him, but I was taught not to swear.’

Winnie laughed and offered a biscuit, which Vivien declined.

‘He’s also a policeman,’ Vivien added.

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah. He thinks he’s untouchable.’

‘Did you report him?’

‘Not really.’

Winnie pursed her lips as her head shook slowly. ‘If no one reports him, I guess that would make him untouchable.’

‘I know, but I just want shot of him. All I want is a peaceful life, but he won’t allow that. He’s even picking on people I care about. So I figured if I’m not around, everyone will be safe, I can start again, and, hopefully, that will be the end of that.’

The biscuit Winnie was dunking in her tea melted and splodged into the hot liquid. She got up to get a teaspoon to scoop out the mess. ‘Aye, well, let’s hope so.’

Vivien watched the woman go about her fishing task. ‘I’m going to look around today, see if there’s anywhere to rent

while I figure things out. I still have a steady income from back home, so I don't have to worry about work just yet.'

'I can offer a couple of shifts here if you like. But no more than that, as I'm fully staffed, and it's not exactly peak season.'

'Thanks, that's really kind, but I'll be all right for a bit. My main worry right now is phoning my sister to tell her I've moved.'

Winnie looked bewildered. 'Did you not tell anyone you were coming here?'

'Nope.'

'If I did something like that, my siblings would be hunting me down by now.' She glanced at the back door as though they were standing there. 'We're very close. Won't she be worried about you by now?'

The horses being groomed, fed, and loved came to mind. 'Probably not. She won't have noticed yet. Anyway, she'll just moan, voice her opinion, then tell me to do what I want. I don't think she'd miss me. We're not close.'

'Do you live far from each other?'

Vivien had to laugh. 'The land we live on is next door to each other. We just get on with our own lives, that's all. Our family was always pretty quiet and distant.'

Not like the Silvers. Oh, I love them.

'What line of work you in, Vivien?'

'I have a café on Silver Wish Farm.'

'Oh, the Gatehouse. I know it. Well, I've heard about it from my grandfather, Angus. He always speaks fondly of the Silvers.'

Vivien took another mouthful of tea, wondering what she should do first. She had quite the to-do list in her mind. Finn had another few hours at work, so she couldn't call him straight away, even though she was itching to.

Maybe I could text.

‘Hey, Winnie, can I ask, what would you do if you were me?’

‘That’s always tricky to answer. People say what they’d do, but they haven’t got the emotional connection, so they wouldn’t really know. I like the idea of starting afresh. It works for a lot of people, but Angus always taught us to stand and fight our ground. I’m sorry, Vivien, but I just don’t know. I don’t want to tell you to fight the abuser. It might be dangerous. Perhaps you’re safer here. There are plenty round here that would stick up for you, I can tell you that much for nothing. We’re a tight-knit community in Honeydale.’

Vivien loved the tight-knit community of Pepper Bay, and she knew half the Isle of Wight was on her side. They’d heard the whispers about Brody, and without even questioning her, they believed her. She gestured to the ceiling. ‘I’d better go make some calls.’

Winnie lightly patted her on the shoulder as she passed. ‘You take your time with your decisions. There’s room here for you, okay?’

‘Thanks, Winnie. I mean that.’

Winnie nodded at the back door. ‘Tell you what, why don’t you go for a walk first? Always clears my head. There’s Honeydale River just over the way. Beautiful and serene. Have a wander.’ She pointed to a cloakroom. ‘There are coats, hats, and wellies in there. Lots of choice. Help yourself. There’ll be something to fit you, I’m sure. Go on. It’ll do you the world of good.’

Vivien agreed. She wrapped herself up in a large, padded dark-green coat, shoved a yellow woolly hat on, and slipped into a pair of red wellies.

The air was fresh and crisp, blowing all the cobwebs from her mind. Walking across the field brought a lightness to her step. Her leg had been a nuisance for what seemed like forever, so having it join in with the other one almost skipping along made her smile.

The cold river flowed gently, looking peaceful and in no way dangerous. Vivien daren't step foot in it though, figuring the chill alone would put her in hospital. There were stepping stones inviting her to cross, and she was tempted, but thought better of it, even if her bad leg was pretending to be miraculously healed all of a sudden.

She leaned against a boulder and stared into the trickling blue liquid. Taking in the tranquillity, she noticed a man jumping from one stone to the other across the waterway, heading her way.

'Hello,' he said, adding a huge smile.

Oh, wow, you're gorgeous.

Finn flashed through her mind. He too had a killer smile.

'Hello,' she replied.

The man frowned, revealing only the slightest of crinkles hidden beneath his dark woolly hat. 'Are you lost?'

Vivien pointed over at the inn. 'No. I'm staying there.'

'Oh, right. I didn't know Winnie had any guests at the moment.'

'I just arrived.'

The man leaned forward slightly, offering a hand. 'I'm Cameron Hart, Winnie's brother.'

She shook his gloved hand and smiled. 'Vivien Smithson.' She looked down at her wellies for a moment, as checking out the obvious muscles beneath his coat didn't seem the polite thing to do.

'And what brings you here, Vivien?'

Winnie would probably tell him anyway, so... 'I came up from Silver Wish Farm. I'm currently deciding whether to live here or not.'

A puff of cold air left Cameron's mouth as he belted out a roar of a laugh. 'Just like that, eh?'

She shrugged. 'Bit more complicated than that, but...'

‘Ah, life is always complicated, isn’t it? But if it makes you feel better, we have a few people around here that came up from somewhere else.’

That made her feel better. Just knowing others had walked the path before her brought her even closer to the idea that it was well and truly possible for her to make the move.

‘I have someone at home, but I’m not sure what to do.’

‘What do you mean?’

She wished she knew. ‘Well, I love him, but—’

‘Stop right there. If you love him, there shouldn’t be a *but*.’

‘There’s always a *but*.’

Cameron crunched one shoulder to his cheek. ‘True enough, I guess. Still, love normally figures itself out.’

‘What do you do when you can’t make up your mind about something important?’

He gestured over the river as he smiled. ‘I farm Christmas trees over at Emerald Tree Farm. You probably know that from my last name, seeing how you come from Silver Wish Farm. I just get to work. That always clears my head, then I can think straight. Failing that, I ask my grandad. He’s a wise old owl. I can introduce you if you like.’

‘Maybe later. I have to get back and make some calls.’

‘Have you made your mind up already?’

Vivien peeled herself off the chunky boulder. ‘I don’t know. Maybe I’ll have to come up to your farm and grow Christmas trees.’

Cameron laughed as he joined her side to walk over to The Black Hat Inn. ‘Anytime you like. What work do you normally do down south?’

‘I own the Gatehouse Café.’

‘Oh, I’ve heard of that. Will have to pay the Silvers a visit one day. We work well with them, sending our trees down and that, but we never get to see each other much. Angus, that’s

my grandad, has been once or twice over the years. Not for a long time.'

'I probably served him without knowing who he was.'

'No doubt you did.'

Vivien widened her eyes as a goat trotted by.

'That's Cupcake,' said Cameron, grinning.

'When you need a sign from up above and all you get is a passing goat.' She laughed along with her new friend, thinking life was more surreal than ever. She was still surprised she was in Scotland.

'I think you make your own way in life, Vivien. I believe we always know what's right and wrong for us. We're not as daft as we look.'

'I feel pretty daft most days.'

'Sounds like you're being a wee bit hard on yourself there.'

She couldn't argue with that. Blame, guilt, torment, it was all there eating away at her twenty-four seven. How could she not be hard on herself?

Cameron playfully nudged her elbow with his own. 'Deep down, you know what to do.'

Stay in Pepper Bay would be her first choice, but for Finn's sake it wasn't an option.

They entered Winnie's kitchen via the back door, and Vivien watched the siblings hug before Winnie set about making her brother a cup of tea.

Can't remember the last time Rhett hugged me.

Vivien left them to it, declining another cuppa, and made her way back to her room to sort out her life.

It was nice meeting two people in Honeydale already. The place felt homely, though not her home, and part of her heart ached for Pepper Bay.

The countryside was a beautiful sight outside the bedroom window of Vivien's room. It was a view she could get used to

and made her think about finding a home that made her feel as cosy as where she was now, and as cosy as Finn's.

'Oh, Finn,' she blew out the window, as if her answers were out there.

I need to speak to him. I can't do this to him. He'll be hurt if I stay here without an explanation.

Deciding to send a short text, what with him being at work, she fired up her phone, hoping everyone back home would understand.

A voicemail was waiting for her from Finn and a missed call from Ashley. Vivien thought Ashley could wait, as it was probably something to do with the café. Ashley had proved to be more than capable of sorting anything and everything attached to the business, so Vivien wasn't too worried. Besides, Finn was resting heavily on her heart.

She listened to the message and frowned. She listened again, as he sounded weird. He was telling her he loved and missed her, but there definitely were tears in that tone, and she was sure he was talking as though she were dead.

Maybe he was emotional after coming out of the police station and discovered I'd gone home.

Not much else came to mind. Finn wasn't the drunk-dial type, so she ruled that out. She listened once again for good measure, as something niggled at her.

'What are you going on about?' she mumbled to her phone.

She wasn't prepared to listen to the odd message again. It was time to put things in order. Finn had to know she'd left and probably wasn't coming back, and he'd better get on with his life without her, and...

'And what? What do I say?' Words failed her. She slumped down to the mattress and sighed. 'Oh, what a bloody mess this is.' Rolling her shoulders back and raising her chin, she took a breath and had a word with herself. 'Come on, Viv. You can sort this. Do it now. Get it done.' She glanced once more at her phone.

Finn

Finn held the hose over the pond outside what was left of the Gatehouse. No water was pouring out. He just stared down at the small fish in need of a top up.

The sky had lightened to a cold blue and the air felt a touch milder than it had been all winter. There was no sound around him, as the garden centre was closed, and his family was up at Rhett's.

He couldn't look over his shoulder at the charred remains of the café, but something told him to be there. It wasn't really for the fish. Vivien's body was somewhere amongst the debris, yet to be found. He had orders not to touch a thing, not that he needed to be told. There didn't seem much he was capable of doing, even the fish were still waiting for the hose to do its job.

Finn stared mindlessly at the rocks surrounding the clear pond, forgetting for a moment why he was there. Nothing felt real. He didn't even feel as though he existed.

Hustle, bustle, work to forget, it had all gone, leaving behind a shell of a man who couldn't figure out which way was up, not that he cared to try. What was the point? What was the point of anything anymore? Work didn't matter. Keeping busy didn't help. Life was now in his way, blocking him from leaving.

Being forced to stay alive whilst wanting to die seemed cruel. Finn just wanted to be wherever Vivien was.

Don't look at the café.

She wasn't there. Somewhere, anywhere, just not there in amongst the cinders. He couldn't bring himself to think about the fire. He could hardly think at all. Guilt was the only emotion strong enough to fight his numbness, making itself known every few minutes or so.

Some firefighter he was. Couldn't even save the woman he loved from a burning building. He didn't belong in that job anymore. He didn't belong anywhere.

Vibrating and a low hum came from the pocket of his jacket, bringing him back into his life for a moment. His empty, numb life. On autopilot, he reached for his phone, not wanting to speak to anyone. No longer caring about people at all.

Leave me alone.

He wanted to yell out into the fresh, cool day, but he wasn't quite sure if he still had a voice. Maybe he had lost everything within when he was throwing up in the toilet. His heart sure as hell went down the pan.

Without any thought or idea as to what he was doing, he raised his phone to his ear, focusing only on the gentle breeze blowing through the gap between the mobile and his face.

'Finn?'

Tiny air bubbles hit the surface of the water, catching his attention. He glanced at the end of the hose in his palm as Vivien's soft voice echoed through his mind.

'Finn!' she snapped.

He blinked hard, then turned to look at the Gatehouse.

'Are you there?' she asked.

He pulled the phone away from his ear so he could look at the screen. It told him Vivien was on the other end of the call, but that couldn't be right.

'I need some help,' he told the fish, lowering his head whilst closing his weary eyes.

It was all too much. He hadn't slept since the fire, even though his mother tried to settle him. His throat was sore from yelling, crying, silently choking him as each minute passed. Another moment without her.

'Finn, I can hear you. Can you hear me?'

That sounded real.

He glanced at the phone still clenched in his hand, then slowly raised it closer to his ear. ‘Viv?’ he asked tentatively.

‘Yes, it’s me. We seem to have a bad connection.’

‘I can hear you.’ His wary eyes raised to the sky.

‘Oh, good, because we really do need to talk.’

‘I can hear you,’ he repeated, swallowing down what felt like razor blades.

‘Yes, I know. Can we talk, please? Have you got time?’

‘You’re alive?’

‘What?’

Finn could barely breathe. He dropped to his knees, beaming in bewilderment at the fish. ‘You’re alive,’ he whispered, mainly to himself, as parts of his brain still needed to catch up.

‘Hello, Finn?’

A loud roar came up from somewhere deep within him, cascading out of his mouth with all the force of an erupting volcano. ‘Argh!’ He laughed, falling back to his bottom to sit on the damp grass. His watery eyes peered up at a passing fluffy cloud as his racing heart stole all words.

‘Finn, is everything okay?’

Pressing his lips to the screen on his phone, he smiled. A light waft of pond water temporarily filled the air, and the sound of nature that didn’t seem to exist a moment ago surrounded him. Slowly uncurling his body, he stretched out on the ground and stared up at the lack of storm above him.

‘You’re alive,’ he told her quietly.

‘Why wouldn’t I be alive? Oh my goodness, Finn. Did you think I’d died? I went to Scotland, that’s all. Why would you think that?’

I could kiss you, then kiss you some more.

A lazy smile filled his face. Nothing mattered once again. This time because all he wanted to do was lie back and listen

to her voice.

‘Finn?’

Wait, what?

‘Scotland. You’re in Scotland?’

Vivien’s breath crackled the phone as she sighed. ‘I couldn’t cope. I just packed a bag and left.’

He blew out a laugh. ‘Scotland.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry. But listen, we need—’

‘Oh, Viv!’ Finn shot up, staring over at the remnants of the Gatehouse.

‘What’s wrong? Why are you acting weird? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were drunk. Finn, what’s going on?’

‘You’re alive. I—’

‘Yes, I heard you the first time, but—’

‘No, Viv, you don’t understand.’

‘What is it?’ She sounded worried, and she had every right to. He wasn’t exactly making much sense. ‘Finn,’ she demanded.

‘It’s the Gatehouse. It... it burned down early this morning.’

Silence sat between them, and he knew she was processing his words. He was still processing his whole morning.

‘Viv,’ he said softly. ‘Brody broke in and set the place on fire.’

‘Brody?’ Her voice cracked, and all he wanted was to wrap her in his arms.

‘Ashley arrived for work to see the building in flames. By the time I got there, it was too late. I thought you were inside. I couldn’t get to you.’ Before he knew what was happening, he was crying down the phone. Large gulps of air pulled at his lungs, muffling his words. ‘Oh God, Viv... I...’

‘Hey, hey, Finn. It’s okay.’ Her voice was soft and soothing, giving his whirling head some respite. ‘I’m right here. I’m alive. Everything’s okay.’

It took a while, but Finn controlled his breathing, cuffed his nose, and sniffed away his nightmare. ‘Sorry. I’m sorry.’ He clutched the side of his hair, digging his fingers into his head. ‘Oh, Viv. I thought you were dead.’

‘I’m not. I’m right here, sitting in Honeydale. I even had haggis for breakfast, I think. I don’t know what it was. I didn’t like to ask. I just ate it to be polite.’

Finn laughed out loud. ‘Oh, Vivien Smithson, I bloody love you.’

After he’d stopped laughing and a moment of silence passed, Vivien quietly asked, ‘How bad is my home?’

Finn looked straight at the cinders. Half-eaten beams flanked a pile of melted plastic and metal, and blown-out glass sat shattered into a million pieces by what was left of the main door. The roof had one corner remaining, protected by solid stone that helped make the chimney. The upstairs floor was burned to ashes, and no contents of the home or café had survived.

‘It’s gone,’ he replied gently. He heard her cry and wished so badly he could hold her. Oh, how he needed her in his arms. ‘Viv, stay where you are. I’m coming up.’

‘But I’m in the Scottish Highlands,’ she said in between sobbing.

He heard her hiccup, then take a deep breath. ‘I’ll drive up, that way we can do a bit of sightseeing on our way home. I’ll stop over somewhere halfway for the night, then be with you tomorrow. How’s that sound?’

Please say yes. I can’t take much more.

Waiting for her to reply was excruciating. She seemed to take forever. His stomach started cramping again, probably from emptiness, he assumed, or maybe he was that afraid of her saying no it was causing him physical pain.

‘Okay,’ she finally replied. ‘As long as you do stop over somewhere, as it’s dangerous to drive for that long in one go. Oh, listen to me going on about danger to you. You already said you would, take no notice of me, my mind’s all over the place. Erm, I’d better call my sister while you’re getting on with that. I assume she thinks I’m dead too?’

Finn stood, rolling the tension out of his body and cricking his neck. ‘It was a nightmare. We all watched the Gatehouse burn, and we all thought you were inside.’

‘Oh, Finn. I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault. I never should have sent you that text. I didn’t stay there at all. I only used it as an excuse so you wouldn’t know I had left. I didn’t want anyone to stop me. As soon as you went to the police station, I booked a flight to Scotland.’

‘It’s not your fault, Viv.’

‘Everything is my fault. You getting placed in a police car on Valentine’s Day at our fete, you almost getting arrested for rescuing Nora’s cat, and... Wait, are you hurt? Did you get burned in the fire?’

‘No, I’m fine. I was in uniform. I went to work extra early just to clear my head.’

‘But you ran into the fire, didn’t you?’

He nodded to himself. ‘It doesn’t matter now.’

Silence lingered between them once more. Finn was still half in shock, and he had no idea how Vivien was feeling about the whole situation.

‘How do you know Brody started it?’ she asked.

‘The security cameras took a while to melt. They captured him before it all kicked off.’

‘Bloody hell. What am I going to do?’

‘He’s in custody. They picked him up earlier on. Sitting in his new home, he was. Acting normal, like he was innocent. Little did he know about our secret cameras.’

‘And there was me telling you off for installing them.’

‘You had every right. It was a good idea, yeah, but we both know I shouldn’t have done that without your permission.’

‘I can’t believe this. It just seems so mad. Perhaps I should just come home. See for myself.’

He nodded, even though she couldn’t see him. ‘You could, but I think some time away will do you good.’

‘Finn?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Show me.’

‘What?’

‘Switch to FaceTime and show me the Gatehouse.’

Finn’s brow tightened as he gazed that way. ‘It’s not pretty. Are you sure you want to do this now?’

‘Yes.’ She didn’t sound determined, just broken. Sad.

He did as she asked and slowly faced his phone at the crumbled mess before him, letting her take it all in. ‘I’m so sorry. I know how much this place meant to you.’

‘The Gatehouse was my dream,’ she said quietly.

‘I know,’ he whispered, feeling so useless.

After a moment, her voice came back through the phone. ‘That’s enough now, Finn.’

He turned the screen to see weary eyes and pale cheeks. ‘Oh, Viv. You look as bad as me.’

‘I’m okay. I think it’s just the haggis.’

Finn burst out laughing, and Vivien joined in.

‘Why are we laughing?’ she managed in between giggles.

‘Because if we don’t laugh, we’ll cry.’

She nodded as she drew breath. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly after composing herself.

‘What are you sorry for now?’

‘Brody trying to arrest you every chance he got. For bringing you into my mess. For—’

‘I love you, Vivien Smithson. Nothing else matters.’

‘We’ll talk more when you’re here. You’re right though. I do want to stay here a while longer. I just feel as though I can breathe here.’

‘Good. That’s good. You stay. I’ll come to you. I’m going to ring Ashley while you call Rhett. Let everyone know the good news.’

She laughed on an exhale. ‘That I’m alive.’

Finn pressed the phone against his forehead for a second, taking that moment to silently say his thanks. He looked back at the screen and gave her one of his cheeky winks, knowing it would make her smile, and my goodness did he need to see that smile.

‘I’ll speak to you soon, Finn.’

She was gone, but this time not forever. He didn’t care if she was the other side of the world, as long as she was safe. He smiled once more at the cool sky.

She’s alive.

Vivien

It could have been the Silvers Vivien was sitting having lunch with the next day, as the Hart family were so alive with love and laughter. Winnie had invited her family to The Black Hat Inn to have a friendly meet-and-greet with the newcomer, and Vivien was loving every minute of her time with them.

Winnie had a sister, Ava, and another brother, Blake. There was a small similarity between them, except for Ava's long red hair. Both the women had blue eyes, whereas the brothers had light brown. In Vivien's opinion, their old grandfather didn't have the look of a wise old owl, more a cunning fox that knew its way around a farm or two.

Angus was adorable. His beady blue eyes held a twinkle that warmed Vivien, making her feel immediately at home. Maybe it was the grandfatherly vibes or because he reminded her of Benton, she couldn't be sure. She just knew she felt safe and comfortable in his presence.

Winnie had made them a superb roast beef dinner. The best Vivien had ever had. She quizzed her host for recipe tips, especially about the gravy, but Winnie just grinned and tapped the side of her nose.

Blake was the younger brother, who owned a holiday park next door to his grandfather's tree farm. Vivien couldn't wait to go over there to see the fairy-tale theme they'd told her about, especially the boot-shaped homes.

If only Finn were with her. It didn't go unnoticed that she peered out the window every so often, checking the car park.

Vivien had told the Harts that Finn was on his way up. He'd spent the night in Stoke, then left first thing. Cameron joked that he was probably lost somewhere in the Highlands, and as it was already lunchtime, Vivien thought it could quite possibly be the case.

The youngest sibling, Ava, reminded Vivien of Tyler. They were both the bubbly type, which she appreciated, needing the

lightness to help distract her mind.

It had gone down all sorts of roads since she'd spoken to Finn before he set off that morning. She didn't want to be negative but couldn't help but think, with her luck, he was crashed in a ditch somewhere and that would be her fault too.

'I'm telling you, newcomers get lost in Honeydale,' said Cameron, nudging her arm playfully.

'He'll be here soon,' said Ava, smiling into her tall glass of orange juice. 'I can see how much you love him.'

Vivien laughed, thinking her super sweet. 'I do.' The thought warmed her heart immediately.

Ava clapped. 'Ooh, do you remember his face the first time you told him?' Without waiting for an answer, she rattled on about how wonderful love could be.

Vivien was only half listening. She still hadn't told Finn she loved him, so she had no idea what his face looked like during that moment. Was it worth visualising now?

Cameron had changed the subject away from Ava's lovefest by the time Vivien stopped trying to imagine Finn's face. 'I can draw you a rough map for the area if you still want to explore. There are a few twists and turns, but mostly it's pretty straightforward.'

'You would say that,' said Winnie. 'You grew up here.' She tapped Vivien's hand resting on the table by the salt pot. 'If you really do want to check out some houses around here, I can drive you around. I'll soon let you know what to avoid.'

Vivien liked the idea of house shopping in Honeydale. She still hadn't made up her mind about where to live and wanted to wait until she'd spoken to Finn, but it was still nice to dream a little after feeling dreamless for so long.

'I like Finn's house. It's cosy and just the right size for a small family. I lived above my café. It was spacious, but I always felt it lacked something. I'm not sure what.'

Finn?

Winnie nodded, seeming to understand. ‘Growing up on a farm, I had all the space in the world, so when I bought this place, it did feel slightly strange at first, but then I got used to it. I guess I like the idea of having an inn because I come from a big family. It’s nice having life around you. I mostly focus on work so don’t take too much notice. I guess it’s different when you share your home with someone who loves and respects you so much.’

Yeah, I guess.

Vivien did feel things about her had changed since living with Finn. Life with him was the total opposite to the one she had shared with Brody. She smiled over at Blake. ‘Do you like having a holiday home?’

His face came alight with glee. ‘Yes, it’s a great business. You’ll have to pop over and check it out.’

‘Ooh, you all have lovely jobs,’ said Vivien.

Cameron gestured at Ava. ‘Ava does. She’s a baker. As for Angus, well, he’s part of the Christmas tree farm. He’ll never retire.’ He laughed along with the others as Angus frowned.

‘I’m too young to retire, my boy.’

Cameron raised his eyebrows at the old man. ‘You’re in your eighties.’

‘Pfft. You’re only as old as you feel.’ Angus smiled at Vivien. ‘And if you don’t stop all your worrying, you’ll look older than me by the end of next week.’

Vivien touched her cheek. ‘Oh, that bad, is it?’

Angus offered some form of sympathy in his eyes. ‘You look as though you’ve fought a hundred wars, lass.’

She’d lost count of the battles at home she’d had with Brody. ‘Hopefully, being up here will breathe new life into me.’

‘That bad, eh?’ asked Angus.

Winnie tried to nudge his arm, but he flapped her away, handing Vivien the room.

In for a penny...

‘My ex is an abuser. I’ve been through a lot, but I’m on the other side now. I’m in healing mode.’ She breathed out a short laugh. ‘I guess my face isn’t quite there yet.’

Angus reached over and gave her hand the gentlest of touches. His frail fingers were warm and filled with compassion. ‘There are two types of men. Those that protect all they love, and those that want power over everything they touch. Just remember that, if ever you want to have a relationship again. How sure are you about Finn Silver?’

There were no doubts when it came to him. She’d known him her whole life and not once had he shown even an inch of what Brody was made of.

‘Finn’s the best, Angus.’ As the words left her mouth, she knew that whatever happened next, she wanted to spend the rest of her life with Finn.

‘Aye, I thought he was a good lad,’ said Angus. ‘I’ve got good Scottish Spidey-sense.’

Everyone laughed, and Winnie got up to clear the plates and fetch dessert, ordering Vivien to stay put and Cameron to help instead when Vivien tried to stack some empty glasses.

Winnie served up a chocolate cake with hot chocolate custard, and Vivien wondered if the Hart family lunched so heavily every day. She was already full from the main meal, but choccy cake with hot custard wasn’t something she was about to turn away.

The chatter turned to desserts, as Blake suggested Vivien tried some of Ava’s cakes next time, and Vivien happily agreed.

Other customers in the restaurant area of the pub were dotted about, dining and drinking merrily, and Vivien’s thoughts were with The Ugly Duckling. Her heart warmed, knowing what love she had back home, and now up north. She still couldn’t get over the fact she’d done a moonlight flit to Scotland, but she was glad she did, apart from everyone back home thinking she’d died in a fire.

The Harts were cheery and friendly, and Vivien felt as though she'd known them all her life. They made her feel welcome in their hometown, and she was sure she would be happy living in such a place.

Even though the air was beer infused with a hint of roast beef, Vivien could only feel fresh air entering her lungs. Her constant smile was coming from deep within, and not once did she peer over her shoulder.

'Ooh, look lively,' said Cameron, gesturing to the window. 'New car alert.'

Vivien sat up, stretching her neck above the sill. Everything was right with the world once more as Finn Silver's car pulled up outside. 'That's him,' she told them. 'That's Finn.'

My Finn.

Ava tapped Vivien's foot under the table. 'Well, what are you sitting here for?'

Winnie stood at the same time as Vivien. 'I'll fetch him a plate. He'll be starved by now.'

Vivien scampered out from the cluster around the table and headed for the door, running across the gravel as fast as her healing leg would allow. She flew into Finn's arms as soon as he closed the car door and turned her way.

Finn

Caught off guard by Vivien's body practically flying through the air to land on him, Finn just about managed to balance himself as her legs wrapped around his waist. She kissed all over his face, not giving him time to catch his breath, and the warmth coming through her chest onto his made him whisper one thing: 'Where's your room?'

Vivien giggled on his cheek, then climbed down from his body. She glanced over at the door to the pub, where Ava and Cameron stood. 'You need to meet the Harts first.'

That wasn't on his to-do list. Never letting go of Vivien was all he had in mind. Reluctantly, he allowed her to take his hand and lead the way.

'You got lost, didn't you?' said Cameron, patting Finn on the back as he entered the old inn.

Finn had to laugh. It was true. 'I swear, I spent an hour going up and down lanes around here.'

Angus stood to greet him, shaking his hand before placing him into a chair by his side. 'You've grown since I last saw you. How are your family?'

Finn exchanged pleasantries, ate the mound of food offered, which he found delicious, and tried hard not to show his impatience.

The drive up had been long and boring, and he'd hated having to have a stopover, but he knew the dangers of long drives, tired eyes, and lack of food breaks. He was, after all, a rescue worker. There was a time when he'd cut someone from their car after a crash all because the driver was too tired to concentrate on the road, thinking the short ferry crossing to the Isle of Wight would be the break they needed from the long journey they'd taken across England.

He'd tossed and turned most of the night, itching to be next to Vivien. Keeping her company through the phone till she

drifted off was as good as it got, and as long as it helped her, he was all right.

When he woke and it was past seven in the morning, he was amazed, then annoyed. He wanted to set off again at five, and seeing how he normally woke around that time, he didn't bother to set an alarm.

A quick shower and half a cup of coffee later he was back on the road, heading north. The last thing he expected was to have to hang out with the locals, but he was raised to be polite so joined in with the chatter.

Vivien seemed happy. Her face was lighter, somehow. He couldn't quite place it, all he knew was she looked relaxed. It was easy to feel comfortable in their new environment. The Harts reminded him of the people back home in Pepper Bay.

Another round of drinks later, and Finn stood, excusing himself whilst gesturing for Vivien to join him.

'You come up to the farm, my boy,' said Angus. 'Make sure you visit before heading off.'

'He's just got here,' said Winnie, gesturing Finn's way. 'He won't leave anytime soon, that's for sure.'

Finn and Vivien said their thanks and goodbyes and headed upstairs to her room.

As soon as she closed the bedroom door behind them, Finn snuggled her into his arms, pressing his body against hers.

'Finn,' she mumbled, but any words were lost on him.

He'd thought she'd died. The last thing he wanted was another conversation. Being with her, holding her, just hearing her breathe heightened all his senses.

Within moments, he stripped them both of all clothing and carried her over to the bed, kissing her along the way.

Vivien hadn't said another word. She was all over him as much as he was her, but then he stopped.

'What's wrong, Finn?'

He rolled to her side, slipping beneath the covers and encouraging her to do the same. They snuggled in the warmth, Vivien's head on his chest.

'I just need a moment, Viv.' His head was all over the place. One minute, she was his Valentine, the next, part of a bonfire. But she wasn't dead. Very much the opposite. Everything felt surreal, and he needed to come to terms with the situation he was now faced with.

I'm in Scotland! And she's alive.

He stared up at the ceiling whilst gently stroking her hair. A tear attempted to escape his eye, but he rolled it back and sniffed.

There will be no crying.

Lowering his head, he raised her chin to lightly kiss the tip of her nose.

'Are you okay?' she asked quietly.

'I think so.' It was best to be honest. 'I feel as though I'm in a rip, being pulled in a direction I don't want to go. I don't know how else to explain it to you.'

'I understand.'

'Do you?'

'It's all been a bit much lately, hasn't it?'

Finn moved so he could face her. 'When I thought you'd died—'

Vivien's lips pressed down on his and stayed there motionless for a second. Then she smiled and pulled back. 'I love you,' she whispered.

The unexpected words took a moment to settle in his brain, but as soon as they formulated, his whole being came alive.

'Say that again,' he whispered.

Vivien's eyes smiled. 'I love you.'

'One more time.'

She nudged his nose with her own. 'I love you, Finnigan Benjamin Silver.'

Was it even possible to kiss someone with every inch of life you had left? Finn felt as though that was exactly what he was doing. Time disappeared, as did the room, even Scotland no longer existed. Just her. Vivien Smithson. His best friend.

No matter how much he loved her, he had to come up for air, and Vivien laughed as soon as he found the energy to pull away from her.

'We need to talk, Finn.'

He drew her back to his mouth. 'We need to kiss,' he mumbled on her lips, making her laugh again.

Vivien sat up, forcing him to slide his back up the spongy headboard. 'As much as I want to keep kissing you, and do more than that, we do need to talk.'

Finn groaned playfully and swung his arm around her shoulders. 'Okay, but let's start with this place.'

'It's nice, isn't it?'

He glanced across the room at the pale-green floral wallpaper. It looked cute enough, he figured. 'I guess, if you like the old medieval look. I wonder how old this building is?'

'Not the inn. Although, yes, it's nice too, but I meant being up here away from it all.'

'So what's really behind your spontaneous trip? You just needed to get away for a bit? Is that all, Viv?'

He could almost hear the words she was holding back.

'I'm thinking of moving here,' she said quietly, lowering her eyes from his. 'For good.'

His heart sank as he reached down to the floor to grab his blue tee-shirt. 'Here, put that on. I can't concentrate while you're naked.'

Vivien slipped the garment over her head, then planted a kiss on his cheek. 'I don't want to leave you, but I don't want to change your life either.'

A huff of a laugh shot out of his mouth.

You've already done that.

She stroked over his chest, which really didn't help matters. His life was crumbling before his eyes and...

'Do you want me to live here with you, Viv?'

'Yes.' She replied so quickly, there was no denying she meant it.

He inhaled deeply, then hugged her close for a moment. 'Okay.'

'Okay?'

'Wherever you want to go, we'll go.'

Vivien's nose crinkled 'Just like that?'

'Viv, it wasn't that long ago I thought you were dead, then, just now, I thought you were about to leave me again. I can't take much more.'

Watery eyes flashed his way. 'I'm so confused, Finn.' Vivien covered her face with both hands, and Finn's heart sank again.

He quickly huddled her onto his lap, brushing her hair with one hand whilst soothingly stroking her back with the other. 'Shh, Viv, it's okay. Please don't cry. It's going to be all right. I promise.'

'I don't know what to do,' she said, sniffing in between words.

'We'll figure it out. That's why we're here, right?' He felt her head nod on his shoulder. 'We're talking now. Making our plans. We'll sort something.'

'I just want to be with you.'

Each broken word had him in pieces. 'I'm not going anywhere.' He lifted her face, wiping away the dampness on her blotchy cheeks. 'Hey, we're going to be fine.'

The slightest of smiles and slower breaths showed Vivien had started to settle. 'Perhaps we could go to an estate agents

and look in the window. See what's available.'

'Sure. Come on, we'll get dressed and check this place out properly.'

Vivien cuddled up to him. 'It can wait another five minutes.'

He matched her seductive grin. 'I'm going to need more than five minutes.'

Vivien

Vivien was walking on air. Her face was practically glowing, and suddenly life felt good. Her home was burned to the ground, her ex had been arrested, and she was at the other end of the country, but none of it mattered as much as she thought it would. Escaping to Honeydale was nerve-wracking at first, but then Finn showed up, and now problems felt solvable.

She snuggled into his side as they walked arm in arm along a high street a town away from where they were staying.

It was a dry, crisp early evening and the sky was a cool blue, making Vivien smile whenever she gazed its way. There was something refreshing about the air clearing out her nostrils and waking her face. It reminded her of the beach back home, except there wasn't a salty taste on her mouth, just the memory of Finn's full lips resting there.

The thought lifted her butterflies from their bench, bringing them back into the game for one more round.

How had she not seen what was right under her nose all those years? It was hard to believe her soulmate had always been by her side. Finn Silver was her match.

Did he always know?

She brought him to a sudden halt, stopping outside a chemist. 'It was always you, wasn't it, Finn?'

He adjusted her woolly hat, making sure her ears were covered. 'What was?'

'You were the one I was supposed to be with.'

His eyes narrowed as his head tipped slightly to one side. He stared at her for a moment, and Vivien couldn't read his mind.

'I feel a bit stupid,' she added quietly.

'You're not stupid. A bit slow but—'

'Oi!' She tapped his arm as she laughed.

‘Look, Viv, in all seriousness, I don’t know if I believe in destiny or anything, all I know is, I’ve wanted to be with you since my hormones kicked in way back when.’

Those soft lips of his were calling her again. She gave him a quick peck and smiled. ‘I always loved you, but I didn’t see it as more than friend love.’ She shook her head. ‘I love what we’ve shared all these years. I guess, looking back, we probably were a lot closer than friends, but I just don’t know why I didn’t do anything about making us closer.’

Finn shrugged. ‘Does it matter now?’

‘It just confuses me.’

‘It’s habit. We humans love our comfort zones. Somewhere in the back of your mind probably told you not to change what we had.’

‘Are you scared now we’re together?’

He whipped his dark woolly hat off, as though getting hot. ‘I’m not scared. I always knew we’d work. I just had to hope you would catch up one day.’

Vivien hugged him tightly, never wanting to let go.

I am slow. It might have been a joke, but I am. What a waste of all these years. I could have been happy. Don’t start flipping crying again.

She sniffed and looked his way. ‘I’m sorry, Finn.’

‘Why are you saying that to me? Hmm?’

‘All the wasted years.’

He shook his head and then kissed the tip of her nose. ‘There’s no wasted time. Some roads just aren’t straight, that’s all. Me driving to Honeydale proved that.’ He flashed her a lazy smile, then winked.

‘I’ve had more emotions run through me this year than I have my whole life, and we’re only in February.’ She scrunched her nose as she groaned. ‘I was really looking forward to spending Valentine’s night with you as well.’

‘Would it sound too corny if I told you every night with you is Valentine’s night?’ He nodded whilst she laughed. ‘Yep, it’s a bad line. I withdraw.’

‘You can’t take it back once it’s out there.’

They cuddled in silence, then walked to a bench near a park and sat huddled together, staring over at the shops across the road.

‘This is why people go on holiday, isn’t it, Finn?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a way of escaping life for a bit. That’s what I’m doing, aren’t I? I’m not facing up to reality. I’m daydreaming instead. Pretending all that crap back home doesn’t exist. That I live here, where everything is fine.’

‘Maybe, but it doesn’t have to be a holiday. We can move here. We can forget the crap, and everything *will* be fine. It’s down to us now. We say what’s what from now on. Do that, Viv. Make your own rules. If you want to go, then go. If you want to face it all, do that. There’s no right or wrong way. It’s about what feels good.’ Finn cupped her face in his gloves. ‘All I want is for you to feel happy, and I’m telling you with all honesty, the moment I saw you up here, I could see the bags under your eyes had faded, your cheeks held a tint of colour, and there was a sparkle in those beautiful eyes of yours.’

She kissed him again, then held his hands in hers on her lap. ‘That’s what a holiday can do for you.’

‘And like I said, this doesn’t have to be one. You want here, we’ll take here.’

There’s no sea.

‘Finn, what about your jobs?’

He grinned cheekily. ‘I’m pretty sure Scotland have a fire brigade too.’

‘I was thinking more about the RNLI. We’re inland here.’

He shrugged, looking away, and Vivien knew he was missing it already.

I can't take him away from all he loves just because I'm being a coward.

'It is nice here,' she said quietly, wondering if she spoke at all.

Finn gestured to the estate agents over the road. 'Why don't we pop in for a chat.'

'I've made a decision.'

'About?'

'Us.'

'Oh?'

'Well, I mean everything, really. I can't go on this way. I've been hiding away for years. It's time to stop. It doesn't matter where I go, if I don't face my problems, they'll still lurk somewhere, waiting to pounce.' She shook her head. 'I don't want that life. I want our life. This is our time, and I'm going to fight for it.'

Finn breathed out a puff of cold air as he laughed. 'I'm sort of following, but I'm not. Can you be more specific?'

'It's time to go home. I need to get the insurance sorted, stand up in court against Brody, and rebuild my business.'

I love you more than I fear all of that. I'm taking you back where you belong.

'Are you sure, Viv?'

'It has to be done. I can do this, Finn.' She gave him her best determined look so he wouldn't question her motives anymore. 'We deserve a life that's neat and tidy, and we can't have that until I get out the broom and clear up my own mess.'

'I have a dustpan and brush, if it helps.'

She laughed along with him before seriousness took hold again. 'I love you, Finn, and I love us, and it goes without saying how much I love the Gatehouse. So how do you feel

about this plan? I'll live with you, and we'll rebuild the café, this time with an upstairs. It can be hired out for tea parties some evenings. I'll sign up to the coach tours Hotel Royale have for the tourists so more customers come our way during peak season. It'll be good for the garden centre as well, and you and me, we'll simply live happily ever after, hopefully with some kids, if you don't mind.'

Finn chewed his bottom lip and narrowed his eyes. 'That's some plan.'

'We can brainstorm.'

'Nope. No need. It was a perfect pitch. I'm in.'

'All of it?'

Finn grinned. 'When can we make a start on the having kids part?'

'Do you really want children? I've never been sure you have. You're thirty-five and have never been serious with anyone, so I wasn't—'

'I told you. I've been waiting for you to catch up.'

A blush hit her cheeks as she lowered her eyes. 'I'm here now,' she said softly.

'So I see.'

Finn lifted her chin, and she met the love in his eyes exclusive to her. 'I need to know something.'

'What?'

'Do you really want to go home or are you doing this for me?' She went to speak, but he interrupted. 'And don't lie. I can read you like a book, Vivien Smithson.'

'I think it's best for both of us. I need to face everything, and you would hate not working on the lifeboats.'

'Thought as much, but just so you know, I'd cope.'

'I don't want you to cope. I want you to be happy. This is my mess, not yours, and I'm not about to let what destroyed me hurt you.'

‘I can cope.’

‘You’re not listening.’

‘No. You’re not listening. You mean more to me than any job, hobby, or lifestyle.’

‘But don’t you see, that’s how I feel about you.’ She tugged him forward, wrapping her arms around his big coat.

‘I don’t want you in a place that haunts you, Viv.’

She pulled back and nodded. ‘That’s what I was worried about at first, but now I see it’s just a matter of perspective. I’m in control of my life, and I’m taking it all back. The Gatehouse Café will rise through the ashes, and so will I, and you and me are going to have the best life. If there are ghosts back home, then I’m going full Ghostbuster on them. Nothing is going to rain on my parade from this day forward.’

‘That’s my girl.’ He kissed her hard before smiling. ‘I’m looking forward to seeing you in the Ghostbuster costume.’

‘Only if you wear one too.’

‘Of course. You’re just making all my dreams come true, aren’t you?’

Vivien lowered her voice as she held his hands. ‘What are your dreams, Finn?’

‘I’ve kind of got them all. I love my life. You were the only thing missing. Now I’m complete.’ His smile was gentle, almost sad in a small way. ‘Apart from the Gatehouse, did you have any dreams?’

‘Family. Happiness and peace. Everything I have with you and yours. I’d like to have lots of children. At least four.’

‘Four?’

She laughed. ‘I want a kitchen like your mum’s, and a home filled with laughter and love. And I definitely want us to holiday up here once a year.’

‘Deal.’

‘You always make everything simple.’

‘I just have the attitude that life’s what you make it, and I say we head home and make a start on ours, especially those four kids.’

In that moment Vivien realised what a difference picking the right partner made. All those eggshells had disappeared. There was no noise, no confusion, no fear.

So this is what a healthy relationship looks like. I can speak freely, be myself, and breathe easily through every word.

She smiled to herself as she cuddled her gorgeous man, silently thanking his wonderful parents for bringing such a superstar to the world.

‘Hey, Finn,’ she said, looking up into his dark eyes. ‘Do you reckon they’ve got a jewellers around here?’

He glanced at the row of shops before turning back to her with so much love directed her way, she was sure her heart swooned.

‘Are you proposing, Miss Smithson?’

‘With every fibre of my being.’

‘Then what are we waiting for?’ He quickly stood and whipped her up into his arms.

Vivien giggled into his shoulder. ‘Are you seriously going to carry me to the shop?’

‘I’m making sure you don’t run away.’

‘So, is that a yes then?’

‘With bells on.’

Finn

It was the beginning of March, and all that was left of the Gatehouse Café was an empty patch of land and some tulips that had sprouted around what used to be the left side of the building. Building equipment covered the lawn, as the foundations were ready sooner than Finn and Vivien expected.

The insurance money still hadn't come through, but Anna had called round with an offer that Finn made sure Vivien didn't refuse.

Anna and Jake brought a team of designers, structural engineers, and builders on board within the blink of an eye. Plans had been drawn and distributed before Vivien had a chance to change her mind, thinking their generosity all too much.

As soon as the insurance company paid out, the Reynolds were getting their money back, so that lightened the load for Vivien, and when she asked Finn to be her partner in the business, it lightened a lot for him too.

Brody was in prison, awaiting his court date. He was going to stay there for a long time, after his act of arson. Finn wanted him charged with attempted murder as well, but Brody swore blind he knew Vivien was living at Finn's. It was just the Gatehouse he wanted dead. He wanted her to stay alive, watch, and suffer.

In some ways, Brody gave Vivien her freedom when he lit that match. Little did he know he was burning his own bridge with her.

She was starting anew, in all ways.

It really was a dream come true for Finn to have the love of his life not only living with him permanently but also as his fiancée. Each time he glanced her way, she would be smiling or happily humming away to whatever song was playing on the radio. Her leg was so much better, and there was a definite skip to her step. The Vivien Smithson he knew was back.

A lot of visitors came to Silver Wish Farm, wishing Vivien well, offering to help her rebuild. Joey Reynolds even brought a rather large shiny coffee machine for when the café was rebuilt. Eyes were filled with empathy, and hearts with love, and Finn appreciated every single person who added to Vivien's smile.

He knew she had barely registered most of what had happened. It was understandable, considering, but seeing her spirit rise that little bit more each day gave him hope that, one day, she would fully heal from the trauma Brody had inflicted upon her.

A twinge of guilt still niggled at him every so often. Had he known the danger she was in, he would have risked life and limb to save her. He felt he'd spent a whole fortnight mentally shaking his head at himself. All the what-ifs drove him mad. Even his dad had to have a word.

Finn hated feeling useless, so getting stuck in with Heath and the builders boosted him no end.

Vivien wanted the new Gatehouse to still be close to the gate, and Benton agreed she could build there. It was a great opportunity for the Smithsons to have the building on their own land, which was where Rhett wanted it to be, but Vivien loved the tradition, stating it would no longer hold a curse, just a combination of love from the two families.

This time, the Gatehouse was being made from bricks. The design was modern but still fitted in with its surrounds and was a touch wider on each side.

Reporters had been by, gathering as much news as they could and annoying the hell out of Finn. Tyler had stepped up, using the conversational skills he'd picked up working at tills, which came in handy, because Heath's deep voice and big muscles came across as intimidating, and the last thing anyone needed was more police at the farm.

A cloudless blue sky and gentle mild breeze made Finn smile. He loved springtime. It was his favourite season, especially at Silver Wish Farm, with the flowers and plants slowly blossoming, sprouting, or waking from winter.

He stood at his opened front door, lingering for a while, watching Vivien swaying by the wood burner to a slow song playing quietly. A surge of love rushed through him when she glanced at her engagement ring and smiled a smile that practically reached her ears.

That's it, Viv. You smile. And I'm going to spend the rest of my life making sure you're always happy.

He could feel the agony in his silent words as a memory of the dullness in her eyes back in February hit him. He quickly shook it off, remembering how his dad had told him that bad memories will appear, but it didn't mean they had to stay.

'Don't give them power, son,' Benton had said. 'Blow them away as soon as they arrive.'

The technique seemed to work. Finn just wished the memories didn't exist at all.

The shadow of disappointment faded as he continued to watch his future wife. It was almost hypnotic how blissful the scene was. Nothing major was taking place, just a lone woman, a song, and a lightheaded feeling.

A slow smile crept on his face as he idly wandered over to take her in his arms and join in the dancing.

Vivien traced over his jaw with her mouth, stopping to have a nibble, making him laugh. 'We're supposed to be hosting dinner for half the neighbourhood tonight. I don't want them thinking we have a messy home.'

He lightly kissed behind her ear. 'They won't care. Anyway, I'm firing up the barbeque later, so they can all stay outside if they're allergic to dust.'

'Hey, we don't have dust.'

Finn spun her around and dipped her low, not even bothering to fight back his grin. 'Have I ever told you how much I love you?'

Her mouth twitched. 'Never.'

Pulling her up, he laughed. 'Best not to start now then.'

She flicked her yellow duster at his arm just as Fran entered.

‘I’ve brought some more meat for the fridge,’ she said, raising the large silver tray in her hands. ‘I’ve run out of room in mine.’

Finn followed her into the kitchen. ‘Not sure there’s room in ours. What about Heath’s?’

‘He’s got all the desserts, and Ty’s fridge is loaded with drinks.’

Finn slumped onto a chair. ‘Perhaps we should’ve hired a hall for this shindig, Mum. It might have seemed a plusher way of saying our thanks to everyone for their kindness.’

Fran flapped a hand behind her back as she starting moving things around in the fridge. ‘Oh, nonsense. Nothing beats a good old-fashioned house gathering.’

Most of Pepper Bay is coming.

‘Not sure they’ll fit in my house, Mother.’

‘Good thing it’s a lovely day.’ Her head popped back up. ‘Stop worrying, Finn. It’ll be nice outside around the firepit and barbeque. Your dad’s looking forward to cooking.’

‘Oh, he doesn’t have to. I’ve got it covered tonight.’

‘No need. You know what your father is like. He loves cooking and having a boogie with the tongs.’

Finn was so grateful for his parents. No matter his age, they would chip in and help, taking over if need be. He didn’t mind. It was how his family was. He vowed to be the same type of parent for his kids.

I wonder if Viv’s pregnant yet?

He wandered back into the living room and slid his arms around his fiancée, lightly stroking over her stomach. ‘I think we need to put in more hours in the bedroom.’

She wriggled out of his arms and gestured to the stairs, but before he could run with her in that direction, Fran called out from the kitchen, reminding him of her presence.

‘Did you remember to collect the bags of ice from the supermarket? Fiona’s put them to one side for you out the back.’

‘I did not,’ he mouthed to Vivien. ‘We’ll go now,’ he called.

‘We?’ questioned Vivien.

‘Yeah, come with me. We can sneak off to the treehouse and have some alone time before we head off.’

Vivien giggled. ‘As lovely, and uncomfortable, as that sounds. Let’s not.’

He took her hand and walked out into the beauty of their connecting lands. Some birds were tweeting happily in a nearby tree, and Rhett’s horses were mooching in a field close by.

Vivien snuggled into his arm. ‘What do you think about getting a cow?’

‘What?’

‘After Nate brought one up here, I liked the idea of seeing one around.’

‘How about a cat instead?’

‘Ooh, I always wanted a cat. Rhett got one after Mum died, but I never thought about getting a pet after moving into the Gatehouse. But, yes, a cat would be good.’

Finn laughed. ‘That’s that settled. I wouldn’t know what to do with a cow.’

They stopped laughing as they approached the space for the café.

Vivien’s face was unreadable as she stared at where her old home once stood, and Finn wasn’t sure if she was hurting.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah,’ she replied quietly. ‘It’s just strange, isn’t it? The Gatehouse was a huge part of our family’s history.’

He offered the empty space a sympathetic smile. ‘It will be again.’

She glanced his way, and he caught her eye. ‘The new design is lovely.’

Finn had to agree. As much as the old Gatehouse had character, the new one met all health and safety requirements, which reassured the firefighter in him. ‘It’ll be great, Viv.’

Her head rested on his shoulder. ‘This was built by love, then turned to hate. It was destroyed by hate and is being rebuilt by love. Life can be funny.’

They walked over to the large old gate that gave the place its name and leaned on the thick planks of wood, staring out to the driveway.

‘My parents created Silver Wish Farm from a place of darkness. It’s amazing what love can build.’

Vivien put her arm around his waist. ‘Rhett made Lucky Riding Stables what it is today because she loves it so much.’

‘We’re definitely surrounded by a lot of love.’

‘It feels nice, doesn’t it?’

Finn kissed her temple and smiled. ‘There’s no other feeling like it.’

‘And our children will know what loves looks like because we’ll show them every day.’

Finn picked her up, plopping her down on top of the gate whilst resting between her legs. She lowered her head to meet his lips, and they shared a slow, lingering kiss before smiling at each other happily.

‘I like my new life, Finn.’

‘So do I.’

‘And I’m glad this gate didn’t burn down.’

Finn clamped one hand over the old wood whilst the other held Vivien’s thigh. ‘This was put here to divide us, Viv.’ He shook his head and laughed. ‘It’s the last man standing.’

Vivien cupped his face in her hands, bringing his eyes back to hers. ‘No, it’s not. We are. We beat the feud, the curse, and

this old gate. You and me. We're the winners in this story.' She raised her face to the sky, and Finn followed her gaze. 'You hear that, ancestors. Love truly is the strongest force, and it will always win.'

Amusement filled him, crinkling his eyes and revealing his laugh lines. 'I think the feud was over before we were born, Viv.'

She nudged his hip with her leg. 'Just go with me on this, okay.'

'Okay.' He looked back at the sky. 'You can take our Gatehouse, but you'll never take our freedom,' he roared, then looked back at Vivien. 'See, this is what happens after you visit Scotland.'

She curled herself around his body, pulling him closer to her and the gate. 'We got engaged in Scotland.'

'Yep. Do you want to get married there as well?'

'Nope. I want to get married up at Castle on the Mead.'

He pulled back to look at her. 'Why there?'

She gave a slight shrug. 'It's got character. Plus, it's in Pepper Bay, and there's nowhere quite like home.'

'You're my home, Vivien Smithson.'

'And you're my dream come true.'

* * *

If you enjoyed this story, come back to Pepper Bay and meet Rhett and Heath.

[Silver Wish Farm – UK](#)

[Silver Wish Farm – US](#)

After Rhett left Heath on their wedding day, things were never the same for them, but because they have a daughter, they've always tried their best to keep the peace. But then life changes for Heath, and he suddenly wants answers about their past and the future he believes he should have had, but will Rhett tell him the real reason she left him all those years ago?

About the Author

Hello, I'm K.T. Dady. I'm the bestselling author of the Pepper Bay series. I'm also a chocolate lover, mum to a grown-up daughter, and a huge fan of a HEA. I was born and raised in the East End of London, and I've been happily writing stories since I was a little girl. When I'm not writing, I'm mostly reading, baking cakes, or pottering around in my little garden in Essex, trying hard not to kill the flowers.

I love hearing from readers, so please get in touch over at my website or sign up for my [newsletter](#) and receive a free Pepper Bay short story that you won't find anywhere else.

Newsletters go out once a month and often contain free gifts, previews, and writing tips amongst the news. Head over to my website at ktdady.com

If you enjoyed reading my book, please leave a rating or review on Amazon or Goodreads. It really helps to bring the story to more readers. Thank you so much.

You'll also find me on my social media accounts.

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* * *

Pepper Bay series:

[Starlight Cottage](#)

[Honeybee Cottage](#)

[Pepper Pot Farm](#)

[Lemon Drop Cottage](#)

[The Post Office Shop](#)

[Pepper River Inn](#)

[Silver Blooms Flower Shop](#)

[The Old Boat Clubhouse](#)

[Castle on the Mead](#)

[Christmas Memories at Waterside Cottage](#)

* * *

Honeydale series (Pepper Bay spin-off):

[Honeydale Lodge](#)

[The Black Hat Inn](#)

[The Little Bakery on Wishing Well Lane](#)

[Emerald Tree Farm](#)

[New Beginnings in Honeydale](#)

Acknowledgements

This story is dedicated to those who are a continued support to their partners, no matter what. To have a partner loving you, raising you up, wanting only good things for you, and showing you nothing but respect and love is everything a relationship should be. These people give love a good name.

* * *

If you would like to help support women in the fight against domestic abuse, you can donate to [Refuge](#). Please note there are many other help centres around.

* * *

Sending a huge thank you to my wonderful editor Aimee for all her help.

* * *

I'm also sending a cheer to the book bloggers who join the Pepper Bay book tours. I call them my Pepper Bay Buddies. So many readers are a constant support to this series, and I want you all to know that I am so completely and utterly grateful to each and every one of you.

* * *

As always, sending lots of love and light your way. Keep reading. It's good for the soul.