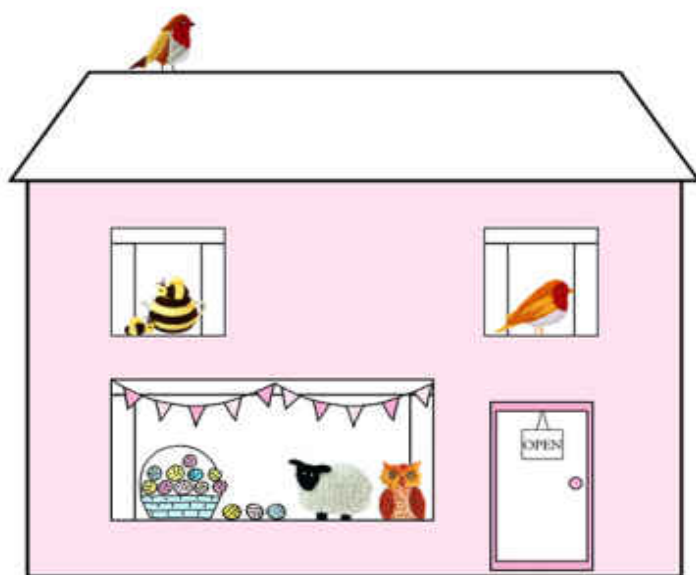
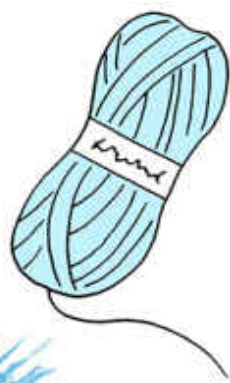


Scottish Island

Knitting Bee



De-ann Black



Scottish
Island
Knitting Bee

De-ann Black

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Scottish Island Knitting Bee

Other books by De-ann Black (Romance, Action/Thrillers & Children's books). See her Amazon Author page or website for further details about her books, screenplays, illustrations, art, fabric designs and embroidery patterns. www.De-annBlack.com

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CHAPTER ONE

Innis stood strong on top of the highest hill on the beautiful, west coast Scottish island, admiring the view of the small town and distant villages further along the island's coast. The day was going down in a blaze of glory. The sky aglow with amber light merged into pink and lilac. Golden hour was his favourite time, the early evening, when the busy day gave way to the mellow twilight.

Wearing his black and dark grey tartan kilt and white, lace-up ghillie shirt, he felt the mild breeze hint that summer was on its way as he surveyed the island far below.

Lights emerged from the cottages dotted along the coastline and sprinkled across the countryside beyond. Twinkle lights stretching the length of the main street beside the little harbour glittered like diamante and highlighted the row of quaint shops that wrapped themselves around the curve of the bay.

He pinpointed the glow from the windows of his cake shop with its selection of chocolatier sweet temptations. Night display lights illuminated the cakes and chocolates in the windows. It was closed for the day, but his duties still prevailed. His attendance was required at the island's castle, now a successful hotel catering for guests and special functions. He was due to attend an anniversary ceilidh celebration.

His two brothers, Finlay and Ean, similar in age to him, in their early thirties, were as duty bound as he was, though more so as they were responsible for the running of their family's castle and its estate. Innis helped them, while building his own business. The castle's well-equipped kitchen doubled as his chocolatier facility, enabling him to expand his range of cakes and sweets while still having the shop at the harbour. The best of both hectic worlds.

His heart settled to a calm, steady rhythm after the fast-paced walk up the hill. Sturdy brogues worn with thick, cream wool socks, helped him tackle the grass and heather-covered terrain well. The frequent walks kept the long, lean muscles in his thighs strong. There was something invigorating about locking up his shop for the evening and bounding up the hill to see the view he never got tired of, even after all these years.

Born and raised on the island, he'd no desire to leave and seek his fortune on the Scottish mainland, barely twenty miles away. Although well-travelled, he always enjoyed coming back to the island. Everything he'd ever needed and wanted was on his home turf — except one desire that was recently causing him sleepless nights and moments of heart searching during the day. Usually, he could brush aside the thought of wanting to find someone to share his life with him, a woman to love. Maybe it was true what his elders said, that there comes a time when a man feels ready to settle down, to marry and build a future together with her.

He'd spent the last three years in the romantic wilderness due to making a mistake and falling for the wrong woman at the wrong time. His heart had mended easier than he'd anticipated, further emphasising that she hadn't been the one for him. Still, the wound cut deep at the time. She'd left him after a brief fling with someone else, and headed back home to the city, to the mainland. Those close to him assured him that one day the woman he was meant to be with would walk into his world. Perhaps she was already on the island, someone he'd never met or considered, or she'd arrive on the daily ferry. He lived in hope, but kept these thoughts to himself. On the surface, he was known locally as the wolf in wolf's clothing. A man who suffered fools badly.

His brothers had their own natures. All of them were different. Finlay, thirty-three, was the responsible type and the spit of their blond-haired, blue-eyed father. Ean, thirty, had inherited their mother's artistic talents along with her chestnut hair and green-eyed looks. Innis, thirty-two, had dark hair and amber eyes, wolf eyes. The lone wolf of the family, now with an increasing longing to change that.

Ean, the youngest, had looked set to marry first. But the love of his life decided she didn't want to live on the island, especially with Ean, and went back to her ex-boyfriend in Edinburgh. The whole messy drama had turned Ean inside out. It had taken the past two years for him to regain his emotional equilibrium.

Finlay was still single, with a short string of broken romances with women from the mainland. The last two had only been interested in Finlay because he would, in time, when their father retired, become the new laird of the castle.

Unlucky in love, an expression often cast into discussions about the three handsome, moneyed and eligible brothers, definitely applied to their past and current circumstances.

But there was hope of finding true love, Innis told himself. There was always hope.

He took a deep breath. The lights from the shops began to dim as the cottages came to life. The restaurants, teashop, cafes and bars were still aglow, ready to welcome evening customers into their cosy hubs.

Innis had considered extending his opening hours and adding a cafe style eatery at the rear of his cake shop, but there were rumours that the knitting shop next door would be up for sale soon now that the owner, Morven, had fallen in love, and wanted to go on long holidays with one of the island's wealthy gentlemen. The knitting shop sold yarn, handmade items and haberdashery products, that Innis knew nothing about. The local knitting bee was held there. The shop, a traditional, two-storey, converted cottage, painted pale pink, had an extension at the rear of the premises where the knitting bee nights were enjoyed. Morven lived above the shop. Excellent premises. Innis imagined he'd expand his business next door when the opportunity presented itself.

The sea breeze mixed with the heady scent of the greenery and blew his thick dark hair back from his sculptured features. He breathed it all in.

Far across the sea the lights of towns and cities on mainland Scotland flickered in the distance. Above him, the silhouette of

a majestic golden eagle soared towards the emerging stars in the sky. The island had long offered mesmerising views of the night sky. The panorama of the Milky Way could still take his breath away.

He could've happily stood there a while longer, but it was time to head back down the hill and join in the festivities at the castle. Lights shone from the windows and spiralling turrets.

Guests would be getting ready for the ceilidh dancing after their lavish dinner, made mainly from locally grown and produced foods — everything from the fresh farm eggs, milk, butter, cheese, condiments and jams to the seafood and hearty vegetables.

Before leaving, he took a long, lingering look at his favourite view of the island — a patchwork of fields, the dark stone castle and estate sheltered by a forest, thistle loch, and a coast with hidden coves, surrounded by a blue-green sea so deep and full of mystery.

Morven, decided to phone her niece, Elspeth, in Glasgow. It was early evening, and she'd been hoping to ask her for a huge favour.

Elspeth, born and raised in Glasgow, used to visit her aunt's knitting shop on the island during the summer holidays when she was a young girl, but once she'd grown up, and started work for an accountancy firm in Glasgow, she'd never been back. Elspeth now met her aunt in the city, mainly for family celebrations, or when Morven came over from the island for a day trip to Glasgow. They kept in touch, and Elspeth liked to look at the updates and photos on her aunt's knitting shop website.

Recently, Elspeth, thirty, had been made redundant from the accountancy firm and ventured out on her own — starting up a knitting business selling yarn from her flatshare in Glasgow. Knitting was a hobby she'd enjoyed since she was a little girl. Over the years, she'd become skilled at knitting jumpers, cardigans and making her own patterns. She'd messaged her aunt the news, but said she'd felt stuck in the accountancy job

and had always wanted to have her own knitting business. Although she wouldn't have chosen such a harsh goodbye from her accountancy job, it had sparked her into forging out on her own. Her aunt gave her a bolstering reply, cheering her on. In the past several weeks, they hadn't been in touch again, until now.

Elspeth was working on a Fair Isle jumper, but put it aside to cook herself dinner. As she decided whether to make pasta, her phone rang. She took the call.

'Hello, Elspeth, it's me.'

'Aunty Morven.' Elspeth sounded surprised and pleased to hear from her. 'Everything okay?' she asked quickly. Her aunt rarely phoned on busy week days, so she assumed something was amiss.

'Yes, everything's hunky-dory. In fact, that's why I'm calling. I wanted to ask you a favour. And it's fine if you don't want to do it,' Morven added hastily.

Elspeth frowned. 'Do what?'

'I'm going gallivanting for a couple of months,' Morven announced.

Elspeth laughed. 'Gallivanting?'

'Yes, I've met someone. I've known him for years on the island, but we've both hid our feelings for each other, until recently.'

'You've got a boyfriend?' Elspeth sounded delighted.

Morven smiled at the thought that she did. In her fifties, she'd married and divorced early, and hadn't anticipated finding love in her later years. 'Yes. I'm dating Donall.'

'Donall?' Elspeth remembered him. 'He's a fine, strapping man. And he's not short of a shilling.'

'He owns half of a wee whisky distillery and is part owner of two of the pubs on the island. But he has folk to manage things, so...he wants to whisk me away for a holiday.'

'A cruise?'

‘No. We discussed that, but then I said that I’d love to tour Scotland, to see all the places I’ve never been, like Inverness and Aberdeen, the pink sand beaches, all the beautiful lochs and castles. I’ve never visited the Shetlands or Orkneys and I’d love to see the yarn they’ve got.’

‘A tour of Scotland sounds great.’ Elspeth had often thought that instead of going abroad, she’d enjoy visiting the wonderful places right on her doorstep.

‘We could end up heading to Edinburgh for a couple of weeks. It’s years since I was there. And maybe we’ll go to Skye and Bute. I want to visit all the magnificent castles, wee villages and the cities, so I could be away for two or three months. Definitely for the late spring and throughout the summer.’

‘It’s almost summertime now.’

‘Well, all the better. Sunshine and adventure. I’ve always wanted to throw caution to the wind and just take off like a will-o’-the-wisp, and go where the breeze blows me. Donall wants the same. So we’re doing it. But... I need a shop sitter, so I wanted to ask if you’d be interested. Now, before you say anything, I know you’ve got your own online knitting business that you run from your flat, but maybe you could still run your business from my shop.’

Morven tried to sell the idea to Elspeth, but her niece took little persuasion.

‘Run my business from your shop on the island?’ Elspeth clarified.

‘Yes. What do you say?’

‘What about the ladies at your knitting bee? Don’t any of them want to do it?’

‘I don’t want to ask them. They’ve got their own wee businesses, and they’re all set for the summer trade or their holidays. I’m sure they’d say yes, but I don’t feel right foisting the task on to them and upsetting their summer plans. I don’t mean to sound as if I’m fine about disturbing your plans, but —’

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, I’ll do it. I’d love to spend a couple of months, or more, in your knitting shop. It’s been far too long since I visited.’

‘Any money you make from the sales, you keep,’ her aunt told her.

‘No, I—’

‘That’s the deal.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Definitely. And with your experience of accounts, you’ll probably handle my business better than me.’

During the call, they discussed the fine details, and Elspeth couldn’t contain her excitement when later, Catriona, her flatshare friend, walked in. Elspeth gave her the short course.

Catriona’s reaction was instant. ‘That’s fantastic. I’m so glad you’re going.’

Elspeth laughed. ‘Don’t sound so delighted to get rid of me.’

‘I’m not. I’m just—’

‘Happy that your boyfriend can come and stay while I’m away?’

‘Just a wee bit,’ Catriona confessed.

They laughed, and Catriona helped Elspeth make plans for what to pack and get ready for her trip to the island.

Elspeth booked her ferry ride. Then with her car full of suitcases and bags, she headed from Glasgow to the coast and drove on to the ferry.

With her car parked safely on a lower level, she ventured up and stood outside on the main deck, breathing in the fresh sea air. Pulling up the collar of her stylish cream wool coat and thrusting her hands into the pockets for warmth, she enjoyed

sailing towards the island, wondering if she'd see dolphins and seals, like she had in the past, and the huge fins of basking sharks cutting through the wild sea.

But there was nothing but the froth from the ferry as it headed to the island on a bright, breezy day.

Elsbeth swept strands of her long, blonde hair away from her face as she glanced back at the diminishing view of the mainland. No regrets.

She smiled as she looked ahead again. The pale sunlight shone in the light blue sky, promising an early summer.

The island enjoyed warm summers, mild autumns, often with summer lingering well into the later months of the year. Winter was a wonderland of crisp, frosty days and snow. Plenty of snow. And rain, from smirry rain to hailstones. December and January were invariably winter at its finest. But the early springs soon brightened the days again and merged with summer so easily. The Gulf Stream with its warm winds helped to create a temperate climate for the island.

Sheltered from the onslaught of fierce winds and rain by the outlying islands, and snuggled near the long stretch of bay on the Scottish mainland coast, the weather on the island was fairly mild.

The shops and houses appeared into view as the ferry sailed closer to the island. The hills looked so lush with greenery that Elspeth felt she could reach out and touch the texture, like emerald velvet softening to light spring greens as the hills stretched down to the farmlands and fields where cattle, sheep and deer were to be found. In the past she'd been in awe of the large stags roaming around.

She remembered the summer fields of barley blowing in the breeze. The flora and fauna were like another world to her when she was a wee girl. Hidden niches, like the secret coves where she peered into the sea swept caverns, wrote her name in the sand and watched the waves wash it away. And the fairytale castle, where she stood and gazed up at the turrets, picturing being part of the romance. Everything felt so full of hope and adventure.

The castle and the loch were hidden from view as the ferry sailed into the harbour, but they were there.

Elsbeth remembered being so excited to take the ferry with her parents to visit her aunty. Her parents were currently living in London, due to her father's business. Frequent trips to London were mixed with being back home in Inverness. They were happy. She was happy for them.

Feeling the excitement bubbling up inside her, Elspeth collected her car, drove off the ferry and headed for the main street that ran alongside the harbour. Very little had changed. She recognised the shops, and realised a few were new or had updated their look.

And there in the heart of it was the pretty pink knitting shop, sitting between a new cake shop and a cafe bar she'd never seen. Next to the cafe bar was a clothes boutique she vaguely remembered, only now it sold vintage clothes rather than current fashions.

She parked outside the knitting shop and took a deep breath.

Excitement charged through her as she admired the beautiful yarn and knitted items on display in the front window. The pale pink theme of the shop made it look inviting, along with the tubs of fresh flowers in shades of light candy to deep rose. The greenery sparkled as if someone had helpfully watered the flowers that day. Everything looked and smelled fresh.

She stepped out of her car feeling a fresh start for herself here.

The midday sun reflected off the window and glass door, and she cupped her hands to shield herself from the glare to get a better peek inside the shop. The shelves were stacked neatly with an extensive range of colourful yarns, and knitted jumpers, cardigans, scarves and shawls hung tidily from rails near the counter. Knitting needles and other haberdashery accessories were displayed on two fully stocked carousels. The shop looked ready for business, and even prettier than recent pictures on the website.

Her aunt had told her to collect the keys from the cake shop next door. The owner, Innis, had them. Elspeth had never met him before.

The cake shop had a pretty facia, painted pale vanilla with touches of soft pink. Hanging baskets filled with spring flowers, primroses, daffodils and pink roses added to the floral pastel look. Perfectly iced cakes decorated with flowers made from fondant icing were displayed in the front window. It was one of the loveliest cake shops she'd seen. The chocolates looked tempting too.

Elspeth picked up her bag from the car. She was probably going to be tempted to buy herself a treat while she was in the cake shop.

Her coat was on the back seat of the car, but she left it there. Wearing slim-fitting, moss green velvet trousers, ankle boots, and a soft white jumper she'd knitted herself, she headed into the cake shop to pick up the keys from Innis.

The aroma of chocolate, vanilla and other delicious scents of the cakes wafted in the air. As it was lunchtime, the shop was busy with customers. Two ladies, sisters, Rosabel and Primrose, wearing aprons and bakery caps with their silvery curls peeking out, were serving them. Both in their latter years, they looked cheery as they put cakes and chocolate scones into paper bags. Rosabel wore a pale pink apron, while Primrose had opted for pale yellow. The interior of the cake shop matched the exterior and had a modern vintage vibe.

Elspeth saw a tall man, fitting the description of Innis, arranging cakes in the counter's glass fronted display. He wore a chef's collarless white shirt with short sleeves, black trousers and a chef's black apron. Everything unintentionally emphasised his fit physique.

He was handsome. Not that she was interested. Her life was busy enough with moving to the island without adding romance into the mix to complicate things, which it always did. But she couldn't help noticing. Innis wasn't a man to be overlooked. He was a looker.

Her heart reacted when he glanced at her. Those eyes! Wow! Those were sexy, come to bed and be prepared to stay for a looong night type of eyes. Her heart fluttered again.

She shook herself from her unwanted thoughts.

‘Elsbeth?’ his rich, deep voice called to her above the chatter in the shop.

She jolted. He knew her name.

‘Your aunt showed me a photo,’ he explained, seeing her reaction. ‘But you were a lot younger and pretty in it.’

Feeling slightly unnerved, and wondering if he’d deliberately tried to insult her by insinuating she wasn’t a spring chicken these days, she stepped forward. ‘I came to pick up the keys to my aunt’s knitting shop.’

He reached under the counter, and then dangled the keys over to her.

‘The big one opens the front door. The small silver one is for the back door. The others are for cupboards and drawers in the shop,’ he summarised, towering over her. She barely came up to his broad shoulders.

‘I’ll figure them out.’ She clasped hold of the keys and headed away.

‘Good luck,’ he called after her.

Elsbeth glanced back and nodded acknowledgement of his comment, then left the cake shop.

She could still feel his eyes on her. Or maybe she was just hyper, in need of a cup of tea, or to flop down on the sofa. All three probably.

CHAPTER TWO

Innis continued to sort the cake display while his thoughts rewound his encounter with Elspeth. He mentally kicked himself for commenting on her photo. Her cornflower blue eyes had cut right through him. She'd looked insulted. Morven had briefed him about her niece, but he hadn't been prepared for the petite beauty walking into his shop, knocking him off his stride. The photo of the gauche, pretty teen, bore only a slight resemblance to the beautiful and confident young woman he'd just met.

He'd seen her look temptingly at the chocolate scones and the glacé fruit cupcakes on display. But she'd bolted as soon as she had the keys in her grasp before he could give her the fresh bread and milk he'd bought for her, at Morven's request. Morven had stocked the knitting shop's accommodation with groceries for her niece, but having left the previous day, a fresh loaf of bread and milk were needed. He'd bought them earlier, thinking he'd hand them over along with the keys to the knitting shop.

Sighing to himself, he wondered what to do.

Primrose commented under her breath as she went by to pick up a box of chocolate truffles. 'She's very pretty, isn't she?'

Innis looked like he didn't know what she meant.

Rosabel helped clarify while bagging a cherry cake for a customer. 'Morven's niece. She's a beautiful young woman. I thought you'd offer her a cake, in welcoming.' She left her comment hanging.

'She seemed to be in a hurry.' Innis busied himself with the display.

'I think you rattled her,' Primrose chipped-in.

Those wolf eyes glanced at Primrose.

But Primrose and Rosabel were accustomed to those eyes and saw only the good-hearted, if sometimes brusque, man beneath the fierce exterior.

Rosabel and Primrose had spent a lifetime baking cakes on the island, making their living from it, using secret cake recipes belonging to their grandmother. But several years ago they'd retired, intending to relax and live life at a more convivial pace. That hadn't lasted long. They missed the buzz of baking for business, and when Innis offered to pay them for the use of the secret recipes in his new cake shop, they'd accepted his offer on one condition — they'd come out of retirement and work for him at his cake shop. Flexible hours. Innis had agreed, and now he couldn't imagine hiring anyone better to assist him.

'I sensed a spark between the two of you,' Primrose told him, smiling.

'There was no spark,' he said adamantly. His tense fingers crushed the delicate icing daisy he'd attempted to place carefully on top of a cake.

Primrose and Rosabel smiled knowingly at each other. They knew the effect that Innis had on women, especially on first meeting him. Women often blushed as he served them their cakes. Elspeth had hurried out before the blush emerged, but they sensed her reaction to seeing their tall, handsome employer.

'Don't break her heart,' Rosabel told him. 'Remember, she's only here for the summer.'

'I've no intention of breaking anyone's heart,' he refuted strongly. 'And she's not my type,' he lied.

Elspeth was exactly his type he thought. A pretty, blue-eyed blonde with a slender figure and curves in all the right places. A walking temptation. He hadn't been tempted like this in a long time. The blood stirred in his veins, pumping through his entire system with every strong beat of his heart. Or maybe it was just sheer frustration that he'd caused her to do a runner

from his shop. Unnerving first encounters were rarely easy to rectify.

He marched through to the kitchen to make another daisy.

Rosabel and Primrose exchanged a look, sensing trouble brewing.

Unknown to her, another set of admiring eyes were watching Elspeth.

Brodrick owned the cafe bar on the other side of the knitting shop. Wearing expensive but casual clothes in dark neutral shades, he blended in with the classic tones of his premises. He was unloading a food delivery from his car and had seen her unlock the front door and step inside. She'd turned the lights on and he could see her quite clearly having a look around. Morven had mentioned to him that her niece was due to arrive. He hadn't expected Elspeth to look so lovely.

Brodrick's strong arms lifted the heavy boxes with ease as he carried them from the car into the cafe. He matched Innis in height and years. He was single, with dark russet hair and green eyes that were filled with curiosity watching Elspeth. Once he'd unloaded the delivery, he planned to chap her door and introduce himself. He'd offered to keep the keys to the knitting shop, but Morven had given them to Innis. So he knew Elspeth had already met one of the local heartbreakers. Sometimes he'd heard the gossip stating that his own name was included on that list. But he'd never had a big tip for himself, especially when it came to dating.

He sighed deeply and wondered — would he be lucky in love this summer? Then he saw Innis head out of the cake shop carrying a bag, probably filled with cakes and other sweet temptations for Elspeth, and knock on the door of the knitting shop.

Elspeth appeared to welcome Innis inside. As she closed the door again, Brodrick tucked his hopes in his back pocket, for now, and headed into his cafe bar.

Elspeth peered into the bag that Innis put down on the shop counter.

‘Your aunt asked me if I’d pick up fresh bread and milk for you when you arrived,’ Innis explained.

‘And a few extras?’ Elspeth said, noticing he’d added a glacé fruit cupcake, a chocolate scone and a sample box of his chocolates. He’d clearly seen what she’d been looking at on display.

‘By way of welcoming you to the island and to apologise for my comment on your photograph,’ he said. ‘I meant that you’re obviously a young woman now.’ He faltered, unable to reveal that she wasn’t just pretty these days, she was quite beautiful. Even more so now, standing talking to her in the knitting shop. Her eyes really were the closest to cornflower blue he’d seen and the blush forming across her cheeks only added to her loveliness.

He blinked out of his deep thoughts as she thanked him for the items.

‘I was going to pop out for milk to make a cup of tea,’ she told him. ‘Or head into the cafe bar next door for a cuppa.’

Those wolfish eyes glinted under the shop lights. ‘That would’ve made Brodrick’s day.’

She frowned. ‘Brodrick?’

‘He owns the cafe bar and seemed mesmerised, watching you while he unloaded his delivery from his car. Didn’t you notice him?’

‘No, I was too excited about having a look inside the shop to notice anyone.’

‘Well, I think Brodrick was suitably impressed, though I’m not insinuating he was being sly or underhand. I’ve known him for years and could tell he was pleased to see his new neighbour.’

Elspeth blushed. ‘I’m not used to being the focus of anyone’s attention.’

‘I find that hard to believe, though I accept what you’re telling me.’

Her heart reacted as it had done in the cake shop and a wave of emotion, of raw attraction, swept her usual calm aside. Innis would surely make most women swoon, and she hadn’t experienced such potent masculinity up close in a man. Innis was handsome, and classy, and her heart was gripped in a double pincer movement that threatened to make her blush without reserve.

She lifted the bag. ‘I’ll put the milk in the fridge upstairs.’ It was a less than subtle hint that it was time for him to be on his way while she sorted out moving in, making tea, and calming her heart down.

Innis took the hint. ‘I’ll let you get settled in. Welcome to the island, Elspeth.’

The deep resonance of his voice saying her name, in the confines of the quiet shop, shook her senses. She felt him say her name as well as heard it. A shiver of excitement charged through her.

Innis opened the front door of the shop to leave, and then hesitated. ‘If you’d like to have dinner at the castle this evening, let me know.’

‘Dinner at the castle?’ With him? By herself? For any particular purpose apart from welcoming her to the island?

‘There’s a party in the function room for guests and those dining in the restaurant this evening, as there often is. It would be an ideal way to meet people from the local community, and enjoy the castle’s fine cuisine,’ he added with a smile that could break her heart if she let it. But she would not, she told herself firmly.

‘Thank you, dinner at the castle would be great,’ she heard herself reply without thinking through the numerous spurious clauses she should’ve considered. ‘It’s been years since I’ve been inside the castle. Mainly, I played outside in the estate. I loved the swing that daringly swung across the river.’

‘Did you ever let go and jump in the water?’ He’d done this every time. He shared her excitement about playing on the swing when he was young. But he’d never met her.

‘No, it was always summertime when we visited, and I wore pretty dresses that I didn’t want to soak and ruin. Often I’d made them myself.’

‘That’s a fair excuse,’ he said. ‘Are you a dressmaker too as well as an expert knitter?’

‘I only knit these days. But I’d like to get back into sewing, quilting and dressmaking.’

‘This island has a way of encouraging us to do things we wouldn’t otherwise dare do.’

Like stepping forward and kissing those firm, sensual lips of his and to pot with the consequences.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, frowning at her. ‘For a moment you looked like something had disturbed your thoughts.’

‘I’m fine, perfect, no wayward thoughts, nothing like that, totally fine.’

Innis smiled. ‘Dinner’s around seven or seven-thirty tonight.’

‘I’ll be there,’ she assured him, wishing she could reassure herself that she wasn’t stepping into a situation she couldn’t handle.

‘The road to the castle is signposted.’

‘I know where it is,’ she assured him.

Innis nodded and left the shop.

Elsbeth watched his tall figure walk past the window to his cake shop.

She let go of the breath she hadn’t even realised she’d been holding, and shook her head, scolding herself. Dinner at the castle? Whatever was she thinking?

Sighing to herself, she picked up the bag from the counter and took it upstairs.

Innis walked through to the cake shop kitchen to get on with his work. There were cakes to decorate with chocolate buttercream icing.

But a quick call to the castle's restaurant to ensure a table booking for two was needed first. A member of staff confirmed the booking. He put his phone away in his pocket. Word was bound to get through to his brothers, but he'd deal with that fallout later if necessary.

Washing his hands, he tried not to think about Elspeth. What was he thinking inviting her to dinner at the castle? He shook his head, mentally scolding himself for getting himself into a pickle. Finlay and Ean would tease him about wangling a date with the new girl. He could handle that. He was less sure that he could handle the attraction he felt for Elspeth when she had dinner with him. She was dining with him, wasn't she? He'd made that abundantly clear. Or maybe not.

Busying himself, he melted dark chocolate, then folded it into a bowl of softened butter mixed with icing sugar until the buttercream icing was ready to be put on the cakes. He used a hand spun turntable and a spatula to spread the icing smoothly on to the cakes. He'd barely finished one cake when Primrose popped into the kitchen.

'Did everything go okay with you and Elspeth?' she said, adding sprinkles to a plate of frosted cupcakes.

'Yes,' he said, concentrating on keeping the turntable spinning while he skilfully smoothed on the icing.

Primrose knew him well enough to sense that something was amiss. 'What went wrong?'

He didn't balk at her bluntness. She knew something was wrong.

Sighing wearily, he told her. It would be headline gossip soon anyway. Maybe if she told him he'd done the right thing, her sensibility would assuage his concerns.

'What a foolish and impulsive thing to do,' Primrose told him bluntly. 'Does Elspeth think she's going on a dinner date

with you tonight?’

‘Yes, no, maybe, I’m not sure.’

Primrose pursed her lips and shook her head at him, then carried the tray of cupcakes through to the front shop to continue serving the customers.

The tension in Innis caused his cake to wobble, and he had to start smoothing the icing again.

Any minute now, he thought to himself. Tick tock, tick—

Rosabel came bustling through to the kitchen. ‘You’re going on a romantic dinner date this evening with Elspeth? Impressing her with your family’s castle. What will her aunty think? I doubt she’ll approve of you pouncing on her niece when she’s only just arrived here.’

‘There will be no pouncing,’ he snapped at her.

‘Probably not, but it looks bad, Innis. Folk will assume you’ll be canoodling with Elspeth up at the castle.’

‘They can assume what they want,’ he said with a deep growl.

‘No, they can’t. Not as far as Elspeth’s reputation is concerned. They can think what they want about you. It’s that young woman’s trusting nature I’m worried about. She’s not used to our ways. She’s out of her depth until she settles in.’

Innis swallowed any further remarks. Deep down, he knew Rosabel and Primrose were right to react against his foolishness.

Rosabel hurried back through to the front shop.

No more was said of the situation.

Innis continued to decorate the cakes, bake more cakes and ice them too. But all the while he kept thinking about the gossip flaring up like wildfire around his night with Elspeth.

The cosy accommodation above the knitting shop felt homely, reminding Elspeth of the times she’d stayed there in the past.

Her parents always slept in the spare bedroom at the back, while Morven's bedroom was at the front with a view of the main street. Elspeth loved being tucked up for the night on the living room sofa, in a striped flannelette sheet and a quilt, in front of the fire, watching the flames flicker, determined to stay awake, but feeling her eyelids close and falling asleep. She remembered waking up happy in the mornings to the sound of breakfast being made in the kitchen just off the living room. Little had changed. The decor had been refreshed, but the cosy cream and pastel pink colour scheme was as comforting now as it had been back then. More so now. It was great to be here for the summer. But what would happen when she had to return to Glasgow? Nothing felt settled.

She shrugged off her doubts, determined not to waste her time there worrying about what ifs and maybes.

Putting the milk in the fridge, she noticed that it was filled with fresh salad items and vegetables, along with macaroni cheese pies, vegetable hot pot and baking potatoes.

The freezer was well-stocked, and the cupboards were likewise. Tins of Scotch broth, lentil, tomato and vegetable soups tempted her just looking at them. She hadn't eaten anything since a hasty breakfast.

Vintage pattern floral teacups, teapots and dinner plates were displayed on an old-fashioned dresser painted eggshell pink. The kitchen walls were rich cream, and the small table had a laminated top, and floral print cushions were tied with ribbons to the two wooden chairs.

Ceramic vases, with prints of flowers and butterflies, sat on a shelf, and were made locally from one of the crafts shops. She intended buying flowers for them, or picking some fresh from the garden at the back of the premises. It used to be a lovely garden and she recalled enjoying sunny days there playing happily.

Pulling the homemade curtains aside, she looked out the kitchen window at the back garden. Yes, there it was, the lush lawn, an apple tree, and flowers surrounded by bracken and hedging.

She was about to fill the kettle to make tea when she heard the shop's front doorbell tinkle.

'Hello, Elspeth,' a chirpy voice said entering the shop.

Elspeth hurried downstairs.

A young woman, very attractive, in her early thirties, wearing a ditsy print dress and hand knitted cardigan, smiled and walked up to the counter.

Was this her first official customer, Elspeth wondered.

'I'm Holly,' the woman said, introducing herself. 'I run the vintage fashion boutique with my sister, Skye. Morven told us you were taking over the knitting shop while she's away with Donall.'

There were no secrets in this community, Elspeth thought to herself.

'Pleased to meet you, Holly. I noticed your boutique. Is it new? I vaguely remember a fashion shop—'

Holly cut-in. 'We took it over recently when our mother retired. Skye and I love vintage clothes, so we decided to sell pre-loved ladies clothes, especially dresses, rather than high fashion.'

'I must come in for a browse.' Elspeth had every intention of doing this. Vintage fashion a couple of doors down? Try and stop her. She knew where some of her profits were going.

'Pop in anytime, even if we're in, but closed to customers. That's probably the best time, so we can chat — and gossip.'

Elspeth laughed. 'My aunt thrives on the local gossip.'

Holly gave her a knowing look. 'Speaking of gossip... was that Innis visiting you, bringing gifts?'

'It was.' Elspeth explained what had happened.

Holly swept her silky chestnut hair back from her pretty face, and her green eyes widened. 'Innis has invited you to have dinner with him at the castle? That was fast work.'

‘Not with him, just to go there and enjoy dinner at the castle this evening. He said there’s a party in the function suite.’

Holly shook her head. ‘Nope. He’s making a play for you.’

‘Nooo, I’m sure he’s only being welcoming. He knows my aunt. He probably promised to look out for me until I settled in.’

Holly gave her a disbelieving look. ‘Keep telling yourself that, but I’m not buying it. Many women from around here would love an invitation like this from the lone wolf.’

‘The lone wolf?’ said Elspeth.

‘You’ve seen those eyes of his.’

‘Eh, yes, I noticed they were—’

Holly cut-in. ‘Come to bed and don’t expect to leave until the dawn sort of eyes?’

Elspeth smiled and nodded. ‘But what does that have to do with a lone wolf?’

‘Innis doesn’t flirt and play around a lot. In fact, his dating history mainly centres on getting his heart fried by his ex-girlfriend three years ago when she cheated on him and then left the island to go home to the city.’

‘So he’s been a lone wolf type ever since,’ Elspeth surmised.

‘Yes, but maybe you’ve ignited a romantic spark in him and he’s hoping to enjoy your company.’

Elspeth giggled and pressed her hand against her chest. ‘Now I’m panicking. Maybe I should cancel dinner. Take a rain check?’

‘Dinner with Innis isn’t something you keep stashed away for a rainy day,’ Holly told her. ‘You cash in that invitation, put on a dress to impress and heels for dancing.’

‘I can manage two of those criteria. I’ll accept the invitation, and I have the shoes.’

‘Come with me. The perfect dress is in our shop window.’ She eyed Elspeth’s figure that was similar to her own. ‘It’ll fit you, and if it needs a couple of tucks, we’ve got time to alter it before you go to the ball, Cinderella.’

Elspeth laughed, and allowed Holly to scoop her out of the knitting shop and into the vintage fashion boutique next to Brodrick’s cafe bar.

‘What’s Brodrick’s story?’ Elspeth said to Holly as they went by.

Holly looked delighted and mischievous. ‘Well...’

CHAPTER THREE

Skye sat at her sewing machine, working on the seams of a vintage dress she was upcycling ready for sale. She paused and smiled when she saw Holly walk in with Elspeth.

‘This is my wee sister, Skye,’ Holly said, introducing them.

‘Pleased to meet,’ said Elspeth, glad to make new friends.

In her late twenties, Skye was marginally younger than Holly and Elspeth. Her bright blue eyes showed that she was happy to meet Elspeth. She wore her long, strawberry-blond hair in pleats pinned up with butterfly clasps in a messy coronet. Wisps accentuated her pale complexion and soft features. Skye and Holly were both quite beautiful, slender, slighter taller than Elspeth and had a fashionably eclectic sense of dress. Fashion was their passion.

The boutique was a converted cottage with the kitchen at the back. The kettle clicked off, and Skye stood up, revealing that she was wearing a maxi skirt from the seventies, ankle boots and a slouch jumper in shades of lilac.

‘I put the kettle on for tea. Would you like a cup?’ Skye offered Elspeth.

Did she ever. ‘Yes, I’d love a cup.’

Holly followed Skye through to the kitchen. ‘I was just telling Elspeth all the gossip about Brodrick.’

‘Rewind,’ Skye insisted. ‘I want to chat about it too.’

While the tea cups and spoons rattled in the kitchen, Elspeth took a moment to look around the boutique. Yes, some of her hard earned pennies were going to be indulged here. There were three dresses on display in the window, and she’d gladly wear any of them. They were classy but cute. Nothing too outlandish, even though they were obviously vintage from the forties and fifties. Personally, she drew the line at wearing

a sixties mini dress and white boots. But, never say never, she quickly reminded herself. This was the summer when she was going to try new things, like running off to the island and leaving the city behind. A geometric mini paled into insignificance compared to that venture.

She liked Skye's sewing machine. It was pale pink. Her own machine was white and functional. Maybe her aunt's penchant for pink was rubbing off on her.

Beside the sewing machine she noticed a half finished piece of knitting. The lilac tones indicated that it was something Skye was working on. Very neat stitches, she thought, wondering if Skye was a member of the knitting bee.

Chatter about biscuits and sweets being served with the tea sounded from the kitchen, and faded into the background as Elspeth realised that the weekly knitting bee evening was due the following night. Should she attempt to set it up?

Holly carried the tea tray through and set it down on the shop counter.

'Help yourself to milk, sugar and biscuits,' said Skye. 'And a sweetie. Holly bought chocolates from Innis's shop and they are delish.'

Elspeth poured milk into her tea and took a sip, needing a cuppa to refresh her senses. Then she popped a dark chocolate truffle into her mouth and nodded as the flavours hit her.

'They're tasty, aren't they?' said Skye, selecting a white chocolate topped with a half cherry.

'Mmmm,' Elspeth agreed.

Holly sipped her tea, and settled down to stir up trouble with the latest gossip. 'Innis has invited Elspeth to have dinner at the castle tonight.'

Skye's eyes widened. 'Nooo?'

Holly nodded and confided further. 'And I think we were right about Brodrick watching Elspeth arrive at the knitting shop.'

‘Brodrick was definitely watching you,’ Skye told Elspeth. ‘We could see him out the window.’

‘I was telling Elspeth that he was watching her like a hawk,’ Holly explained. ‘So you’ve got Innis and Brodrick interested in you, Elspeth.’

Elspeth shook her head and sipped her tea.

‘I wouldn’t know which one to choose if I was in your situation,’ Skye told Elspeth.

‘Don’t tell fibs,’ Holly scolded her. ‘You know fine you’d choose Innis.’

Skye sighed wearily and didn’t argue. ‘Chance would be a fine thing. Innis doesn’t even notice me.’

‘I had to stop Skye from making a complete fool of herself recently when she got a bit tipsy on ginger wine with whisky in it,’ Holly told Elspeth. ‘She was going to put on a yellow and pink psychedelic, sixties mini dress and boots, and waltz into his cake shop to buy truffles.’

Elspeth laughed.

‘Innis still wouldn’t have noticed me anyway.’ Skye sounded huffy. ‘He’d have continued smoothing icing on his fancy cakes without blinking.’

‘You can see why it’s such a big deal that Innis has asked you to have dinner,’ said Holly.

Elspeth nodded, taking this in.

Holly stood up and went over to the three dresses on mannequins in the window display. ‘That’s why you need a classy but hot dress to wear. This red one gets my vote, but you’ll know when you try it on whether you like it.’

Elspeth admired the three dresses in the window. ‘They’re all lovely.’

‘Come on, try it on,’ Holly encouraged her.

Elspeth downed the rest of her tea.

Skye helped Holly lift the mannequin out of the window and set it down so they could take the dress off.

‘Here you go,’ Holly said, handing over the classy little red dress that was a fifties wrap with cap sleeves. ‘The changing room is behind that curtain.’

‘Thanks.’ Elspeth stepped into the small changing room that had a full-length mirror and put the dress on. Being a wrap, she was able to adjust the waist to fit her. The colour was sensational. Red wasn’t in her current wardrobe. Neutrals, white and pastels were more her style. She smoothed her hands down the silky jersey fabric and looked at herself in the mirror. This could be a winner, if she had the nerve to wear it.

She pulled the curtain aside and padded into the main shop area wearing the dress and her socks.

‘Oh, yes,’ Holly said, nodding enthusiastically.

‘You look great, Elspeth,’ Skye told her, checking the fit of the dress. ‘The colour is amazing on you.’

‘You need heels to get the full effect.’ Holly reached up to a shelf and selected a pair of black shoes.

Elspeth stepped into them and looked at herself again in the mirror. ‘I do like this dress, but...’ Was it too sensational for dinner?

‘Try the blue one on,’ Holly suggested.

‘But I think the red hot one is the look you need for tonight at the castle,’ said Skye.

Holly was lifting the mannequin with the lovely blue dress out of the display when she noticed Innis heading towards his car that was parked outside the cake shop.

‘There’s Innis!’ Holly said, keeping her voice down as if he could hear her, which he couldn’t.

The three of them looked as Innis put something into his car, and then as he was heading back into the cake shop, he glanced at the boutique.

‘He’s looking over here!’ Elspeth said, keeping her voice down too. She stepped back from the window so he couldn’t see her.

Holly surmised what he was up to. ‘I bet he knows that Elspeth is in here and he’s trying to nosy in to see what she’s up to.’

Skye nodded.

Elspeth found herself agreeing with them. ‘What should I do? Hide in the changing room?’

‘Don’t you dare hide,’ said Skye, determined to cause mischief. Grabbing a floppy hat from a hook, she put it on and stepped into the front window display.

Holly tried to pull her back. ‘No, Skye, no. Get out of the window. Innis will see you.’

Skye shrugged free from Holly, plonked the hat on, using the brim to hide her face, and struck a model-like pose beside the only remaining mannequin that was wearing a classic, ditsy floral tea dress.

‘Here he comes again,’ Elspeth said, seeing Innis head back out to his car carrying another box. He put it in the boot of the car, and as he turned, he glanced at the boutique window again. And blinked. Sunlight shining on the window obscured his view.

Elspeth put her hand over her mouth to stop from guffawing. Skye looked like a vintage mannequin, especially with that pose.

‘He’s hesitating,’ Holly hissed. ‘He’s not sure whether it’s a mannequin or not.’

Skye didn’t budge, didn’t breathe until he’d disappeared into his cake shop again.

‘Phew!’ Skye let out a huge sigh. ‘Did you see his face? I didn’t think I’d be able to stop myself from giggling.’

Elspeth laughed. ‘Is this a normal day at your boutique?’

‘We’ve got to have some fun,’ Skye told her. ‘Come on, grab a hat and stand beside me.’ She lifted the remaining mannequin out of the window and dumped it on the floor to make room.

‘No!’ Elspeth exclaimed, and yet feeling an impish urge to go for it. The confused and displeased expression on Innis’ face brought out the mischief in her.

‘Holly, quick, step in before he comes back out of his shop,’ Skye insisted. ‘He’s going to have another look.’

Holly giggled and joined in the ruse. She tilted the brim of a hat she’d grabbed and struck a pose. Her dress was an ideal fit for the window display.

Elspeth gasped.

Skye beckoned Elspeth urgently to join them. ‘Hurry up. Get in the window!’

Elspeth grabbed a wide-brim hat, stuck it on and stepped into the window beside Holly. The three of them posed and stood motionless seconds before Innis headed out to his car yet again, with another box.

Elspeth’s heart pounded from a mixture of mischief and excitement and the thought of the consequences if she got caught playing a prank on him.

‘Oh, no, he’s coming over,’ Skye whispered, trying not to move her lips.

‘Go to red alert,’ Holly mumbled.

Elspeth had no idea what that was, but it was obvious that the two fun-loving sisters had done things like this before.

‘Wait!’ said Skye. ‘Brodrick’s sussed what we’re doing. He’s waving Innis over to his cafe bar.’

‘Quick, get out of the window while Innis is distracted,’ Holly said, bundling Elspeth out of the display, along with Skye.

‘Phew, that was close!’ Skye sighed, waved to Brodrick and mouthed to him — *thank you*.

Brodrick nodded surreptitiously, spoke to Innis for a couple of minutes, and then went back into his cafe bar.

Innis glanced at the empty window of the boutique, frowned, and then headed into his cake shop.

Giggling, Holly and Skye put other dresses on the three mannequins.

Elspeth took the red dress off in the changing room. 'I won't wear the red dress tonight. I don't want Innis to have his suspicions confirmed that you'd involved me in your mischief.'

'Try the blue one.' Skye handed it into her.

Elspeth put it on and emerged happy wearing it. 'I love this.'

Holly and Skye agreed that it suited her.

'The red dress would look like I was trying too hard to impress Innis,' said Elspeth. 'The blue feels nice.' She ran her hands down the soft, light blue fabric.

'Borrow the blue dress,' Skye told Elspeth. 'The dresses are all second-hand, and I was intending altering the darts on it, so it'll be restyled and washed before going on sale anyway.'

'Are you sure?' Elspeth asked her.

'Yes,' said Skye.

'Thanks, I'll do that.' Elspeth took the blue dress off and Skye put it in a bag for her.

Elspeth got changed back into her own clothes. 'But I still want to buy the red dress. I love it.' She emerged from the changing room. 'It's such a bargain.'

'With a discount,' said Skye. 'All knitting bee members receive a ten percent discount.'

'My aunt told me the same applies to sales in the knitting shop,' said Elspeth. 'Are either of you members of the bee?'

'We both are.' Skye added the red dress to the shopping bag.

‘The next knitting bee night is due tomorrow evening,’ said Elspeth. ‘I’m not sure if I should try to organise it in time.’

‘We’ll help if you want to go ahead with it,’ Holly promised her.

‘Yes,’ said Skye. ‘We’ll pop round and show you how to set up the tables and chairs.’

‘Okay,’ Elspeth agreed. ‘Can you let the other members know it’ll be on?’

‘We’ll tell them,’ Skye assured her.

Elspeth noticed Brodrick leave his cafe bar and walk down the main street. ‘So that’s Brodrick, huh?’

Holly continued to dress the mannequins. ‘He’s handsome, isn’t he?’

‘He is,’ Elspeth mused, wondering if it was true that he’d been watching her. Then she thought about Innis. ‘I suppose you’ve known Innis since you went to school together.’

‘No, we went to school in Dundee,’ Holly told her.

‘Dundee?’

‘Our parents are from the island, and I was born here, but they left when I was a toddler and moved to Dundee when our dad got promoted in his work,’ Holly explained. ‘My wee sister was born on the isle of Skye.’

‘Ah.’ Elspeth realised the naming connection.

‘It was only a short stay on Skye, again due to dad’s work,’ Holly continued. ‘Then we moved back to Dundee and that’s where we went to school.’

‘But now you’re back here.’ Elspeth prompted them for more details.

Skye nodded. ‘When we left home to train in fashion and design, our parents decided that with an empty nest, they’d move home to their roots on the island. Mum inherited this shop from our grandmother, and now we’ve taken it on. Dad took early retirement and mum wants to enjoy more time with him. So everybody’s happy.’

‘You trained in fashion and design?’ Elspeth sounded interested.

‘Yes, on the mainland,’ said Skye. ‘We worked in fashion, taking part in fashion shows in the cities. But every time I stepped off the ferry to visit our parents on the island, I felt like I was coming home.’ She shrugged. ‘I know I was born on Skye, but this island suits me. I love it here.’

Holly finished dressing the display and walked over to join them at the counter. ‘A lot of the wee shops here struggled to make a good profit around the time when mum owned this shop. But then everything started to change, to pick up. Local businesses were bolstered by online sales. Our shop sells more online than ever.’

‘My aunt says that too about her knitting shop,’ said Elspeth.

‘I know you’ll probably go back to Glasgow when your aunt comes home, but keep your options open,’ Holly advised Elspeth.

‘Including when it comes to men and romance,’ Skye chipped-in.

‘The latter has never worked out well for me,’ said Elspeth. ‘And I’m feeling trouble brewing over having dinner with Innis tonight.’

‘Chalk it up to experience. A night to remember,’ Holly told Elspeth.

Skye looked thoughtful. ‘I don’t think that Innis would be easy to date anyway. I want a relationship like my parents have. They love each other, and they’re best friends. Dad is happy to pop in and sort my sewing machine. He’s interested in what I’m interested in. He understands why I’m happy when a delivery of vintage dresses or a new roll of fabric arrives at the shop.’ She shook her head. ‘I can’t see Innis taking an interest like that.’

Holly nodded. ‘But Brodrick would. He’s handsome and successful, but he makes time to chat, to wave to us. Innis is

more like a handsome stranger. He's wrapped up in his own world, with his brothers and the castle.'

Elspeth looked out the window and saw the tall, strong figure of Brodrick heading back down the main street to his cafe bar carrying a bag of whatever he'd bought. Something deep in her heart stirred when she looked at him. Wrapped in her thoughts, she jolted when her phone rang.

'Aunty Morven!'

'I'm not checking up on you, Elspeth. I just wanted to make sure you'd arrived safely.'

'I have. The knitting shop and everything is wonderful.'

'That's great. I won't be pestering you with calls,' Morven assured her. 'I want you to be free to have fun.'

'Where are you?' Elspeth asked her. 'Are you in Glasgow?'

'No, we're in a lovely hotel in Perth. We're going to see a show at a theatre tonight. We plan to stay in Perth and tour the wee towns in the area. Donall has friends in Perthshire and he's taking me to meet them.'

'You sound so happy.'

'Oh, I am, but I won't be bothering you with my gadding about,' Morven told her.

'No,' Elspeth cut-in. 'I want to know all about your tour.'

'You do?'

'Yes, I think it's a wonderful idea, and I'll live it vicariously through you. I may even do something similar sometime.'

Morven sounded delighted that Elspeth wanted to keep in touch with her during her holiday. 'Okay, I'll keep you updated.'

'I want lots of pictures. Including ones from the show tonight,' Elspeth insisted.

Morven laughed. 'I'll do that. What are you up to?'

Elspeth took a deep breath. 'Well...I've borrowed a dress from Holly and Skye's boutique because Innis has invited to

have dinner this evening at the castle.’

There was a pause as Morven took this in. ‘You’re going on a dinner date with Innis?’

Elspeth explained the details of what happened. ‘So I don’t know where I stand, but I’ve got the dress and I’m going to the castle later on.’

‘Are Holly and that rascal Skye involving you in their mischief?’ Morven asked lightly, and loud enough for them to overhear.

‘Of course we are,’ Skye called to Morven.

Elspeth put the phone on speaker and told her aunt about their antics in the boutique window.

‘You’re a trio of mischief makers,’ Morven scolded them jokingly.

‘And Brodrick has his eye on Elspeth too,’ Skye revealed.

‘I want all the details of what you’re up to as well,’ Morven told Elspeth.

The light-hearted conversation ended with Morven wishing Elspeth good luck for her dinner date.

Elspeth put her phone in her bag. ‘What should I say to Innis if he confronts me about what we did in the window?’

‘Tell him he must’ve been mistaken,’ Skye told her. ‘The sun was glinting off the window. He couldn’t get a clear view. Okay, so he suspects it was us, but he was frowning, squinting against the sunlight.’

Holly agreed. ‘Brush it aside, and throw a question back at him. Say you saw him talking to Brodrick. That Brodrick waved him over. Ask him if there was something wrong. Put the focus on him.’

‘It’ll throw him for a loop, especially if you mention Brodrick,’ Skye said to Elspeth.

‘Be prepared for Innis to be jealous,’ Holly added. ‘He’ll ask you if you’re interested in Brodrick.’

‘What should I tell him?’ said Elspeth.

‘The truth,’ Skye advised her.

Elspeth’s heart jolted again. What was the truth? She wasn’t sure. The only thing she knew for sure was that her plans for a quiet evening settling into the knitting shop were cast to the wind.

CHAPTER FOUR

The glacé fruit cupcake became Elspeth's snack while she unloaded her suitcases and bags from her car and carried them into the knitting shop. The enticement dangling at the end of this task was a cup of tea and the chocolate scone, with butter or jam. She wasn't sure as she'd never tasted a chocolate scone before.

Traipsing back and forth several times, she wondered if she was being watched and tried to make short work of it.

With her suitcases upstairs, she tackled her unpacking, hanging up her clothes in the wardrobe and tucking them into a chest of drawers.

She sighed. 'All done.'

Making a cup of tea, she sat at the kitchen table eating the chocolate scone with butter. The rich chocolate flavour didn't need enhanced with strawberry or raspberry jam. Innis had perfected the taste.

Those eyes of his, gazing at her from that handsome, unsmiling face, refused to be brushed aside, and drifted through her thoughts as she'd been unloading her car. She almost wished she'd taken that rain check for dinner. But an evening relaxing here, knitting by the fire, would have to wait. She'd a dinner date looming. Every time she thought about it, waves of excitement washed through her.

Downstairs in the shop she put the small stock of yarn she'd brought with her on the counter. Standing with her hands on her hips, she took a look around at the beautiful range of yarn in the shop. The colours were gorgeous and included new selections for the summer season — light turquoise and sky blues, pastel pinks with pops of fresh greens, sunshine yellows and strawberry and cream tones that she loved. The layout of the shop made the most of every nook and cranny. Morven's

shop had a great selection. Shelves on two walls displayed an array of colours and textures of yarn, from chunky, Aran and double knit to local, hand spun specialised skeins.

Behind the counter were cupboards filled with extra stock and haberdashery items including knitting needles, crochet hooks, patterns galore, darning mushrooms, sewing needles, scissors and thread.

Elsbeth stood behind the counter and gazed out at the view of the main street and harbour beyond — and the blue–green sea.

While she familiarised herself with the shop’s computer and checked for any online orders, she wondered what to say on the news updates about taking over while Morven was away. They’d agreed that she’d write an update informing customers of the temporary changeover. With a few ideas in mind, Elspeth typed a couple of sentences introducing herself and assuring customers that the shop would continue as usual.

The front door opening made her look up to see Brodrick walk in. His height, broad shoulders and manliness made the premises suddenly feel smaller.

‘I can see you’re busy,’ he began, ‘but I wanted to welcome you to the island and to introduce myself.’

‘Brodrick,’ she said, smiling.

‘Ah, so you know my name.’ His mind surmised that Holly and Skye would’ve given her the details about him and his cafe bar. Maybe Innis had mentioned him too.

‘I’m pleased to meet you.’ Elspeth stepped from behind the counter and extended her hand.

His strong hand accepted hers.

She steeled herself, expecting a crushing grip, a man not knowing his own strength, but instead she felt a firm, well–measured grasp.

‘I’m pleased to meet you too, Elspeth.’

His grasp lingered a second longer than her heart was ready for. And she wasn’t ready for Brodrick, or the effect he had on

her.

She had to be extra tired or just off kilter from travelling, because a feeling of excitement and warmth washed over her. The effect was so different to what she'd felt standing beside Innis. She recalled what Skye had said, comparing the two men.

His stunning green eyes were looking at her, and under the shop's lighting his dark russet hair shone like liquid copper. His handsomeness wore more slowly on her senses, but the effect was deeper. Something she hadn't experienced in a long time, if ever.

From the pocket of his jacket he handed her a voucher. 'Drop by for a meal in the cafe bar. It's on the house.'

Elsbeth accepted the voucher. 'That's very kind of you.'

'You probably won't need to use it, but it's just in case I'm out and the staff aren't familiar with you,' he explained.

She smiled up at him, thinking that he wanted to say more, but was keeping his comments to himself.

'Have you owned the cafe bar long?' It was the first thing she could think of to keep the conversation going. Maybe then she'd find out what he wanted to say.

'Several years. I opened it when I was in my mid-twenties, buying over the premises from the previous owners when they retired. I'm from the island and always wanted to own a business like this.'

'I'll pop in soon.'

'The menus are on the window, or you can check out my website.'

The air felt electric she thought — a spark of attraction ignited between them. She sensed it. She wondered if he did too.

He smiled and her heart jolted. What a sexy smile in a handsome but friendly face.

‘I’ll see you soon, then,’ he said, as if he was about to leave. ‘Come in tomorrow for lunch or dinner if you want.’

‘That would be handy. I’m holding the knitting bee tomorrow night, so I’ll probably pop in for a meal to save time cooking for myself.’

His smile lit up his face, and his gorgeous green eyes looked at her. ‘Great, I’ll see you then.’

Smiling again, he headed out, leaving behind him a feeling that intrigued and excited her.

She checked the time, realised she needed to shower and start getting ready for her night at the castle, locked the shop door and hurried upstairs.

Stepping into a pair of neutral tone heels that complemented her blue dress, she put on her cream wool coat, picked up her bag and headed downstairs. She’d washed her hair, dried it smooth and wore it down around her shoulders. Her makeup was subtle, but she wore her favourite lipstick and played up her eyes with mascara.

Locking up the shop, she got into her car and drove off along the main street beside the harbour and headed towards the castle. The evening glow reflected off the calm sea, and the cafes, bars and restaurants were alive with customers coming and going. The air had a buzz to it.

Elsbeth continued driving, remembering the route, though she’d never driven it herself. Her parents always drove, but the landscape hadn’t changed, and thoughts of the past came flooding back — thoughts of sunny days, cheerful times, happy memories.

A winding road wound its way into the forest, and at times the only light shone from the car’s headlights. She felt as if she was driving through a picture book fairytale. A half moon hung in the dark sky, and there were glimpses of thistle loch glistening through the trees. It was magically beautiful.

This island had always been safe, and felt safe. Only the ripples of anticipation of a night at the castle disturbed her

calm.

Everything was fine until she came to a fork in the road and noticed that the signpost had been nudged askew. The two directions indicated on the sign weren't clear. This part of the road was unfamiliar, perhaps an extra route through the forest.

But which one led to the castle? She wasn't sure.

She pulled the car over on to a grassy verge, got out and looked around her, searching for any hint of the castle. Nothing. No turrets, no other cars heading there.

It was so quiet she could hear the murmur of the sea in the distance behind her.

Okay, she thought. If the sea was that way, she needed to head in the other direction. Taking a calculated guess, she got into her car and drove on. It felt like a small adventure, and the scent from the trees filled the air.

If this was the wrong direction, she thought, she'd double-back and head the other way. It was barely seven o'clock. She wasn't late, not yet. Dinner was seven to seven-thirty.

As she drove on, she saw a glimpse of a turret through the trees. Bolstered by this, she continued on her way until the castle entrance was in view.

Trees overarched the ornate iron gates that were open wide to allow guests to drive in.

The gardens were more like a park, with lush lawns, flower beds and greenery extending into the trees. The castle looked majestic, a dark silhouette against the background of trees, but the windows were aglow with lights.

She felt excited rather than nervous, thrilled to be back at the castle. She'd always loved the romance of it, even though the dark stone grandeur could look ominous on rain soaked days. But even on rainy summer days she'd felt that it was magical, a fairytale castle where you could dream of wondrous things.

The car park was quite busy, but she parked near the entrance, checked her makeup and hair in the mirror, and

stepped out into the night. The only thing that was calm was the air. Her heartbeat increased in anticipation of walking into the castle. The large front doors to the entrance were open wide, and the glow from the lights shone out.

She paused to take a few minutes to stand outside and gaze up at the stars twinkling in the clearest night sky she'd seen in years.

The wee girl she was from years gone by would've loved a night like this. The woman she'd become hoped she'd enjoy it too, even though she was unsure what Innis' invitation included. Did it even include him? Or was she there to dine on her own, with merely a nod from him? If that was the case, she'd have dinner and maybe join in the dancing.

Come on, she urged herself. You could be sitting in a flat in Glasgow watching television this evening. The night ahead held so much more promise.

Finlay strode over to where the solitary figure of Innis stood near the roaring log fire at the far end of the castle's function room. Innis was kilted and wearing a black waistcoat with his white shirt. It emphasised his broad shoulders and lean torso, unintentionally attracting appreciative glances from some of the guests. Innis was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice.

Tables circled the dance floor. The castle's hotel guests and those invited locally, were starting to be served dinner — to sample the new season's summer menus.

Innis gazed into the flames, thinking what he'd say to Elspeth when she arrived. It was just after seven. She wasn't late. But he was anxious to see her. A table was reserved for them at the side of the dance floor, set with white linen and silverware.

No one dared approach the wolf standing alone, steeped in his own thoughts — except his brother, Finlay, the future laird of the castle.

With his shock of thick blond hair, classically handsome features, light aquamarine blue eyes, and a stature matching that of Innis, Finlay looked like a film star, ready to step on to the set of a Scottish Highland movie. His kilt was the same black and dark grey tartan that Innis wore, but Finlay's white shirt was buttoned up, topped with a black tie, waistcoat and jacket. Around his waist hung a silver and black sporran. A silver-handled Skean Dhu blade was tucked into the outside of his right, knee-length dark sock. Flashes matching his kilt were in the top folds of his socks, and he wore ghillie brogues.

Finlay always dressed well, particularly for special evenings like this — the celebration of the new season's menus. Local restaurant, bar and cafe owners or farmers supplying goods to the castle, were always invited to partake of the new fayre. Businesses supported each other rather than thwarted each other's efforts. It had long been the way of things on the island.

'Where's your dinner date?' Finlay said, eager to meet Elspeth.

'She hasn't arrived yet,' Innis told him.

Finlay blinked. 'What do you mean? You're here. Didn't you bring her with you?'

'No, she's driving up in her own car.'

'Why would she do that? Is she the independent type?'

Innis looked awkward. 'I didn't offer to drive her to the castle.'

Finlay sunk his brother with a disdainful look. 'You've let a newcomer, a young woman, drive through the forest at night on her own?'

'Elspeth is familiar with the lay of the land. She visited her aunt plenty of times when she was a young girl in the past,' Innis said defensively.

Finlay ran an agitated hand through his blond hair, pushing it back from his troubled brow. 'I've just been informed that the signpost at the fork has been hit, knocked askew. It won't be sorted until the morning. She won't know what direction to

take. She'll have to best guess it.' He shook his head at his brother's foolhardiness. 'What time was she due to arrive?'

'Between seven and half seven.' Innis remained outwardly calm while mentally kicking himself. He should've offered to give her a lift to the castle, but he was worried it would look like a proper date. And besides, at the end of the evening she'd head back to the knitting shop and he lived in private quarters at the castle, as did his brothers. Yes, he could've driven her home, but it seemed unnecessary when she had her own car and knew where the castle was.

Finlay checked the time. 'I'm going to look for her.'

'I'll go,' said Innis.

'No, if she arrives at the castle she'll expect to see you. Does she know anyone else here?'

'I don't think so. She's become friends with Holly and Skye, but they're not on tonight's guest list. But I think she may recognise Brodrick.' Innis hadn't seen the cafe bar owner yet, but he was always invited to attend these evenings. And Brodrick had called him over outside the cafe bar earlier in the day to tell him he'd be there.

'What's her phone number?' Finlay asked, taking charge.

'I don't know.' Innis' tone showed how badly he felt about the situation.

Finlay sunk him with a look. 'Do you know anyone that may have her number?'

Innis shook his head. Then he sighed. 'Morven, but I don't want to alert her unnecessarily.'

Finlay's patience was wearing thin. 'Wait here. I'll drive to the fork and see if she's lost her way. If she takes the wrong route into the forest, she could end up in the heart of it. It's not a place for a young woman to be at night, especially as she's a city type. She could do something foolhardy, though she'd have to really extend that error to beat you this evening, Innis.'

With that blunt parting shot, Finlay stormed out of the function room and into the night.

Innis stood strong, trying not to look like the wayward brother who'd caused trouble before their night had barely started.

Moments later, the angry roar of his Finlay's car driving off could be heard above the convivial chatter.

Ean came running down the stairs, kilt and sporran swinging in his rush to help Finlay with the situation, taking over to welcome guests and oversee the meals. Tall, lean and fit, he jumped the pleated red and gold cord at the bottom of the sweeping staircase that signalled this part of the castle was private.

Finlay had made a quick call to Ean about the predicament.

Slowing his pace, Ean walked into the function room calmly without altering the watermark of the cheerful atmosphere.

Meanwhile, Elspeth had handed her coat in to the cloakroom and been tempted to wander down one of the castle's corridors off the reception area. With time on her hands, she wanted to take a peek at the grand sitting room where she remembered the beautiful oil paintings in ornate frames hanging on the walls.

No one was in this part of the corridor, and she walked down the plush, dark tartan carpeted hall and peered in. Yes, there it was, just as she remembered. Lamps gave a soft glow to the traditional decor and she could see that the paintings were still hung around the walls, depicting landscapes, seascapes and views of the island.

Stepping away, she headed back down the corridor. Everything about the castle's decor was plush and traditionally stylish. The hallways had tartan carpets, white and beige walls, oak beams and various wood furnishings, and chandelier lighting along with lovely table lamps. Paintings and mirrors hung on the walls in strategic places, creating reflected light and artistic interest to the castle's interior.

Further along the reception area's hallway she saw a flight of stairs sweeping upwards to the first floor. It was corded off. This was the private part of the castle she recalled. She'd often wondered what was up there, what the rooms were like, imagining when she was little that they were vast and filled with luxury.

On the wall beside the staircase was something new — a framed array of photographs of the castle's laird, his wife and their three grown up sons. She stood there and gazed at the faces of Finlay, Innis and Ean. All handsome men. Even in his mature years, the laird was a handsome man who would've given his sons a run for their money in the looks stakes when he was their age. His wife was very beautiful, so it was no wonder that their sons were all heartbreakers.

Her gaze focussed on Innis. Those eyes of his were fascinating and yet...having the chance to study him like this, she saw a faraway look in his eyes, as if something was missing in his life. Shrugging off the feeling, she gazed at Finlay with his movie star looks, a fair match for his father. Ean and his elegant features, chestnut hair and emerald eyes, like those of his mother, had an artistic air.

An antique grandfather clock struck half past the hour. Seven-thirty. Time to go.

The function room doors nearby were wide open, and she could hear the chatter of the guests. She wasn't one for making entrances, preferring to merge with the crowd, but something told her the moment she stood at the open doorway of the large room where guests were seated, a lot of eyes were going to be on her.

She was confident that her blue dress suited her and she felt all dressed up for the special evening ahead, without feeling overdressed. But that didn't stop her sensing she was about to step into the spotlight — the newcomer dining with Innis was bound to attract attention.

Brodrick drove after Finlay. He'd only just arrived at the castle. Ean told him what had happened and that Elspeth could

be in trouble.

If he'd known that she was attending the dinner at the castle, he'd have driven her there himself. He muttered angrily about Innis' actions, then pushed those disturbing thoughts aside to focus on searching for Elspeth. Hopefully, she'd taken the right route and was already at castle. He didn't have her number so he couldn't call her.

Within a few minutes his stylish dark silver car caught up with Finlay's expensive white car at the fork in the road. He signalled with his headlights.

Finlay pulled over and got out of his car, so too did Brodrick.

'I heard what happened,' Brodrick told him. He wore an expensive dark suit, white shirt and silk tie. The bespoke suit was made by a local tailor.

Finlay indicated towards the sign. 'One of the farm vehicles knocked it by accident. I didn't expect any newcomers would be driving up here this evening, and planned to have it righted in the morning.'

Brodrick looked around. 'Elspeth used to know this area, but the extra route is fairly new.'

'What's she like? Is she the sensible sort if she gets lost?'

'Elspeth is bright, intelligent, friendly and warm hearted.'

Finlay considered what to do. 'If I take one road and you take the other, we've a better chance of finding her soon. Head as far as the forget-me-not waterfall, then turn back if you can't see her. I'll take the thistle loch route, then meet you back here.'

As Brodrick nodded, a call came through for Finlay. 'It's Innis,' he said to Brodrick, and then spoke to his brother. 'Is she there yet?'

'Yes, she's fine,' Innis assured him. 'I haven't told her about the fuss.'

'Don't,' Finlay insisted. 'She doesn't need her evening ruined. She can find out later if necessary. She's safe, that's all

that matters.’

‘Where are you?’ said Innis.

‘I’m at the fork in the road with Brodrick. We’ll be heading back.’

Without any further accusations of blame, they ended the call.

‘She’s okay?’ Brodrick sound relieved.

‘Yes, thank goodness.’ He glanced at the signpost. ‘Want to give me a hand to straighten this before we go?’

Brodrick nodded and put his shoulder against the heavy post and together they used their raw strength to pull it upright so that it pointed in the correct direction.

‘Thanks for your help, Brodrick.’

Nodding firmly, Brodrick got into his car, as did Finlay, and they drove back to the castle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Elsbeth and Innis sat at their table. He'd escorted her there having seen her walk into the function room. She looked beautiful in her blue dress, he thought, and noticed that quite a few guests were surreptitiously having a look at them.

'Our chefs have created a new menu for the summer season,' Innis explained, handing her a menu to peruse. 'It's customary to invite the owners of the local eateries, or other guests, to join us for the tasting evening.'

She studied the menu. 'Everything looks so tempting.' She'd already studied Innis and although he was tempting too, she was determined to stay calm and not let her wayward emotions run away with her. Innis had greeted her as if she was a guest. There was no hint that this was in any way a date, or the prelude to such. Under the circumstances it was probably best. She'd only just arrived and needed to settle in before being swept away with romantic notions.

'Excuse me.' Innis suddenly stood up. He'd seen Finlay and Brodrick walk into the function room.

Elsbeth saw Brodrick and recognised Finlay from his photograph. They looked like two men with a purpose as they strode across the empty dance floor, taking the racing line to her table.

Innis cut them off before they reached her, but she could see their tense expressions and hear the undertones of acid comments being bitten back.

Finlay's intense blue eyes glanced over at Elsbeth, his expression softening, and then he looked away.

'She doesn't know what happened,' Innis assured him.

'Fine, leave it like that.' Finlay eased the tension in his broad shoulders and straightened his cropped jacket.

‘Introduce us.’

Innis hesitated and then forced himself to lead them over to her table.

Brodrick smiled at her as he approached. She smiled back at him.

Something churned under the surface of the men’s polite manner. They looked like men at loggerheads. She’d seen that many times at the accountancy firm with difficult clients dealing with difficult staff.

‘Elsbeth, I’d like to introduce you to my older brother, Finlay, the castle’s future laird.’

Finlay was the epitome of politeness, genuine she thought, feeling no animosity towards her, or Brodrick. That could only mean one thing — the swords drawn were between Finlay and Innis.

He waited for Elspeth to extend her hand first before shaking it in a measured grasp.

Classy, Elspeth thought to herself. Very classy, just like Finlay himself. There was a strong resemblance to Hollywood actors she’d seen in interviews, promoting their movies. Finlay had both the looks and the presence. Star quality.

‘It’s lovely to meet you,’ she said to Finlay.

‘I hope you’re enjoying your evening at the castle.’ Finlay’s tone was rich and assured.

‘Yes, thank you.’ She smiled up at him.

Elsbeth nodded acknowledgement to Brodrick. ‘Hello, Brodrick.’

‘Good evening, Elspeth,’ Brodrick replied, feeling a warmth in his heart seeing her there.

‘We were about to order dinner,’ Innis told them, a less than subtle hint for them to go.

They both took the hint.

‘Perhaps you’d promise me a dance later,’ Brodrick boldly said to her before leaving.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Enjoy your meal.’ Finlay smiled and then walked away to where Ean was chatting to guests on the far side of the room.

Brodrick joined another three eatery owners at a table nearby. A local restaurant owner and two bar owners welcomed him. From their murmured words and gestures, Brodrick was explaining where he’d been.

‘Is there something I should know about?’ Elspeth asked Innis outright.

‘No,’ he assured her.

Elspeth wasn’t assured in the slightest, but didn’t push it further. The gossip would spin around. She’d find out at the knitting bee night where gossip galore was guaranteed.

Amid polite chatter, their meal was served. Elspeth ordered the salmon en croute and salad. Innis opted for grilled salmon with whisky sauce and roast vegetables.

Over dinner, they talked about the castle — and the past.

‘I remember thinking it looked so romantic, yet dark and dramatic, even on sunny days when we visited the castle grounds,’ Elspeth recalled.

Innis nodded. ‘It was and it is.’

‘So you live in the castle?’ she prompted him.

‘I do. We all have private quarters on the upper floor and turrets.’

‘I always wondered if anyone lived in those spiral turrets. I couldn’t imagine what the rooms would look like. All twisty–turny, like a story book, with mysterious nooks hidden in the walls.’

Innis’ firm lips smiled wryly. ‘Not quite so dramatic, though the corkscrew stairwells take a bit of navigating, especially if you’re adding new furniture.’

‘I suppose it ensures that the original furnishings are kept intact.’

‘It does. Luckily I don’t dwell in any of the turrets. My quarters are a substantial suite on one level under a turret.’

‘The one with the long windows that overlooks the front of the castle?’

‘Yes. On the right. Finlay’s quarters are on the left and include access to an upper turret.’

‘As befits the laird in waiting,’ she suggested lightly.

Innis nodded and continued to eat his dinner.

Elsbeth ate her delicious salmon encased in puff pastry.

‘Ean lives at the back of the castle in a secluded suite. My parents commandeer everything else, including the second turret,’ he added.

Elsbeth looked thoughtful. ‘I don’t imagine I’d ever feel at home living in a castle.’

Those amber eyes glanced at her across the table, glinting under the lights of the chandeliers that illuminated the function room.

‘Not that I’m assuming this would ever be an option given to me,’ she explained quickly, feeling a blush burn across her cheeks.

Innis left her simmering. Was he offended? Disappointed? She didn’t know. He was a hard man to read, but this in itself said a lot about him. He didn’t make any effort to assuage her offhand but innocent remark.

One of the chefs approached their table, nodded politely to Elspeth, excusing himself for interrupting, and then addressed Innis.

‘Is everything to you liking?’ the man asked him.

‘It is. The salmon is superb,’ Innis confirmed, and then glanced at Elspeth for her input.

‘The meal is perfect,’ she remarked with a smile.

Another member of staff cleared their plates when they were finished, and their puddings were served.

Elsbeth's raspberry trifle with its generous layers of cake, custard, fruit and topping of whipped cream was served in a glass and sprinkled with chocolate flakes.

Innis looked pleased with his cloutie dumpling, made with raisins, sultanas, cinnamon, mixed spices and dark treacle, and served with custard.

'The puddings cater for all weathers,' he explained. 'Warm summer days are perfect for ice cream and trifle desserts, but we like to have a hearty option for guests caught out in the smirry rain.' He pointed to his pudding. 'Cloutie dumpling is always a favourite.'

'There must have been rainy days when we visited the castle and estate, but my memories of it are bathed in sunshine.'

'We are fortunate with our milder weather,' he acknowledge. 'But you're probably remembering the best of times.'

'I am.' Then she recalled, 'But one afternoon there was a rainstorm. I ran for shelter into the forest.'

'There's little getting through those trees,' he agreed. 'But it was brave of you, as a wee girl, to venture into the forest.'

'It felt like a great adventure. Strangely, I was never afraid of the forest. I felt sheltered and protected there. I could hear the rain pour down while I peered from under the trees. The scent of the greenery in the rain was wonderful. I wish I could've bottled it and taken it back with me to Glasgow.'

His amber eyes glinted like the flames in the roaring log fire. 'Are you certain you'll go home to Glasgow when your summer here is over, and your aunt comes back?'

'Yes. This trip was always going to be temporary.'

The disappointment showed on his face, but he forced a resigned smile. 'In that case, you should enjoy every opportunity to dine, dance and have fun.'

He stood up, and this time instead of hurrying away, he held out his hand to her.

‘Would you care to dance with me, Elspeth?’

She stood up and accepted his hand.

Numerous sets of eyes watched them take to the dance floor. The first couple to do so.

No one immediately joined them, preferring to have a good look at Innis dancing with the new young lady.

Rosabel and Primrose sat at one of the tables at the edge of the dance floor. Rosabel’s dress was cream with a pink rose print, a vintage dress she’d purchased from Holly and Skye’s boutique. Primrose’s dress was bought there too, a bargain, drop waist silk jersey dress in a colour that matched her name.

‘What do you think of them?’ Rosabel viewed Innis dancing with Elspeth, and frowned.

‘I don’t think they suit each other. I was sure they’d hit it off, but seeing them dancing...’ Primrose paused and considered. ‘Elspeth doesn’t look at ease in his arms.’

‘There was a spark of attraction between them,’ Rosabel recalled. ‘We saw that for ourselves in the cake shop.’

‘Yes, but most women find Innis handsome. Her reaction was only natural,’ Primrose reasoned.

Rosabel glanced at a table opposite them. ‘Look at the way Brodrick’s admiring Elspeth. I think he really likes her.’

Primrose agreed. ‘Brodrick’s a lovely man, very handsome too.’

‘Ean whispered to me about a kerfuffle that happened earlier,’ Rosabel confided.

Primrose listened as Rosabel relayed the details of Finlay and Brodrick driving off to find Elspeth in the forest.

‘Maybe that’s why she’s looking a bit edgy,’ Primrose remarked.

‘Ean says she doesn’t know. They don’t want to spoil her evening.’

‘She’ll find out later. The gossip will circulate.’

‘It will,’ said Rosabel. ‘Romance on the island is always gossip-worthy.’

‘What romance are you gossiping about?’ Ailsa said, sitting down at the table to join them. Her uncle was one of the chefs and she was there on his invitation.

Ailsa, thirty, owned a local craft shop. Her floral tea dress, bought from the boutique, emphasised her slender figure. Ailsa modelled knitwear and fashion to boost her craft shop earnings. Her silky dark hair was cut just above her shoulders and the gentle waves created a flattering, long bob. Her complexion was pale, and her wide blue eyes were a gorgeous azure blue. Her best friends were Holly and Skye, though she fought not to be as impish. Sometimes she resisted getting involved in their mischief, sometimes not. An okay ratio.

‘We’re talking about Innis and Elspeth,’ Rosabel told her, glancing at them dancing.

‘Holly phoned me to tell me that Innis had invited Elspeth to dinner,’ Ailsa explained. ‘Oh, and, she said that Elspeth is holding the knitting bee at the shop tomorrow night.’

Rosabel and Primrose brightened at this news. They were members of the knitting bee.

‘Good on her. I thought she’d skip it until she was settled in,’ said Primrose.

‘Holly and Skye said they’d help her set up the tables and chairs. I thought I’d pop along and help too,’ said Ailsa.

‘We’ll bring plenty of cake,’ Primrose assured her.

‘Thanks, Primrose. That would be handy.’

‘And I’ll help make the tea,’ Rosabel offered.

‘I’m looking forward to another knitting bee night,’ Ailsa told them. ‘I’m working on a new lace weight cardigan for the summer.’

‘I’m still knitting egg cosies,’ said Rosabel. ‘Customers at the cake shop love them.’

‘And they love the tea cosies we knit,’ Primrose chipped in.

‘I want one of your bumblebee tea cosies,’ Ailsa told Primrose.

‘I’ll bring a couple along with me tomorrow night,’ said Primrose.

Ailsa smiled. ‘I made new yellow gingham curtains for my kitchen and I gave the walls a freshen up for the lighter months with a pale sunshine yellow paint. So I’d like one of your bumblebee tea cosies to match the decor.’

‘Your cottage is one of my favourites on the island,’ said Primrose.

Rosabel agreed. ‘Your granny would be proud of you making a go of your craft shop and keeping the cottage looking lovely.’

Ailsa inherited the cottage the previous year when her grandmother moved to Edinburgh to spend more time with her sister. Ailsa leased the shop premises, and the crafts she sold were popular with tourists and locals. She made jewellery, knitted shawls, hats and scarves, offered watercolour prints of the island, sold artist materials and craft kits, all sorts of things.

Several couples finally decided to take to the dance floor as the waltz that Elspeth and Innis were dancing came to an end.

Elspeth looked tense. ‘I’m not used to being in the spotlight,’ she said to Innis as they finished the dance.

Innis gazed down at her, still keeping her in hold. ‘You’re the newcomer, and they’re interested in you.’

Elspeth knew they were more interested in seeing the woman Innis had invited to the castle.

As Innis went to continue dancing with her, she stepped back. ‘I’d like to sit this one out.’

He nodded curtly and escorted her back to her table. He'd been tempted to bring up what happened with the mannequins in the boutique window, but considering the trouble he'd caused already, he let it go.

Elsbeth sat down and looked around her. 'It's a beautiful function room. And I took a peek in the sitting room. The paintings are still there. Overall, the decor looks wonderful, very plush.'

'As a family, we like to ensure the castle is maintained properly,' Innis explained.

'I couldn't see the gardens in the darkness, but I'm sure they're well kept. I saw a glimpse of the loch and the river through the trees when I was driving up.'

'The swing at the river is still there. You should try it while you're here on the island.'

Elsbeth nodded. 'I will. There are so many things I want to see again, like the forget-me-not waterfall. It was fairytale beautiful.'

'It's as beautiful as ever. Guests enjoy bathing there, and local residents are always welcome.'

Elsbeth smiled. 'I must buy a swimsuit so I can stand under the waterfall too.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Brodrick at their table.

'You promised me a dance,' Brodrick said to Elsbeth, extending his hand, hoping she'd accept.

'I did.' She smiled and let him lead her away from Innis.

Before Innis could sit and brood by himself, one of the guests approached him.

'Can I have a dance with one of the castle's finest gentlemen?' The attractive woman's accent indicated that she was from London.

'Of course,' said Innis.

The dance was another waltz, and Innis swept the guest past Brodrick and Elspeth.

‘I think Innis’ nose is out of joint,’ Brodrick said to Elspeth. ‘I hope I haven’t caused ructions between the two of you.’

‘No, I’m glad you came over. We were talking about the estate’s facilities — the swing over the river, and the waterfall.’

‘The waterfall is magical, especially since the new solar lights were added last summer,’ Brodrick told her.

‘New lights?’

‘Yes, they illuminate the edges of the waterfall, the pool, the stones and the flora and moss.’

‘The moss was emerald, and the water was always so clear that you could see every stone, every pebble at the bottom of the pool,’ she recalled, sounding happy.

‘You should see it at night now. It’s as if everything is so much richer, more magical. They’ve done a great job of enhancing it. Finlay and Ean designed the upgrade. They maintain the estate’s land and gardens.’

‘What about Innis? Does he help?’

‘Sometimes, but he’s usually busy with his cake shop.’

‘I might be tempted to take a look at the waterfall on the way home tonight.’ She sounded daring.

‘Don’t go on your own until you’ve familiarised yourself with the forest again and the new route that’s been added.’

Elspeth sighed, and he felt her enthusiasm wilt as he held her and continued to dance.

‘I’d be happy to accompany you,’ he offered.

‘Would you?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Oh, that’s great. Another adventure to add to my night at the castle.’

Her open-hearted enthusiasm made his own heart react in kind.

As she danced with Brodrick, she felt his strength gently lead her around the room. And she felt happy and relaxed when she was in his arms. With Innis, she'd felt self-conscious and tense. It didn't help that everyone had been watching her dancing with Innis, but still...she preferred dancing with Brodrick. She loved to dance, something she didn't do enough of in the city, but while she was on the island, she intended dancing whenever she could.

'You look happy,' Brodrick remarked.

'I am. It's been quite a day. It's hard to believe that I was in Glasgow this morning. Now here I am waltzing in the castle with you.'

He liked how she included him, as if it was a highlight of her first day on the island.

'What are your plans for tomorrow?' he asked her.

'Working in the knitting shop. Packing orders for the shop, and for my own customers.'

'It sounds like a busy day. And you've got your knitting bee night, after having dinner in my cafe bar,' he reminded her.

Elsbeth didn't need reminded. 'I must have a look at your menus. Or just turn up and take whatever is the day's special.'

Brodrick smiled at her. 'I'll make sure it's extra special.'

She smiled back at him, just as Innis danced past with the guest. Unless she was mistaken, he'd glared at Brodrick, a jealous glance.

Brodrick pulled Elspeth close and waltzed her around the room until the music changed to a slow dance.

Without faltering, they continued to dance, and she felt herself melt into Brodrick's strong arms.

Primrose watched them and commented to Rosabel and Ailsa. 'Elsbeth and Brodrick dance well as a couple.'

'They do,' Rosabel agreed.

As the three of them chatted about the potential for romance between Elspeth and Brodrick, Ean watched Ailsa from the other side of the function room. Taking a bolstering breath, he started walking round to ask her to dance, but another man beat him to it.

Finlay approached Ailsa's table and smiled down at her. 'Would you like to dance, Ailsa?'

'I'd love to.' She let him lead her on to the floor, take her in hold and dance her around the room.

Rosabel and Primrose exchanged a smile.

CHAPTER SIX

Brodrick escorted Elspeth back to her table. She sat down, smiling from the all the dancing.

Brodrick remained standing. 'Thank you for dancing with me, Elspeth.'

'My pleasure.' It had been. Dancing with Brodrick had been fun and exciting. She saw that Innis was now waltzing around with another guest.

'I'll see you later.' Brodrick smiled and walked back to his table.

Elspeth leaned back in her chair and relaxed, taking in the atmosphere of the dinner dance party, the grandeur of the castle and the people, happy that she'd decided to come to the island.

It was then that she noticed one of the ladies from the cake shop waving over to her, inviting her to join their table.

Ailsa had finished dancing with Finlay and was sitting with Primrose and Rosabel again.

Elspeth picked up her clutch bag and walked over to them.

'Take a seat, Elspeth. I'm Primrose. I work with Innis.'

'I saw you at the cake shop,' said Elspeth.

'This is my sister, Rosabel, you'll have no doubt seen her too.'

'Yes, pleased to me you both.'

'And this is Ailsa. She owns a craft shop in the main street.'

Ailsa smiled at Elspeth. 'I feel I already know you. I've heard so much about you from Holly and Skye. You really suit

that dress. I had my eye on it in the boutique window, but I think it was made for you.'

'We're all wearing vintage from the boutique,' Rosabel observed. 'Their dresses are lovely, and real bargains for the quality.'

'I borrowed the blue one, but I've bought the red dress,' Elspeth told them. 'It's hanging in my wardrobe. I wasn't bold enough to wear it tonight.'

Ailsa giggled. 'I heard about the mannequin prank the three of you played on Innis.'

'Ah, yes, that's another reason why I'm not wearing the red one,' Elspeth confessed.

'Did Innis mention about you posing in the window?' said Primrose.

'No, not a word, but I'm sure he suspects we were teasing him,' Elspeth explained.

Rosabel nodded thoughtfully. 'Innis keeps most of his thoughts to himself.'

'That in itself reveals a lot about him,' said Elspeth.

The women agreed with her, and then Ailsa changed the subject. 'I hear you're holding the knitting bee at the shop tomorrow night.' She sounded thrilled.

'I am. Holly and Skye have offered to help me set things up. I'm looking forward to chatting to the members — and knitting. I thought I'd be relaxing with my knitting this evening. I never expected I'd be dining and dancing at the castle.'

'The island has a way of sweeping you along and opening your heart to new things,' Primrose told her.

Elspeth's heart had certainly been affected by various things, including meeting Innis and Brodrick.

Rosabel spoke her mind. 'Brodrick seems to like you. We were gossiping about the two of you dancing. You seemed at ease with him, but not with Innis.'

Elspeth was relieved to discuss this. ‘I didn’t know where I stood with Innis and his invitation. I still don’t. I felt like a guest when I arrived. Then everyone was watching us dancing and I’m not used to being the focus of attention. But when Brodrick asked me to dance I felt more relaxed with him. I think I probably need a good night’s sleep to settle myself. It’s been a whirlwind since I arrived on the island.’

The women let Elspeth spill her thoughts without interruption.

Elspeth took a deep breath and revealed her plans for later that night. ‘I’ve sort of wangled a trip to the forget-me-not waterfall with Brodrick.’

‘The waterfall looks lovely in the sunlight,’ Ailsa told her. ‘I was there a few days ago, and all the spring flowers were blooming. The water was cold, but I went for a stroll around. I’ll brave the water when it’s milder.’

Elspeth smiled tightly. ‘I’m driving to the waterfall tonight, on my way home from the castle.’

Primrose and Rosabel blinked.

Ailsa frowned. ‘You’re going there tonight with Brodrick?’

‘Yes, I’m driving my car and he’ll have his.’ Elspeth explained the details.

The women grinned.

Elspeth recognised the looks between them. ‘There’s nothing going on between Brodrick and me.’

‘Not yet perhaps, but after a romantic night at the waterfall, well...’ Primrose shrugged and smiled.

Elspeth blushed. ‘Stop it. I wanted to see the waterfall at night with the new solar lights illuminating it. Brodrick thought it would be better if he accompanied me. Part of the road has changed. He didn’t want me to get lost in the forest.’

The women smiled knowingly.

‘Okay, so it could be construed as slightly romantic, maybe, sort of,’ Elspeth almost admitted. And then she smiled too.

‘You’ll be quite safe with Brodrick,’ Rosabel assured her. ‘He’s a perfect gentleman.’

Primrose nudged Rosabel. ‘But is Brodrick safe with Elspeth?’ she joked.

The light-hearted conversation continued until they saw Innis approach their table. He’d finished dancing with yet another guest. He didn’t usually dance so freely with guests, but Elspeth had upset his equilibrium and he was doing things differently, unsettled in himself.

‘Here comes trouble,’ Ailsa whispered seconds before he arrived.

‘No trouble from me, Ailsa,’ Innis said, letting her know he’d overheard her.

Ailsa squirmed inwardly, but forced a smile. ‘We were just gossiping.’

‘About me, no doubt,’ Innis surmised, with an assured smirk.

It was the self-assured smirk that did it. Elspeth spoke up. ‘No, about me going to the waterfall tonight on my way home — with Brodrick.’

Innis blinked.

Elspeth held her smile firm. ‘I hear there are new solar lights and it looks totally magical at night, so I’m going to have a peek before driving back to the shop.’

Innis was taken aback, but at that moment, the music changed to a lively, upbeat tune.

‘This is one of my favourite dances,’ Primrose enthused. She stood up and so did Rosabel and Ailsa, all eager to join in with the popular reel.

Primrose clasped Elspeth’s hand. ‘Come on, you’ll love this one.’

Elspeth smiled and let herself be led on to the floor where lots of other people were starting to hold hands and form a circle.

Primrose clasped hands with Rosabel too, who joined hands with Ailsa, and the four women headed on to the floor.

‘Come on,’ Ailsa said to Innis, grabbing his hand and taking him with them.

Moments later, Finlay cut in, clasping hands with Ailsa and Rosabel.

Ean arrived seconds too late to hold hands with Ailsa, so instead he joined them by clasping hands with Elspeth.

His handsome face smiled down at her. ‘I’m Ean.’

‘Elspeth.’ She smiled at him, taking in his well-cut chestnut hair and green eyes. There was an artistic elegance to him, like she’d seen in his photograph, but he was more far attractive meeting him personally.

Everyone got ready to begin the dance.

‘I don’t know the steps to this dance,’ Elspeth said to Ean.

He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. ‘Don’t worry. This is a fast-moving reel. Your feet won’t touch the floor.’

Elspeth’s eyes widened in mild panic, and then she saw the teasing grin on Ean’s face, and smiled.

‘Here we go,’ Primrose said.

And off they went, whirling around the dance floor as one lively circle, picking up pace along with the music. Cheers and laughter merged with the music and everyone seemed to let their inhibitions go and dance their socks off.

Elspeth didn’t know the steps, but it didn’t matter. She skip-stepped around the floor, holding hands with Ean and Primrose. She could see Innis dancing between Ailsa and another woman, and even he wore the happiest smile she’d seen on his face all evening.

This was what island life was all about, Elspeth told herself. Joining in with the people of the community.

After a few more dances where everyone danced with everyone else, skirling and burling around to the lively, Scottish music, the evening started to wind down.

‘Would you like to go before everyone heads out to the car park?’ Brodrick suggested to Elspeth.

‘Yes, let’s go.’

Bidding goodnight to Primrose, Rosabel and Ailsa, and nodding across the dance floor to Innis, who was busy chatting to guests, Elspeth headed out with Brodrick and collected her coat from the cloak room.

‘Excuse me, miss, Elspeth,’ one of the staff called to her from the reception desk.

Elspeth shrugged her coat on and went over.

‘Innis left this for you.’ The receptionist handed her a gift bag and inside it was a bottle of fragrance.

‘Thank you,’ Elspeth said, and walked back to where Brodrick was waiting for her at the front door. She peered in the bag and lifted out a personal note from Innis that was tucked inside along with the bottle.

She read it to herself: *This is a fragrance we offer to guests, made locally from flowers and plants.* She unscrewed the glass top on the bottle and breathed in the fresh but heady scent. *So you never forget us.*

A wave of emotion swept through her. She couldn’t forget them, she thought to herself. Not ever.

Brodrick was alert, looking at a few cars making their way out of the car park.

‘What’s that?’ he said, looking at her gift bag.

‘It’s a bottle of the castle’s perfume that they gift to guests,’ she summarised.

‘Oh, very nice,’ he replied, and then escorted her out to her car.

‘I’ll follow you,’ Elspeth told him.

Brodrick nodded and got into his car.

With Brodrick leading the way, they drove away from the castle towards the forest road that would lead them to the

waterfall.

Elsbeth glanced in the rear view mirror at the castle all lit up in the night. What an evening it had been. Then she looked ahead, following Brodrick's car along the narrow road through the forest.

The trees eventually gave way to an opening where the waterfall glowed like something from a fairytale in the night.

Brodrick parked his car and she pulled up alongside him and got out.

She gazed at the waterfall and sighed.

Water fell like crystal rain from the overhead rocks, tumbling down into a pool illuminated with lights. The colour of the water was incredible — like clear, liquid emerald. Around the edges moss of varying shades of green added to the verdant glow.

Pops of blue were highlighted by the solar lamps — the forget-me-nots, Scottish bluebells and other cyan hued flowers whose petals were still open even at night. Night scented stock flowers perfumed the air and the sound of the water reminded her of the soft pitter-patter of raindrops, so soothing it would be perfect to fall asleep listening to it. When she was a child, her parents said that the sound of rain was fairies' drumbeats. She smiled at the memory.

'It's extraordinary,' Elspeth said, sitting down on a flat stone at the edge of the natural pool and trailing her fingers through the water.

Brodrick joined her. 'Is it like you remember?'

'I'd forgotten how beautiful it is. The air smells wonderful.' Almost as potent as the bottled perfume. 'But I've never seen it this late at night.'

'I can imagine you wouldn't venture into the wild when it's dark,' he remarked.

'The wilds of Scotland have never harmed me, never hurt me. Only people have done that.' Her words filtered into the air, and she gazed up at the star-studded sky.

Brodrick made a promise to himself, watching Elspeth take in the beauty of the night. He would never intentionally hurt her. If she gave him a chance, he would happily protect her, and maybe fall in love with her...if he hadn't fallen a little already.

'I'm sooo tempted to go for a paddle in the pool,' she told him.

'Go for it.' He thumbed behind him to his car. 'I have kitchen rolls in the back of my car. I picked them up for my cafe bar, but I haven't unpacked them. You can dry your feet with some of that.'

Elspeth's eyes sparked with enthusiasm. 'Are you sure? I'm not keeping you out late? You probably have an early start in the morning.'

Brodrick shrugged his shoulders and smiled her at encouragingly. 'Slip your shoes off. In you go.'

He didn't need to tell her twice.

Kicking her heels off, she stepped into the water and waded knee deep at the edge of the pool. 'This feels great. Just what I needed after all that dancing in heels.'

'You look like you belong here, like a fairytale princess that's wandered into the secret forest.'

'That's exactly how I feel, but even better, because it's real. I'm truly here.' She held up the hem of her dress that skimmed just below knee-length, and waded in deeper, feeling brave, mischievous and magical. 'Do me a favour, Brodrick. Take a picture of me. I want to show my aunt. She won't believe this.'

Brodrick took his phone from his jacket pocket and snapped several pictures, while Elspeth jokingly struck a few poses in the pool.

'We've got a winner,' he announced, scrolling through the photos. They were all great, but one stood out as perfect. It showed Elspeth standing knee-deep in the pool, wearing her blue dress that matched some of the flowers, smiling, aglow with the lights and with sheer happiness. The waterfall fell in a band of crystal-like light in the background.

Elsbeth waded over to take a look.

Brodrick held the phone up.

‘Oh, yes, that is a winner. Send it to me.’ She started to wade to the edge of the pool.

‘I don’t have your number,’ he said.

She told him what it was, and he sent the pictures to her. ‘I’ve sent them all.’

Sitting down again on the flat stone, she shook the water off.

‘Hang on, I’ll get the tissues.’ Brodrick hurried to his car and came back with a large handful. ‘There you go.’

‘Thanks.’ Elspeth dried her feet and legs and stepped back into her shoes. ‘That was wonderful. You should’ve joined me.’

‘Next time, I promise.’

It was the way he promised, as if he meant it, that caused her heart to squeeze just looking at him standing there.

‘I’ll hold you to that promise,’ she said.

He smiled at her.

‘Keep that smile.’ She hurried to her car, grabbed her phone and then snapped a couple of pictures of him standing at the waterfall. She sent them to him. ‘And let’s take one together.’ Carried away with excitement, she stood close to him with the glow of the waterfall behind them, and snapped a photo. She sent it to him as well.

Still bubbling with the fun of the night, she got into her car and followed him back along the road and down to the harbour. They pulled up outside the knitting shop. He walked with her to the front door.

‘Thank you for everything, Brodrick. I had a wonderful time.’ She glanced over at the cafe bar. ‘Do you live above the premises?’

‘No, I have a house.’ He pointed up to a large, two–storey white cottage on the hillside behind the shops on the main street.

She noticed that the windows were in darkness, indicating he lived alone.

‘I bought it a few years ago. I used to live above the cafe bar, but I wanted a house of my own.’

‘It’s a lovely house, and what a great view you must have of the harbour and the sea.’

‘I bought it because of the view. Come and have dinner one night when you’re not busy with the knitting bee. The seascape off the island looks like a painting in the evening light. I’m always tempted to go night sailing.’

‘You have a boat?’

He pointed to one of the boats anchored in the harbour. ‘That’s mine, the one with the blue hull and red and white sails, though you can’t see the sails at the moment.’

‘It sounds like the classic red, white and blue boat motif on the quilt on my bed.’

‘It does look like that boat.’

She frowned, surprised he knew what was on the quilt.

‘I’ve seen it hanging on the washing line in Morven’s garden at the back of the knitting shop,’ he explained.

‘Ah.’ She then looked at the boat in the harbour. ‘So you’re a sailor as well as a chef.’

‘I love both, though running the cafe bar is my main thing. But with living on an island, it’s natural to have a boat and go sailing around the coast. I’ll take you out one day if you want.’

‘I’d like that. I’ve sailed around the island on a tour boat once, but I’d love to sail round it again.’

‘It’s a date,’ he said, and then quickly clarified. ‘A date to go sailing.’

Elspeth smiled warmly.

‘Okay,’ he said, taking a deep breath. ‘I’d better get going.’ He started to walk back to his car.

‘I’ll probably be cashing in that voucher you gave me,’ she reminded him.

‘See you tomorrow. I’ll make the special extra tempting.’

Waving, he got into his car and drove off.

Elsbeth breathed in the cool, fresh sea air, the sense of the island at night and the view of the water glistening, reflecting the streetlights and the glow from the shops and cottages. Then she went inside and locked the door to an evening she would always remember.

She’d left the display lights on in the shop window, and by their glow, she headed upstairs.

Hanging the blue dress on the outside of the wardrobe, and placing the perfume bottle on top of the dresser, she got ready for bed.

But the butterflies of excitement wouldn’t calm down. She’d had such a great night at the castle and at the waterfall.

Padding through to the kitchen, she put the kettle on to make tea. While it boiled she scrolled through the pictures on her phone, stopping when she saw the one of her standing at the waterfall with Brodrick. She studied his smiling face, and noticed that she barely came up to his shoulders. Her heart ached a little, warning her that she could so easily fall for a man like him. Innis was handsome, but he didn’t make her feel at ease. But Brodrick did.

It was then that she noticed a message on her phone from her aunt. She read the message:

As promised, here are pictures of our glamorous night out at a theatre in Perth. In the morning we’re heading to some of the towns and villages in Perthshire to visit Donall’s friends, then we’re going to Stirling Castle. Hope you’re okay.

Elsbeth smiled, looking at her aunt and Donall having a great night. And then she sent the picture of herself at the waterfall, with a message summarising her evening.

The kettle clicked off, and she made a cup of tea.

Instead of going to bed, she took the tea downstairs to the shop and checked the orders on the computer. Still buzzing with energy, she decided to pack the orders. One less task to do in the morning.

Standing at the counter, parcelling up the yarn for customers, she glanced out the window at the main street and harbour. She could see Brodrick's boat. Her heart squeezed again just thinking about him.

Careful, she warned herself. Falling in love was never included in her plans for spending summer on the island.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sunlight streamed through the bedroom window as Elspeth awoke the next morning. Although she'd had a late night, she'd slept well and felt refreshed and excited to start her first full day at the knitting shop.

Jumping in the shower, she then dressed in jeans and a hand knitted jumper that matched the clear blue sky.

After having porridge and fruit for breakfast, she took her cup of tea down to the shop, and while drinking it she organised the parcels ready to take to the post office nearby.

The walk along the main street filled her with enthusiasm, looking out at the view of the sea and the gentle waves tipped with white froth sweeping in towards the coast. She breathed in the fresh air, a mix of the sea and countryside, and after handing in her parcels to the friendly postmaster who welcomed her to the island, she picked up fresh milk and granary rolls from the grocers and headed back to the knitting shop.

The shop didn't officially open until ten, so that gave her almost an hour to arrange new yarn in the window display, water the flowers outside the shop, and generally sort out things for the day ahead. Another cup of tea was in order, along with taking a quick peek at Brodrick's cafe bar website. The previous night had an almost dreamlike quality to it. Had she really been dining and dancing at the castle and then paddling in the waterfall? Of course, she knew she had, but the thought of it all sent shivers of excitement through her — along with the anticipation that she'd agreed not only to cash in the voucher Brodrick had given her for her evening meal at the cafe bar, but to dine with him at his cottage.

She'd seen the cottage as she'd walked to the post office. In the morning light she noticed that it was even more substantial

than she'd first thought. It was a cottage, but was borderline a mansion style property. She could only imagine what it looked like inside. Glancing at the decor of Brodrick's cafe bar with its rich, neutral tones, dark wooden floor, coffee and cream walls with vintage prints of the island framed on the walls, and shiny gold balustrades along the bar, she wondered if his cottage would have this style. It was classy, traditional, and yet fitted perfectly into the modern era.

Drinking down her tea, she forced herself to stop browsing Brodrick's website and get on with her working day.

The morning flew in, and she packed new orders as they popped up on the shop's online system, while writing an update to her own knitting business' website. She let her customers know where she was located for the summer and told them that they now had access to the extensive range of yarns from the shop, offering a one-off discount for all new orders from the shop's stock.

While selecting the local, hand-dyed and hand-spun yarns from the shelves, her fingers itched to knit with them herself. Rarely did she go an entire day without knitting something. Her escapades the previous night had thwarted her plans to relax on her first evening on the island and knit. Still, she thought, the knitting bee was on later, and she was looking forward to chatting with the members — and hopefully getting some knitting done.

Lunchtime arrived in what felt like the blink of an eye.

Her only customers had been online, but this had enabled her to settle into the routine needed to run the shop alongside her own business. Her aunt was right in thinking that her work at the accountancy firm would come in useful for handling the accounts. She could already see the benefits of doubling up on the work for both outlets, and maybe merging the two, if only for the summertime. Something to think about, she told herself, running upstairs to have lunch and heat up a tin of those soups she'd been tempted by.

While the lentil soup heated on the stove, she cut two thick slices of bread and rustled up a salad from the lettuce,

tomatoes and other items from the fridge.

A dash of black pepper was all she added to her bowl of piping hot soup, and sat down at the kitchen table to have her lunch. She'd locked the shop door, but put up one of several signs Morven had tucked in the counter drawer. This one said — *closed for lunch, but knock loudly if urgent.*

She smiled to herself, wondering if there was such a thing as a knitting emergency. And then jumped as she'd just finished her soup and heard two loud chaps on the door.

Running downstairs, she smiled when she saw Brodrick standing there.

She opened the door.

In the midday sun, his dark russet hair looked like shiny copper and he ran a nervous hand through it.

'Sorry if you're having lunch,' he apologised. 'But a quick question. I'm preparing the special for dinner. Any preferences?' He listed off a selection of items from buttery new potatoes with seared cod to light and flurry Scottish cheddar quiche with roast tatties.

'The quiche sounds perfect,' she interrupted before he rattled off an entire menu. 'I love quiche, and roast potatoes.'

'With cherry tomato salad?' His green eyes sparkled with light and laughter, making her want to smile at him.

'Double perfect,' she assured him.

She saw the relief relax his broad shoulders. He wore a dark cream shirt that looked like it was made from quality cotton linen, and dark, well-cut trousers that made her heart flutter with how well they flattered his fit physique.

'Great. I'm going to run and let you get on with your lunch,' he said, and then he did just that.

'Thank you, Brodrick,' she called after him.

Without looking back, he raised one hand in acknowledgement and disappeared next door.

Customers were heading to the cafe bar and she had the impression that he was busy with the lunchtime orders, while trying to accommodate her tastes for the special he'd promised her. She almost felt bad for putting him to all this trouble, but then...it was flattering that he cared and wanted to make something she'd like.

Quiche was one of her favourites, and yet she rarely cooked it for herself. Sometimes her pastry didn't come out as well as she'd wanted. But she reckoned Brodrick's recipe would be perfect.

Hurrying back upstairs, she tidied away the lunch dishes, poured another cup of tea and went back down to the shop.

The afternoon flew by at an even faster pace than the morning. This was probably because those itchy fingers of hers had given in and cast on forty-four stitches using one of the mixes of pale lilac and heather, handmade yarn, to knit herself a classic ribbed scarf. The local yarn knitted up well. Using needles size 4.5mm, and following a pattern of knit two, purl two rib stitches across the rows, she made the beginnings of a scarf she intended wearing soon. This would be her project to work on at the bee night. Nothing too complicated so she could knit it easily while chatting to the members and having tea.

Milk! She thought suddenly. She didn't have enough for the tea.

Dashing out to the grocers before they closed, she picked up plenty of fresh milk, and then bolted back along the main street — and ran slam into Brodrick as he stepped out of his premises.

'Woah there!' He grabbed her shoulders to steady her. Two bags filled with the milk dangled from her arms, weighing her down while preventing her from tumbling over.

'I forgot to buy milk for the knitting bee,' she explained, slightly out of breath.

'You can always borrow from me if that happens again,' he assured her.

‘Okay, I’ll take you up on that, even though I have no intention of forgetting again. I’ll get into the swing of things once I’ve settled in.’

His strong hands clasped her shoulders. ‘Are you steady?’ He smiled down at her.

She took a calming breath. ‘Yes, I’m fine, but I shouldn’t have started knitting a scarf. I’m notorious for losing track of time when I’m engrossed in my knitting, and the time has gotten away from me.’

‘Pop in for your dinner when you’re ready.’ He checked the time. ‘The bee usually starts at seven. You’re on schedule, so relax.’

‘I will, thanks. I’ll dash and see you...very soon.’

Giggling, she hurried away, and tried to open the knitting shop door without dropping the bags of milk. She glanced back to nod at Brodrick, and then disappeared inside.

His broad smile lit up his handsome features. Everything she did made him like her even more.

Elsbeth freshened up and put on a pale lemon jumper. She brushed her hair, touched up her makeup, tidied and secured the knitting shop, and then headed out to the cafe bar for dinner.

She walked in and looked around. It was fairly busy, but had a relaxing, welcoming atmosphere. Lights shone above the full length of the bar along one side of the premises and reflected in the mirrors behind it. Two members of staff were tending to customers at the bar, while another was serving dinners.

Brodrick saw her walk in and welcomed her with a smile.

‘I’ve reserved a table for you.’ He gestured towards a table for two near the window.

She let him lead the way, and admired the artwork on the walls. ‘I love these vintage prints of the island, the seascapes and countryside.’

‘Thank you, I think they capture the essence of the island.’ He seated her at her table. It had a view of the main street and the sea beyond, but it was the cafe bar’s interior that she was still admiring.

‘Is that an ice cream counter over there?’ She motioned to the counter at the far end beyond the bar. The flavours ranged from traditional chocolate and vanilla to mint and strawberry and cream.

‘It is. This used to be a retro cafe selling ice cream, sticks of rock and souvenirs. When I bought it over, I kept the ice cream parlour aspect of it.’

‘How do you get any work done? I’d be stopping for an ice cream cone with chocolate sprinkles too often,’ she joked.

Brodrick smiled. ‘I’ve learned to resist temptation.’ Including when it came to Elspeth. She looked particularly lovely, and in his heart he longed to ask her out on a romantic date. He’d dared to invite her to dine at his cottage, but the invitation was vague.

‘Thinking deep thoughts?’ she said, jarring him.

‘I eh...without being presumptuous, I’m going to have my dinner, and I wondered if you’d like to have some company?’

Elspeth brightened. ‘Yes, please join me.’

He saw her reaction was genuine and smiled at her. ‘I’ll organise dinner for two.’ He walked away and then turned back. ‘Do you still want the special? The quiche?’

‘I do.’ Her taste buds were reacting to the aroma of the dinners wafting through from the kitchen at the back of the premises. The cafe bar was longer than she’d thought viewing it on the website. It had been extended to almost double in length out into the back garden.

‘Coming right up,’ he told her, and then headed into the kitchen.

She admired his tall figure, still wearing the classy shirt and dark trousers. He had a calm command of the cafe bar, and she noticed that the staff were busy but at ease and cheery working

there. She found Brodrick easy to like and enjoyed his company too.

Minutes later, Brodrick and a member of the waiting staff served up her quiche, cherry tomato salad and golden roast potatoes.

Brodrick sat down to a plate of seared cod, parsley sauce and buttery new potatoes.

‘This looks delicious,’ she said, smiling over at him.

Seated opposite her, his broad shouldered stature filled the space, and even when sitting down his manly presence made her attraction to him grow stronger.

She cut into her quiche with its generous amount of Scottish cheddar and took a bite. ‘Mmmm,’ she murmured and nodded over to him.

‘I hope it’s to your taste.’

‘Very much so.’ She tried one of the roast potatoes and nodded likewise. ‘You’re spoiling me.’

If only she knew how he’d love to spoil her every day.

He ate his dinner, and for a few moments they tucked into their meal, a relaxing, contentedness extending between them.

She gazed out at the view of the sea. ‘It looks like a calm night.’

‘It does, but the forecast threatens a storm.’

She frowned, seeing no sign of storm clouds in the twilight sky.

‘The spring always goes kicking and storming into the night before giving way to the summer. The rainstorms don’t last long, but beware of being caught out in one. You’ll end up drookit in seconds.’

‘Duly warned.’ She tucked into her dinner, savouring every mouthful. ‘I intended having a more relaxed day. Busy but less hectic.’

‘Those plans flew out the window I take it?’

‘They did. The day sparked as if the hours were compressed.’

‘Time flies when you’re supposed to be having fun,’ he joked.

‘I’m hoping I’ll be able to relax and knit at the bee night.’

Brodrick smiled to himself, pressed his firm, sexy lips together and made no comment.

‘You don’t think so?’ she said.

‘You want me to lie?’

She smiled. ‘It’s going to be busy, hectic but fun.’

He nodded, and then stood up as one of the staff cleared their plates away.

‘Would you like a slice of cake, pudding or ice cream?’ He lead her over to the counter where a selection of cakes were on display near the ice cream.

‘Tricky one.’ she said, tempted by several of the cakes and the ice cream. ‘But I’m going to opt for a slice of carrot cake. It’s one of my favourites and yours looks particularly tasty.’

‘I think I’ll join you,’ he said.

Two slices of carrot cake were served to them as they sat back down at their table.

‘I could live on this frosting,’ Elspeth remarked.

‘It’s my own special concoction,’ Brodrick told her. ‘Innis isn’t the only one with secret cake recipes.’

‘Are you rivals?’ she said.

‘In business or romance?’

Elspeth blinked. ‘Romance? Why would you be rivals in romance?’

Because of you, Elspeth, he thought, hoping that Innis didn’t make another play for her. Keeping this to himself, he merely shrugged and ate his cake.

She sensed the inner turmoil and tension in him.

‘I’m not surrounded by eggshells,’ she told him. ‘You don’t have to tiptoe around me.’

His green eyes glanced over at her. ‘Okay, I think we could be rivals over you. Innis obviously wants to date you, though he made a mess of that last night. And I’d like to get to know you better too.’

‘Well then, let’s start as friends.’

Brodrick nodded, feeling a warmth for her in his heart.

Elsbeth continued to eat her cake as their tea was served along with squares of Scottish tablet.

Brodrick popped a piece in his mouth and relaxed back, having finished his cake.

‘How do you keep in shape with all these sweet temptations?’ she said.

‘I run. I’m a hill runner.’

‘A hill runner?’ No wonder he looked so fit.

‘The hills on the island are perfect for running. There are no mountainous peaks. The landscape’s rolling hills are ideal for bounding up. I’ve always loved running up them, ever since I was a boy. It’s never left me, the feeling of the grass and heather beneath my feet, the rush of the wind, the fresh air and energy I feel when I’m racing up the slopes or along them.’

‘You make it sound wonderful.’

‘It is.’ And then he hesitated.

‘What is it?’

‘If we’re going to be friends, can I ask you a big favour?’

‘Yes,’ she told him, wondering what it was.

‘Morven knitted a great jumper for me three years ago,’ he explained. ‘I wear it for my running. It keeps me warm without overheating. It’s one of those jumpers that’s ideal for what I do. But...it’s become worn, with holes in the elbows and frays at the neck.’

‘You want me to knit you a new jumper?’ she surmised.

‘No. I’m not usually the superstitious type, but it’s sort of my lucky jumper. I’ve worn it for the past three years for the summer hill running race, and won. The race is on again next week. I’ll wear it regardless of whether it’s got holes in it, but I wondered if you could mend it?’

‘Yes, I’d be happy to mend your jumper,’ she told him. ‘I like mending things rather than throwing them away and buying new stuff. I’ll always try mending them first, especially socks. I knit my own socks and I regularly have to mend them when I get a potato.’

He frowned. ‘A potato?’

‘You know, when your big toe peeps out through a hole in your sock. A tattie toe.’

He laughed. ‘I get those myself, but I’m guilty of throwing the socks away and buying a new pair.’

‘That’s fine, but because I knit my own socks, I’m reluctant to throw them away easily. I mend them and get the wear out of them.’ She smiled at him. ‘Give me your jumper and I’ll mend it for you.’

‘It’s through the back. It’s clean, laundered.’ He went through and brought it back in a bag and handed it to her.

Elsbeth peered into the bag, saw the type of yarn her aunt had used to knit the jumper — a storm grey double-knit, and knew she could mend the holes.

‘I’ll mend this for you,’ she promised him, closing the bag and tucking it at the side of her seat as she sipped her tea.

But the time was wearing on.

‘I put aside a cake for your knitting bee,’ Brodrick told her. ‘As a first night welcoming cake.’

‘Oh, you didn’t have to do that.’

Brodrick went over to the cake counter and picked up a box he’d stored on a shelf. He brought it over to her table and handed it to her.

Elsbeth stood up, knowing it was time to go. She accepted the cake box, took a peek and smiled when she saw that it was a large chocolate cake.

‘Thank you, Brodrick.’ She picked up the jumper bag, and carrying the cake box, she headed out.

‘Have a great evening, Elspeth.’

‘Thanks for dinner.’

She hurried into the knitting shop and started to get ready for the members arriving. A sense of excitement charged through her, and moments later, Holly and Skye knocked on the door, smiling and waving in at her, carrying their knitting bags, and eager to help her set things up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elsbeth welcomed Holly and Skye in and led them through to the extension at the back of the shop where the knitting bee nights were held.

‘I found photos in my aunt’s album showing some of the knitting bee nights, and I’ve set up the folding chairs from the storeroom cupboard and two of the trestle tables,’ Elspeth explained. ‘I’m not sure if the long, folding tables should be further along the wall to make room for the sturdy table near the patio doors?’

Holly and Skye put their craft bags down and slightly adjusted the set up.

‘You’ve set it up great, Elspeth,’ said Holly.

Skye held up a bag. ‘We brought scones and strawberry jam to go with the tea. Rosabel and Primrose will bring plenty of cake.’

The three of them headed through to a small kitchen area that had a sink, a cupboard unit and a kitchen table.

‘Brodrick gave me a chocolate cake.’ Elspeth had put the box on the table.

Skye took a peek. ‘Lovely.’

Holly started to take the cups and plates from the cupboard and set them up on the unit.

‘Did you enjoy your dinner with Brodrick?’ Holly said, while Skye prepared two large ceramic floral teapots with teabags.

Elsbeth filled the kettle and shook her head in dismay. ‘News travels fast.’

‘Awe, come on,’ Holly said to Elspeth. ‘We saw the two of you sitting at the window of the cafe bar flirting with each

other.’

‘We weren’t flirting.’ Elspeth flicked the kettle on to boil.

Holly and Skye exchanged a disbelieving look.

‘Okay, so maybe we like each other,’ Elspeth admitted.
‘We’ve agreed to be friends.’

Skye guffawed. ‘We’ll see how long that lasts before you’re dating.’

‘Did he give you a pokey hat?’ Holly said, referring to an ice cream cone.

‘No, I opted for a slice of carrot cake,’ said Elspeth.

‘You should try his ice cream the next time,’ Holly advised her.

A knock on the front door was followed by Ailsa’s voice filtering through to the kitchen. ‘It’s just me.’

‘We’re through here,’ Holly called to her.

Ailsa appeared carrying her knitting bag and a box of sweets. ‘I didn’t know what to bring. I knew Primrose and Rosabel would have cakes, and you two had scones, so I thought, you can’t go wrong with sweeties — chocolate caramels, chocolate mints, raspberry creams and butterscotch.’ She was eating one of the sweets. ‘I can recommend the butterscotch.’

Elspeth let herself be tempted and accepted a butterscotch. ‘Thank you, Ailsa.’

‘Oooh! I’ll have a raspberry cream.’ Skye picked one and popped it in her mouth.

Holly ate a chocolate caramel.

‘Did you have a tasty dinner with Brodrick?’ Ailsa said to Elspeth, putting the sweets down.

Elspeth relented. ‘Yes, but it was just dinner.’

‘I heard he’d been fussing over your quiche,’ said Ailsa. ‘He wanted it to be just right.’

‘It was,’ said Elspeth.

‘So what else is happening with you two?’ Ailsa wanted to know.

‘Nothing.’ Elspeth busied herself, opening a bag of sugar and filling a sugar bowl for the tea.

‘Do we believe her?’ Ailsa said to Holly and Skye.

They replied in unison. ‘Nooo.’

Elspeth blushed and smiled.

A flurry of activity sounded from the front of the shop, as if most of the members had arrived en masse. Chatter, smiles and craft bags stuffed with yarn, knitting needles and patterns, sparked the bee night into a burst of activity.

Elspeth went through to greet them as they took their jackets and coats off and hung them on the back of their chairs, settling themselves into a practised routine, eager to get the knitting bee underway.

‘I’m glad you could all make it at such short notice,’ Elspeth announced over the cheery chatter.

‘We’re just happy that you’re continuing to hold our evenings here while Morven is away romancing Donall,’ said one of the ladies.

Rosabel and Primrose came bustling in carrying cake tins. ‘We’re here, we’re here!’ Rosabel called out as they scurried through to the kitchen.

‘My aunt is having a great time already,’ Elspeth told the members, and held up her phone to show them the recent photos. ‘They had a night out in Perth.’

Several faces gathered round eager to view the pictures.

‘Morven looks very glam, and happy,’ a member remarked.

The others agreed.

Elspeth scrolled to the latest pictures. ‘This is them outside Stirling castle today. She says they’re heading to the West Coast tomorrow to see lots of other castles.’

Skye came through for a look and peered over Elspeth's shoulder. 'I'd love to see all the castles. It sounds so romantic.'

One of the members sat down and opened her knitting bag to get ready to start, but sighed when she saw the mess her yarn was in. 'Ach, the kitten's found my knitting bag.' Nettie pulled out a large skein of yarn that was in a complete tangle.

The others laughed.

Nettie tried to figure out where to start unravelling it. 'He's had a fun time playing with this.' She smiled. 'I left my husband kitten sitting tonight. The two of them were snoring on the sofa after their dinner when I left.' She sighed, unable to untangle the mess of yarn.

'Give it to Rowen,' Skye advised her. 'If she can't unfankle it, no one can.'

Rowen reached over and took charge of the fankled yarn. 'I'll sort it for you.'

While the yarn was being unravelled, and rewound into a tidy skein again, Elspeth went through to the kitchen.

Rosabel cut a large fruit cake decorated with glacé cherries into slices. 'We've brought our special fruit cake, bramble and cream sponge, and butterfly cakes.'

'Thank you so much,' said Elspeth.

The fruit cake had a scent of whisky, the bramble and cream sponge looked tempting, and the buttercream icing on the butterfly cakes sparkled with a sprinkling of crystallised sugar.

'We baked these ourselves. They're not from the cake shop, so you don't have to thank Innis,' Rosabel explained.

Elspeth was relieved that she wasn't obliged to do this.

Trays of tea, cake and scones were carried through to the hub of the knitting bee where members helped themselves. Holly, Skye and Ailsa assisted Elspeth, as did Primrose and Rosabel, but all the members helped out, handing the plates with cake around.

‘Sooo,’ Primrose said, settling down to enjoy her tea and cake. ‘What happened with you and Innis last night at the castle?’ she said to Elspeth.

‘And is it true you went scuddy dipping in the waterfall with Brodrick?’ said Rosabel.

Elspeth blinked, blushed and felt bewildered. All eyes were on her, keen to hear about her evening at the castle as they knitted and drank their tea. She understood their interest, and had been prepared to be the topic of conversation, but she supposed it was a handy way to break the ice, to let them get to know her.

Sucking up her blushes, Elspeth gave them the short course of events, ending with a summary of her visit to the waterfall.

‘There was no bare scud dipping. We were both fully clothed.’ Elspeth showed them the photo she’d sent to her aunt.

‘That’s the thing with local gossip,’ Holly reasoned. ‘It tends to get blown out of proportion.’

Skye wiped the buttercream from her fingers after eating a butterfly cake. ‘I still think it was exciting that Finlay and Brodrick went rushing off to search for you in the forest in case you were lost.’

Elspeth blinked. ‘What are you talking about?’

Skye’s innocent blue eyes looked at her. ‘About Finlay dashing off to rescue you when you hadn’t arrived at the castle.’

Elspeth’s frown showed she knew nothing of this.

A silence descended on the gathering as they realised Elspeth really didn’t know the fuss she’d inadvertently caused at the castle.

Primrose spoke up. ‘I heard that they didn’t tell you so as not to ruin your evening, but I thought you’d have found out by now. The local gossip has been pretty rife.’

Elspeth shook her head. ‘I’ve been busy all day working in the shop. No one mentioned it to me. Brodrick never said a

word when we had dinner.’

Several ladies didn’t know this news, so Elspeth went on to explain about her dinner at the cafe bar.

‘I wouldn’t blame Brodrick for being sneaky,’ Rosabel said to Elspeth. ‘It was all a fuss over nothing. You were safe in the castle, noseing around the rooms—’

‘How did you know that?’ Elspeth asked her.

‘The staff saw you,’ Rosabel told her. ‘But no one thinks badly of you. Sneaking a peek at the paintings in the sitting room is okay.’

‘It’s just that...well, that’s why they thought you’d gone missing. The road sign was wonky, and Finlay was worried you’d taken the wrong route into the forest,’ said Primrose.

‘Why didn’t Innis go to look for her?’ one of the ladies asked.

‘Because Finlay wanted him to stay at the castle to meet Elspeth if she arrived,’ Primrose explained.

‘And Brodrick went to help Finlay look for me?’ Elspeth wanted to clarify the details.

Primrose nodded.

Elspeth felt her world tilt. ‘I didn’t know any of this.’

‘It doesn’t matter surely,’ Holly reasoned. ‘They all meant well.’

Elspeth nodded and started to agree.

‘I think it’s all so dashing and romantic,’ said Skye.

‘Yes, I suppose it is,’ Elspeth said, thinking of how her evening had ended, her trip to the waterfall with Brodrick, and then driving after him down to the harbour.

Needing something to occupy herself, she dug out the grey jumper from her knitting bag and examined the holes and frays.

‘Is that a jumper you’re mending?’ said Ailsa, while knitting her new lace weight cardigan. The fine, azure blue

yarn was a fair match for her eyes.

‘Yes, Brodrick asked if I’d mend it for him,’ Elspeth explained. ‘It’s his lucky jumper and he wants to wear it to the forthcoming hill running race.’

‘Is Ean entering the race this year?’ said one of the ladies.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Ailsa. ‘But Ean would be about the only one capable of winning against Brodrick. Ean was such a fast runner.’

Primrose glanced at Ailsa. ‘I thought you weren’t interested in Ean.’

Ailsa blushed. ‘I’m not, but I’ve seen him running in the hills. And I’ve seen Brodrick win the recent races these past few years. Ean could win.’

Holly agreed as she knitted a slipover in stocking stitch using a light green Aran weight yarn. ‘I’ve seen Ean running and he is fast, and a lot stronger looking these days, as if he’s matured, become more like the man he was meant to be. I think he’s always been in the shadow of Finlay and Innis.’

Skye spoke up. ‘Anyone underestimating Ean these days is in for a surprise.’

The ladies looked at Skye.

Skye shrugged. ‘You can’t help but notice that Ean has become quite...buff.’

The women laughed.

‘Not that I’ve been looking in particular,’ Skye told them, starting to blush too, and focussed on knitting her lilac tone jumper.

‘More tea?’ Elspeth offered the ladies.

Rosabel and Primrose stood up. ‘We’ll make it. You get on with your mending.’

‘What type of mending are you going to do?’ Holly said to Elspeth. ‘Visible or invisible mending?’

Elspeth held Brodrick's jumper up and frowned. 'I'm not sure. The holes in the elbows are fairly big, so there's no easy way to use invisible mending to sort them. The frays around the neckline I can mend with yarn to match.' She dug into her bag, pulled out her needle book, and selected a snag repair needle. Then she popped the needle through the unsightly snags on the jumper and pulled them through to the underside of the jumper where they wouldn't be seen. This neatened up the neckline easily and quickly.

'That's a handy way to repair the snags on the jumper,' Skye remarked.

'The snags won't be seen when they're inside the jumper,' said Elspeth.

As the ladies knitted everything from cardigans to shawls, and socks to soft toys, the tea was served and the conversation veered round to Brodrick — and his beautiful cottage on the hillside and his boat.

'Has Brodrick invited you to his cottage, or to go sailing?' Primrose said to Elspeth.

'Yes,' Elspeth told them.

'What? To go to his cottage or sailing?' said Primrose.

Elspeth's expression answered the question.

'Oh, he's really trying to romance you,' Primrose remarked, causing the members to want all the details.

'You're a scandalous lot,' Elspeth told them with a smile. 'We're supposed to be knitting and chatting about yarn and patterns and—'

'We natter about everything,' said Ailsa.

Rosabel smiled and turned the focus on Ailsa. 'Has Ean invited you to go sailing on his boat?'

'No, he hasn't.'

'Yet,' Skye added, giggling.

'Ean has a thing for Ailsa,' Holly explained to Elspeth, though everyone heard and agreed.

‘So why hasn’t Ean made a move on her?’ said Elspeth.

The ladies let Ailsa explain. ‘I broke up with my longtime boyfriend at the New Year party at the castle. He’s gone off, accepted a job in London. We’re over. I’m okay. We were starting to drift. He wanted to leave the island. I wanted to stay. It was never going to work.’

‘But Ailsa wants time to herself before jumping on the romance carousel again,’ said Holly.

‘I just want a wee bit of time to myself, to concentrate on my crafts,’ Ailsa explained. ‘And have fun nights like this at the knitting bee.’

Elspeth fully understood that. This was partly why she was reluctant to embark on a romance with Brodrick. She was happy to go sailing around the island on his boat, but wary of diving in at the deep end when it came to falling in love. And she was leaving to go home at the end of the summer. When she’d accepted Morven’s offer to take over the shop, her only concerns were dealing with the stock, the orders, the accounts and fitting into the community. Romance hadn’t crossed her mind. Now it was taking up more time than her knitting. The balance was out of whack, and she sensed it. This evening, in the company of the knitting bee ladies, she felt the balance tilt back to where she was totally comfortable — knitting and chatting about crafts.

The gossip continued to swirl around Elspeth, buzzing happily in the background, like lying in the garden on a summer’s day listening to the busy buzz of the bees.

‘What about you, Elspeth?’ Ailsa’s voice cut into her faraway thoughts.

Elspeth blinked.

‘I didn’t know you’d be holding the knitting bee night so soon,’ Ailsa said, unaware that Elspeth was catching up with the conversation again. ‘I organised a get together at my cottage a couple of nights from now. I’m going to go ahead with it anyway, and I hope you’ll come along.’

‘Yes,’ Elspeth heard herself say before thinking it through.

‘Bring your knitting or any other crafts you’d like to work on — quilting, dressmaking, embroidery, anything,’ said Ailsa.

‘Great. I’ll do that,’ Elspeth confirmed.

‘Ailsa’s cottage is beautiful,’ said Rosabel. ‘One of the loveliest on the island. It’s even nicer than Brodrick’s cottage.’

‘What’s his cottage like?’ Elspeth took the chance to ask.

‘Stylish, rather like his cafe bar decor,’ Rosabel explained. ‘He invited us to a summer soiree last year and his garden barbecue was lit up with lanterns. We all had a great night. The view of the sea was amazing.’

‘Brodrick’s kitchen is fabulous,’ Primrose enthused. ‘As you would expect from a man like him. A chef.’

‘I don’t think of him as a chef,’ Elspeth said, realising she’d wrapped his cafe bar business into a niche of management rather than hands-on cooking.

‘He’s a top chef, well-trained, and with his own natural talent,’ Primrose told her. ‘Innis excels too. But they’re like two different sides of the same cooking coin.’

‘But not rivals,’ said Elspeth.

‘Not until you arrived,’ Skye added cheekily.

Elspeth felt a blush start to form on her cheeks.

‘Anyway,’ Primrose said, bringing the conversation back to Brodrick’s cottage, ‘you’ll see how stylish his cottage is when you go there. I assume he wants you to dine with him.’

‘He does.’

‘My cottage is near his,’ said Ailsa. ‘That’s if you can see it. My cherry trees in the front garden are covered in pink blossom and the spring flowers are in full bloom. The wisteria is already trailing across the windows and door. I need to trim it back before the summer encourages it to get into a floral fight with the climbing roses.’

‘It sounds lovely,’ said Elspeth. ‘I’m sure I’ll see where it is.’ She pictured looking up at the hillside in the morning. If it

was near Brodrick's cottage it would be easy to find.

Aisla laughed. 'There are more flowers, blossom and greenery to be seen than the whitewashed cottage.'

'My floribunda needs taming too,' Rosabel said thoughtfully, wishing she had more time to tend her garden. She lived in a semi-detached cottage. Primrose lived in the other half, but their lives spilled over into each other's abodes, and the two kitchens offered them double the room to bake without being restricted for space.

Skye giggled. 'I thought that big strapping farmer friend of yours offered to do that for you.'

'Don't you be cheeky,' Rosabel scolded her jokingly. 'He'd been imbibing at the New Year ceilidh. I've had a lifetime of romances and now I'm content to focus on my baking and my garden.'

'He's liked you for years though, hasn't he?' Primrose prompted her sister. 'We get free bags of new tatties from him every season.'

'We bake him cakes in exchange,' Rosabel reminded her.

'You got his hopes up when you baked him a birthday cake a few months ago,' Skye told her.

'I was just being neighbourly, and I'd extra royal icing and raisins to bake a birthday cake.' This was Rosabel's excuse and she was sticking to it.

Skye smirked. 'It was tied with a big rose pink bow.'

'Rose pink is my signature colour, just as Primrose has a penchant for shades of yellow.'

Primrose continued knitting a bumblebee tea cosy for Aisla, having decided to knit her a new one rather than offer her one from the two she'd knitted. 'Do you want me to knit and stuff a wee bumble for the top of your tea cosy?' she asked Ailsa.

'Yes, please.' Ailsa smiled.

CHAPTER NINE

The knitting bee night continued with lots of chatter, patterns being exchanged and plenty of tea, cake, scones and sweets.

Primrose put the bumblebee tea cosy she was knitting aside and stood up. 'Could I pick up more of this double knit yarn from your shop?' she said to Elspeth.

'Yes.' Elspeth went to stop mending Brodrick's jumper to assist her.

'Don't mess up your mending. I know where the yarn is. I bought this a few days ago. I'll get it myself without disturbing the displays,' Primrose assured her. 'Morven keeps her shop lovely and tidy.' She picked up the labels from the three colours of yarn she was using, so she could match the batch numbers, and hurried through to the front shop.

Elspeth continued mending the elbows of the jumper. She'd used invisible mending stitches on the neckline, as well as having pulled the stray tags through to the inside. Now she was using a darning mushroom, and weaving and stitching patches that were noticeable in a variegated grey yarn that was the same weight as the one the jumper was knitted from. The visible mending technique created neat patches on the elbows that blended with the jumper's design.

'Morven left the shop so neat and tidy for me,' said Elspeth. 'I plan to keep it that way too. I ran a Hoover along the shelves and the floor today to pick up any stoor and oose,' she said, referring to any dust and fuzzy bits of fluff, like dust bunnies.

'I was so busy spinning new yarn,' a member explained, 'that I didn't have time to Hoover and do my housework before heading here. You could stir my hoose with a stick.'

Several of the members laughed.

‘My house is being decorated. It’s in right mogar,’ said another member. ‘But the mess and muddle will be worth it. My husband always makes a lovely job of it.’

Primrose called through to Elspeth. ‘I’m taking two 100g balls of yellow. One 100g ball of amber, and I only need a small 50g ball of chocolate. Luckily, the batch numbers are the same as the yarn I’ve been using, so the colours will match perfectly on the tea cosy.’ She’d knitted half of it already, and planned to make short work of it as the bee night continued, and finish it off at home. ‘I’ll have plenty of yarn left to make other tea cosies.’

‘That’s great,’ Elspeth called back to her.

A couple of minutes later, Primrose came through with the yarn. ‘I’ve put a note on the counter for what I owe you. I’ll settle up before I go.’

Elspeth admired the tea cosy pattern. ‘This is a nice design.’

‘It’ll look lovely in my kitchen. And I love that you’ll knit a bee for the top,’ Ailsa said to Primrose.

‘I only need a smidgen of white yarn for the bee’s bumble.’ Primrose rifled through her knitting bag stash and found a small amount of white yarn. She cast on three stitches, knitted one row, then increased the stitches on the following three rows. Changing the white yarn for chocolate and then yellow, she knitted the little bee. Soon he was ready for stitching together and stuffing.

And all the while, the chatter continued, swirling around the members as they exchanged everything from gossip to ideas for knitting.

By the end of the evening, Elspeth felt she’d made a lot of new friends and become an accepted member of the knitting bee.

All was well. Holly, Skye, Ailsa and others helped wash the tea dishes, and tucked the folding chairs and tables in the storeroom cupboard. Everything was left tidy, as if they’d never been there. Any leftover cakes were shared with those

wanting something to take home with them. Brodrick's chocolate cake wasn't included in the takeaways. There wasn't a crumb left of the lavish chocolate treat. Elspeth had indulged in a small slice, along with a large slice of the bramble and cream sponge.

The members, buttoning up their jackets and coats against the brisk air, armed with their knitting bags, and chatting happily, filtered out of the shop waving goodnight to Elspeth.

'Remember to pop along to my cottage for our craft night,' Ailsa reminded Elspeth.

'I'll be there.' Elspeth waved the last of them out of the shop and then locked the door against the wind whipping in from the sea. A storm looked to be brewing.

Securing everything and turning on the shop's display lights, Elspeth headed upstairs.

Should she do the sensible thing and go to bed to get a decent night's sleep? Or...put the kettle on for tea and snuggle up in front of the fire to finish mending Brodrick's jumper?

As the kettle clicked off, Elspeth made a mug of strong, hot tea, with plenty of milk in it. She'd given most of the milk, she'd over estimated, to the members. But that still left a surfeit of it. She added another splash of milk to her tea, took it through to the living room, and worked on the mending.

The sound of the wind and rain from the gathering storm added to the cosiness of a night knitting by the fire.

She stopped watching the clock, and kept stitching and weaving the yarn into patches until the holes in the sleeves were mended.

Holding it up she checked her work, and smiled, satisfied she'd repaired the wear and tear.

Although the jumper had been washed, she could still pick up the scent of Brodrick's shaving products, or whatever he used for showering. Nothing strong, just enough to remind her of Brodrick.

Folding the jumper and putting it in the bag he'd given her, she planned to hand it to him in the morning. A fair exchange for the delicious chocolate cake, and dinner at the cafe bar.

Securing everything for the night, she climbed into bed, pulled the duvet and quilt up, and peered out the window at the stormy night sky.

She fell asleep and didn't stir until the morning.

Making scrambled eggs on toast for her breakfast, Elspeth then tidied up, and went downstairs to the shop, taking the bag with Brodrick's jumper with her.

The morning light shone through the front window, and she could see the colourful sails of the boats bobbing gently in the harbour. The sea in the bay looked calm.

Picking up the bag, she opened the front door and stepped outside. Everything was refreshed, and the colours of the shops along the main street, and the surrounding scenery, bore an extra clarity. She breathed in the fresh air, enjoying the calm after the storm.

The only thing that wasn't calm was the excited beating of her heart as she approached the front door of Brodrick's cafe bar. A few lights were on, and his car was parked outside. He was in, and no doubt getting ready for another busy day.

She planned to hand him the jumper, gain his approval of the mending, but was prepared to redo the repairs if he didn't like the visible mending patches. No lingering. No blushes or telling him she'd been dreaming about him during the night. Nothing like that.

She went inside and looked around.

No one was there.

The lights along the bar lit up the cafe.

She checked the time. It was early morning, and her shop wasn't due to open for a while yet. She'd bounded out of bed at the crack of dawn, filled with energy to start her day, jumped in the shower, washed and dried her hair, and put on a

pair of slim-fitting black trousers with a pale pink jumper she'd knitted.

Standing in the middle of the cafe bar, she saw that it had a small dance floor in the heart of it. She hadn't noticed it before.

Stepping on to it, the heels of her ankle boots sounded on the wooden floor.

Seconds later, rumblings of someone clambering up a ladder from the cellar jolted her.

Brodrick appeared and climbed out from a hatch beside the bar. His reaction to seeing Elspeth standing there was instant. A smile lit up his face.

'Elspeth!'

He wore dark trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up revealing his strong arms. It was open at the neck, one button too many undone, tempting her to button it up or undo a couple more.

She blinked away the unwanted thoughts immediately, and blushed.

Brodrick only saw the best person he could've wished for to start his day.

'Sorry, I was in the cellar changing over the beer barrels,' he apologised. 'I didn't hear you.'

She held out the bag to him. 'I've mended your jumper.'

Brodrick opened the bag eagerly and lifted the jumper out. 'Wow! What a job you've made of this. It's far better than I expected. It looks like new, but with stylish patches on the elbows.'

Without any encouragement from Elspeth, he pulled the jumper on and held his arms out, admiring the mending work on the elbows, the marl grey yarn patches that blended in with the grey tone of the jumper.

'I love it,' he said.

His enthusiasm made her smile. ‘I worked on it at the knitting bee last night.’

‘I suppose the ladies had plenty to say about you doing this for me.’

‘They did.’ She couldn’t hide her smile.

‘Do they think we’re an item?’

‘I told them we’re just friends.’

He stepped closer and gazed down at her. ‘As your friend, I truly appreciate you mending my jumper.’

‘Good luck with the race.’

‘Thank you, Elspeth.’

She glanced around her. ‘I didn’t realise you had a dance floor in the cafe.’

‘Yes, it’s small, but adequate for couples smoochy dancing after dinner.’

She smiled. ‘Smoochy dancing?’

‘Romance dancing,’ he renamed it.

Elspeth frowned. ‘Romance dancing? Is that a thing here on the island?’

‘If it’s not, it should be.’ Then taking her by surprise, he pulled her into his arms and began slow dancing with her, demonstrating what he meant.

She laughed and let him lead her in a few steps, feeling the gentle strength of his arms around her. Beneath the soft texture of the jumper, she felt the lean muscles on his chest, arms and shoulders. She liked how it made her feel, perhaps a little too much, and as she went to pull back, he held on to her for a few more seconds, smiling down at her with warmth in his eyes.

At that moment, two members of staff walked in to start work, preparing the food in the kitchen.

Elspeth and Brodrick stepped apart immediately.

He ran a hand through his hair, sweeping it back from his brow. ‘I’ve changed the barrels over, but the wine delivery is

still in the kitchen,' he said to the staff. 'I'll be right through to get it.'

'Sure thing, Brodrick,' one of the chefs, a man in his late thirties, told him, and walked through to the kitchen, followed by another man, one of the bartenders.

Tight smiles were exchanged, and smirks.

'I'll tell them...' Brodrick wasn't sure how to explain the early morning dancing.

'That you were so pleased with the jumper you danced me around the floor,' she suggested lightly.

'Do you think they'll buy that excuse?'

'Absolutely,' she lied.

'You're no use at lying, Elspeth.'

She smiled and started to head out. 'I'll take that as a compliment,' she said, glancing back, and then left to get on with her day at the shop.

Before opening the shop for business, she went out to the back garden and picked fresh flowers and greenery to put into the vases upstairs. She shook the stray raindrops off the petals and leaves, and loved the scent of the garden mingling with the air wafting in from the sea.

Filling the vases with water and arranging the flowers, she took one of the vases downstairs and sat it behind the counter. The fragrance of the flowers smelled lovely mixed with the comforting and familiar scent of the yarn. Shops like this, and haberdasheries selling thread and fabric, always made her want to knit and sew. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in any shop like this and left empty handed. If ever. She always bought something, even if she didn't particularly need it. Coming home with a bag brimming with balls of yarn, fabric for dressmaking or quilting, felt great.

Unlocking the front door, she turned the sign to *open*.

‘Morning, Elspeth,’ said Ailsa, wandering in a few minutes later. ‘I’m looking for another ball of the azure blue yarn for my cardigan. Morven put one aside, under the counter.’

Elspeth lifted the ball of yarn that belonged to the same batch Ailsa had been using. ‘Here you go.’

Ailsa sighed happily. ‘I thought I had plenty, but Morven thankfully put one aside just in case.’ She paid for the yarn. ‘That was a great knitting bee night. Everyone said how much they liked it.’

‘I’m glad, and I’m looking forward to your craft evening.’

‘It’ll be fun. Are you going to be bringing your knitting?’

‘I was thinking I’d like to try my hand again at quilting, just for a change,’ said Elspeth.

‘Most of us knit, crochet, quilt, embroider, you name it, so you’ll have plenty of helping hands and encouragement. What do you want to make?’

‘I’d like to make a small quilt, for throwing over when I’m sitting on the sofa knitting.’

‘Do you have fabric?’ said Ailsa.

‘I don’t have much fabric, just a few scraps in my stash. But it’ll be enough to get started.’

‘My stash has taken over part of my living room and is making its way through every room. There are plenty of fat quarters for piecing together and making blocks for a quilt, and I have hexie papers you can use if you decide to make hexies for a patchwork.’

‘I don’t want to use up your stash,’ said Elspeth.

‘Good luck in trying to make a dent in it.’

Elspeth laughed. ‘Okay, thank you.’

‘I’ll probably see you before the craft night, but if not, remember it starts around seven.’

Agreeing to see each other at Ailsa’s cottage the following night, Ailsa left to go to her craft shop nearby on the main

street, and Elspeth got on with packing the customer's online orders. Several of her customers had taken her up on her discount offer and selected yarn from the knitting shop. She was happy to pack the yarn up for them. The Aran knit and local dyed and spun yarns were particularly popular, and again, Elspeth wanted to knit with all the lovely textures and gorgeous colours.

Although garments — jumpers, cardigans, shrugs, shawls and scarves were the items she knitted more than anything else, she loved knitting soft toys, and designed her own patterns. Some of these could be knitted in an afternoon or evening, stuffed with scraps of yarn or fabric, and stitched with everything from double knit yarn to wispy textures that created a fluffy effect, especially for cute bunnies and owls. She had great patterns for knitting gnomes and fairies, including fairy houses and toadstools.

She kept leftover yarn from balls she'd been using, and had bags and boxes filled with colourful stashes that she could pick from when she needed only a scrap to stitch a happy smile or cute nose on to the softies. She'd brought her stash with her in the car to the island, and it was tucked through the back of the shop.

Whenever she put the knitted toys for sale online, they were snapped up quickly. The local yarns made her want to knit some softies. So she planned to take the parcels to the post office, make lunch, and then start knitting one of them in the afternoon.

But making plans on the island wasn't easy, as she found out on her way back from the post office.

'Hey, there!' Brodrick waved to her. He was heading over to the harbour.

She walked across to him.

'I'm checking my boat has weathered the storm. Want to take a look?'

She thumbed behind her to the shop. 'I can't leave the shop for too long.' She'd put a sign up that read: *I'm at the post*

office. Back soon.

‘You can see the shop from the boat and hurry over if any customers are at your door,’ he reasoned.

Elsbeth nodded, enticed to join him, to have a look at his boat.

They walked together along the harbour’s edge and he stopped at his boat that was tied secure.

He jumped on to the deck and then held his hands out. ‘Come aboard.’

Her slight hesitation made him reach up, take hold of her and lift her with ease on to the deck. He placed her down, and smiled as she let out an excited squeal.

‘We’re not setting sail,’ she said, panicking that he’d cast off or whatever the term was. Maybe she was thinking of her knitting and not boating.

‘No.’ He laughed. ‘Not today, another day or an evening sail around the island.’

The latter appealed to her sense of a midnight adventure, and she tried and failed to tame the thought of night sailing with Brodrick.

‘Ah, that put a glint in those blue eyes of yours,’ he said, smirking.

She laughed.

‘Come on, let me show you what you’ll be letting yourself in for when we go sailing.’

She eyed him carefully. ‘You need to work on that sales pitch of yours.’

‘Okay, how about...I promise to pack a picnic basket with your favourite carrot cake and other snacks as we sail out into the sunny blue yonder.’

‘Your chocolate cake could be my new favourite.’

‘A slice of each then.’

‘You’re a very determined man, aren’t you?’

He nodded. ‘Especially when it comes to you.’

She glanced over at the shop. No customers, though she was sure the orders would be coming in online.

‘A picnic sounds great, but what if it’s at night?’ she teased him.

‘I’ll rig up twinkle lights.’

She laughed. ‘You won’t be thwarted on this, will you?’

‘Nope.’ He held out his hand. ‘Come and have a look at what you’ll be sailing.’

Elsbeth gasped. ‘Me? I’ve never sailed anything other than a little toy boat in the bath when I was seven.’

‘I’m impressed you have some experience. Most people start from scratch.’

‘The sails were wonky and it sank when I added the bubble bath.’

‘At least you tried,’ he said. ‘Pluck as well as skill is a requirement.’

‘I can’t sail your boat,’ she told him.

‘Did you know that negative words are instantly cancelled out by the sea air?’

She went along with his joke. ‘I didn’t know that. You learn something new every day. Today I learned that when you waved to me I should’ve made a run for the shop and locked the door.’

‘But there’s a ton more fun to be had out here.’

She laughed. ‘Okay, I give in. You win this round of the game. The game’s a bogey.’

He smiled that she’d used an old fashioned term meaning the game had been called off, the towel thrown in, and all bets off.

Clasping her hands he steered her towards the controls. ‘This is where you’ll stand when I cast off.’

‘You’re playing to win this game with me, aren’t you?’ she said, smiling.

For a moment his clear green eyes gazed down at her. ‘No, but I am playing for keeps.’

Shrugging away the comment he’d made, revealing how strong his intentions were, he continued to show her the steering and point out to sea.

‘We’ll head out of the harbour and bank left, then sail anti-clockwise around the island.’

‘If it’s daytime, can we stop at some of the coves? I used to love them, and I haven’t been there for years.’

‘Of course,’ he promised. ‘Anything you want.’

At this moment, she wanted Brodrick, for him to cast off from the harbour’s edge, to throw caution in the face of the wind, forget the shop just for a tiny bit, and go sailing into the beautiful blue-green sea on a romantic adventure.

Reality and responsibility jangled her senses back into work mode when she saw two customers peering in the knitting shop window.

‘I have to go,’ she said, wondering how she’d climb back up on to the harbour boardwalk.

She needn’t have worried. Brodrick lifted her back up, again with ease, and placed her down. Then he climbed up too and waved as she ran across to the knitting shop.

‘Thanks for the sailing lesson.’ Her words filtered through the air, trailing behind her, leaving yet another impression that was hard not to love.

CHAPTER TEN

The afternoon light shining in the knitting shop window created a warm glow. Elspeth sat at the counter knitting a sheep softie.

The fluffy white yarn for the main body and head of the sheep knitted up well. After stuffing them with scraps of yarn, she threaded a large-eye needle with white yarn and used a ladder stitch to sew the gaps closed. Then she added a little tail, ears and legs, and stitched on a face.

When the softie was finished, she placed it in the window beside the white yarn she'd used to make it. She took photos of it in the window display to put on the shop's website as an interesting update to promote the yarn.

She selected one of the photos to send to Morven.

Don't panic, but there's a sheep in your shop window!

Elspeth pressed send and smiled.

Then she noticed a message with photos had come through earlier from her aunt, and read it with interest:

There are so many wonderful places to see on the West Coast. We're standing outside Rabbie Burns' cottage in Alloway, Ayrshire, then we headed along the coast to the ruins of Greenan Castle and Dunure Castle. We drove down the Electric Brae onwards to magnificent Culzean Castle. The message included: On the shore, with Ailsa Craig in the background. And the Isle of Arran, the Sleeping Warrior. The sea shimmered like silver in the sunlight. The message concluded: Loved the photos of the knitting bee night!

Elspeth tidied up the shop as the evening sky deepened to inky blue across the harbour and coastline.

Before she closed the shop for the night, someone spotted the sheep in the window, and came in and bought it along with

several balls of the white yarn to knit a jumper.

Finally locking up, she turned the lights off so that only the spotlights were on to highlight the window display. As she switched the computer off, she jolted seeing a man peering in the shop window.

‘Innis!’ She gasped, wondering what he was doing? The tense and slightly annoyed expression on his face signalled something was wrong.

Hurrying over to the door, she unlocked it.

He didn’t give her a second to say anything before bursting into a complaint and accusation.

‘I know I’m going to regret asking this, Elspeth,’ he began, ‘but I’ve just had Skye in my cake shop buying chocolate truffles. She told me, in a rather concerned manner, that you had a sheep in your shop window. I was icing flowers on a very intricate wedding cake and couldn’t stop to go and look for myself. Rosabel and Primrose seemed to back Skye up, but they were too busy serving customers to check for me. Now it seems to have gone.’

Elspeth went to explain that it wasn’t a real sheep, but he continued to railroad over her.

‘Is it true? I told Skye she was talking nonsense, winding me up, but she insisted it was true. She even made a bet, that if I could prove her wrong, that there was no sheep in your window, she’d mend all the dangly buttons on my shirts, personally. I didn’t know I had any, but apparently she’s the expert when it comes to clothes and couture.’

Elspeth couldn’t get a word in edgeways, and now she was intrigued to let him tie himself in knots to see where it all unravelled.

‘If she’s right, I agreed I’d give her one of my large boxes of special chocolates,’ he said. And then he glared at her with those fierce amber eyes. ‘Is the gossip true?’

‘It is,’ Elspeth told him, giving herself a gold star for initially keeping a straight face. ‘I thought the sheep would

attract the attention of tourists and promote the new ranges of yarn.'

He looked exasperated.

Elsbeth kept up her game face. 'It wasn't a big sheep.'

'It's not the size. Size doesn't matter. I understand that you're a city girl and haven't settled into the ways of the island yet, but really...you can't do ridiculously impulsive things like that,' he told her firmly. 'I have a cake shop next door!'

She couldn't hold in her laughter any longer.

'Oh, so you think that's funny do you?'

Without explaining, she held up her phone and showed him one of the pictures she'd taken of the knitted sheep in the window display.

Checkmate, she thought, triumphantly.

The nostrils on his nose flared as he realised his faux pas. 'It's a knitted sheep.'

'It is. A customer saw the sheep in the window, snapped it up, and bought a bag full of yarn while they were in the shop. The promotion worked.'

A smile fought to break free from his firmly pressed lips.

'You really didn't think I had an actual sheep in the shop window, did you?' she teased him. And then she burst out laughing.

Innis joined her, shaking his head. 'It's been a crazy, hectic, busy day. A customer asked me to make a special iced birthday cake for them for a party this evening. They had a cake, but it got ruined when one of their pets decided it looked tasty, so they came to me at short notice to help them out. I worked on the cake this morning, through lunch, then played catch up all afternoon.' He shook his head again and muttered, 'Skye!'

They were both laughing heartily when Brodrick appeared behind Innis outside the shop.

Brodrick's eyes had an extra hint of green in them, igniting from thinking that Elspeth was flirting with Innis. Brodrick couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Innis crack a wide smile, let alone laugh like this. Clearly he was having a great time with Elspeth.

Disappointed that his plan to invite Elspeth to have dinner at the cafe bar was scuppered by Innis having fun with her, Brodrick turned away to leave.

'Brodrick!' Elspeth called after him. 'Are you okay?'

'Yes, fine,' he muttered. 'I didn't mean to interrupt.' With that curt comment, he went inside the cafe bar, clearly annoyed but trying to suppress it.

Innis was still smiling. 'Sorry if I've caused trouble for you. I'd better get back to work. And deliver a box of my special chocolates.' Smiling at her, he walked into his cake shop.

Elspeth closed the door and locked it. In the cosy warmth of the softly lit knitting shop, she gazed out the window at the view of the sea and the silhouettes of the boats bobbing in the harbour against the twilight sky. It looked like a summer evening sky, not quite as deep as in the depth of winter or even spring. The promise of a lovely summer always filled her with joy.

As she admired the view, the purposeful figure of Innis marched past the window carrying a large box of his special chocolates. He glanced in the window at Elspeth, giving her a tight-lipped smile, and walked on.

Elspeth smiled to herself, imagining the squeals of glee from Skye.

Shaking her head and sighing about everything that had happened, she went upstairs to make dinner.

She popped a potato pie in the oven and prepared salad to go with it while it cooked.

Sitting in the kitchen eating her dinner, she gazed out the window at the back garden, and planned to get some fresh air after dinner, then enjoy a relaxing evening knitting by the fire.

Clearing away the dishes, she went downstairs and out to the back garden. The air was calm but brisk. She hugged her arms around herself for warmth, but felt the benefit of the evening air. The garden smelled of flowers, grass and sea air, a heady scent that brought back memories of the past when she'd play as a child in the garden after dinner. The early summer evenings seemed to stretch into languid nights when she had to be cajoled inside to go to bed.

Taking a deep breath, she gazed up at the starry sky, so clear it looked like a painting. She felt small in comparison, and for a brief moment, all alone. But that was okay she told herself, content to enjoy her time on the island.

She walked further down the garden, over the lawn that was edged with hedging and bracken, but paused and turned around quickly when she heard a noise in the shadows nearby.

She blinked, seeing the figure of Brodrick walk down his garden next door, carrying two mugs with plumes of steam filtering from them into the night.

He offered her one of the mugs. 'A mug of apology hot chocolate.'

Elsbeth peered hesitantly at the frothy mixture. 'With sprinkles?'

'Lavish with sprinkles.'

'Okay, then.' She accepted the mug of hot chocolate and cupped her hands around it for warmth.

'I always frown on men displaying foolish jealousy,' he stated without prompting. 'But then I go and do just that.' He glanced down, clearly displeased with himself. 'But when I saw you and Innis so...happy together, I just couldn't help feeling...jealous.'

'You don't have to explain,' she said, wanting to save Brodrick putting himself through the mill of emotions.

'I feel I do. You see, I really like you, Elspeth. And I know that you'll be going back to your own life in Glasgow, but while you're here I'd like to spend more time with you.'

‘Remember, I’m taking you sailing around the island on your boat,’ she joked.

‘Can’t forget that. As you’re busy working in the shop during the day, it’ll have to be a night sailing adventure.’ He gazed up at the dark sky. ‘I hope you can navigate your way around the coast by the stars.’

Elsbeth glanced up at the hundreds of stars sparkling in the night sky. ‘I wouldn’t know my North Star from my Big Dipper.’

Brodrick stepped over the hedging into her garden and stood next to her as he pointed upwards with one hand while holding his mug in the other. ‘See those seven bright stars? That’s the Big Dipper, the Plough.’

‘I see them.’

‘Now follow those over to the bright North Star. That’s true north.’

For a moment, she was lost in wonder, fascinated by the stars, the beautifully clear night sky. And then aware how close Brodrick was standing and causing her heart to thunder in her chest.

Brodrick gazed at her lovely profile in the evening light, longing to be with her, to hold her and kiss her. But he wouldn’t compromise their friendship, and under the circumstances, loving Elspeth would only tear his heart apart when she had to leave. It was better to control these urges, and genuinely make the most of their summer together as friends.

‘Whether you’re sailing out to sea,’ he explained, ‘or in the city at night, the North Star keeps you right whenever you feel lost.’

Elsbeth glanced at Brodrick, seeing the faraway look in his eyes. She hadn’t known him long, but she felt she was starting to know him well. She’d felt lost for a moment earlier before he’d arrived, now she felt grounded on the island rather than adrift.

She sipped her hot chocolate and looked again at the stars. ‘This would make a gorgeous quilt pattern — the twinkling

stars against the deep, blue sky.’

‘You should make one. It’ll remind you of your time on the island, and nights like this one.’

And you, Brodrick, she thought to herself, wondering if he sensed how deeply she was in danger of falling for him.

She nodded. ‘I think I will. I’ve been invited to Ailsa’s craft night tomorrow evening at her cottage. She’s offered me fabric from her stash for quilting.’

‘Ailsa’s cottage is near mine. Drop by after the craft night for a cuppa if you want. I’ll be in. I’m usually up late. There’s a great view of the sea. You can plan the route you’ll be sailing us.’

She smiled. ‘Where did you learn to sail?’

‘From my father and grandfather. My parents owned a hotel on the island. They’re retired now and living on Tiree. I see them often enough.’

‘Tiree is a beautiful island.’

‘They love the sun, and Tiree is said to be the sunniest place in Scotland,’ he explained. ‘My parents both have relatives, siblings, on Tiree.’

‘What about you? Any siblings?’ she said.

‘No, just me.’

‘Same here.’

‘My parents sold the hotel several years ago, and that was around the time I inherited money from my grandfather. I invested it my cafe bar. I’d already finished my training. I invested in the cottage too. So here I am, and here I plan to stay.’

‘It must be great to have it all figured out.’ She sipped her hot chocolate.

He frowned. ‘You must have some sort of plan, even a rough outline.’

‘No, only a will-o’-the-wisp game plan.’

‘You don’t seem like the type to be blown hither and thither by the breeze.’ He smiled warmly.

She laughed. ‘I have my moments of sensibility, and then wild notions — like packing my bags and coming to the island, or paddling in the waterfall at night.’

‘Wild notions make life fun.’

She looked up at him with a reassuring smile. ‘I am having fun. But I never imagined how deeply fond I’d become again of the island, as if my happy memories of it are playing out in real time. Childhood memories usually have rosy glow around them that fades with time.’ She sighed. ‘But instead, I’m having even more fun than ever. The people, the knitting bee ladies, you and others have welcomed me in and for the first time in years, I’m starting to feel like I belong.’

‘You could stay, when Morven comes back.’

She shook her head. ‘No, I don’t think I will.’

He told her one of his worries. ‘I’m concerned that Morven will cut her holiday short and come home a lot sooner.’

‘That’s crossed my mind too. She’s been sending pictures of all the places she’s visiting, but will she be gone for the entire summer?’ She shrugged. ‘I’m not sure.’ She sighed again.

‘Isn’t there a spare bedroom you could sleep in and share the accommodation with your aunt until you find a place of your own, or someone to settle down with?’

She looked up at him for a moment. Could she see a future here? Past romances had always come crashing down in a torrent of icy rain and bad endings. Did she want to risk that again, now, this summer?

‘Don’t let your chocolate get cold,’ Brodrick said in a rich, soothing voice.

Elsbeth sipped it while standing next to him, both quietly gazing up at the starry sky, content for now just being there together.

‘I’d like to go back to the waterfall,’ she said finally. ‘I found my swimwear tucked into my luggage.’ She’d forgotten it was pink. Maybe she had her own liking for rosy hues.

‘No excuses now for not going swimming in the waterfall.’

‘Nope. I especially want to go night swimming when the waterfall’s all lit up.’

‘You can get some practice in when we sail around the island and stop off at the coves. Ever dived into the sea off the bow of a boat?’

Elsbeth blinked. ‘No, why?’

‘How else do you think you’ll visit the coves?’

‘I thought you’d sail up to the shore and sort of...land me on the sand.’

‘We’ll have to brush up on your nautical terms,’ he said with a smirk.

‘You’re really telling me I’ll have to swim to shore?’

‘It’s not far.’ The twinkle in his eyes warned her he was joking.

She sighed. ‘There goes my plan to wear my bikini. I’m sure Skye will have a one-piece, vintage swimsuit with polka dots, halter neckline and maybe a frilly bottom instead. Far more practical.’

‘No,’ he was quick to reply. ‘I’ll take the boat right up to the edge of the island. I’ll even carry you on to the sand.’

She burst out laughing.

He shook his head at her. ‘You’re trouble, do you know that?’

She kept on laughing.

‘If you want company to go swimming at the waterfall, I’d be happy to take you there,’ he offered.

‘Okay, but it’ll have to be at night. I can’t leave the shop unattended during the day. Though I should be due some days off for good behaviour.’

‘No days off for you then.’

She smiled and gazed up at the sky, breathing in the brisk air. ‘It’s nights like this that make me want to throw caution to the wind, and just go where the breeze blows me.’ She recalled her aunt saying this too. And now Morven was doing that, making her dreams come true.

‘In a carefree night, where would you go?’

She sighed thoughtfully. ‘The forget-me-not waterfall.’ She didn’t imagine he’d encourage her to do just that.

‘Why don’t we?’

‘What? Go now?’

He shrugged. ‘We’re fuelled up on hot chocolate. Why not?’

She couldn’t think of an excuse good enough to override the excitement she felt on taking him up on his suggestion.

‘Okay, let’s do it.’

He clasped her empty mug and held it with his. ‘I’ll tell the staff to hold the fort tonight. I’m due time off for bad behaviour.’

She glanced at him. ‘I’ll get my swimwear. Meet you outside in ten minutes.’

‘Meet me in five.’

Giggling, Elspeth ran inside, up the stairs, threw her pink bikini and a towel in a bag, secured the premises and was standing outside seconds before Brodrick arrived. He had a holdall with him.

‘My car’s over here.’ He led her to where it was parked nearby and opened the passenger door. Throwing his bag on the back seat, she did likewise with hers.

Turning the engine on, he drove them off along the main street where the eateries and bars were lit up, and headed upwards into the countryside towards the forest.

‘I didn’t think I’d be doing this tonight,’ she told him.

‘What type of evening did you have planned?’ he said out of curiosity.

‘Knitting by the fire.’

‘Sorry for scuppering your plan.’ He didn’t sound sorry at all.

‘What did you tell your staff?’

‘The truth.’

‘What version of the truth would that be?’

‘The one where I told them I’m running off with the mischievous knitting shop owner next door. And don’t expect me back to lock up at closing time.’

‘I like that version.’

They drove on, leaving the harbour and coast far behind.

‘Ready for a night adventure?’ he said to her.

‘Oh, yes.’

His dark silver car was clean and tidy, and Elspeth relaxed back into the comfy seat, glancing out the window as she saw the last glimpse of the sea through the trees before they drove deeper into the forest.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The lights from the waterfall illuminated the night as they drove up and parked the car.

Brodrick stepped out. 'I'll give you time to get changed in the car.' Taking his bag, he walked over to where a small beach hut was tucked near the trees, and disappeared inside.

Elsbeth changed into her pink bikini and pinned her hair up in a butterfly clasp. She left her clothes and towel in the car and walked over the grass to the edge of the waterfall. They had it all to themselves.

The solar lamps highlighted the sparkling water pouring down from the rocks into the pool, and she breathed in the scent of the flowers and greenery around the edges.

'It's like something out of a fairytale,' she said to Brodrick as he emerged from the hut wearing a pair of dark blue trunks. He cast his towel in the car and joined her at the pool's edge.

She tried not to stare at his fit physique. She knew he was fit and strong, but seeing him like this, his lean muscles, sent her heart into a flurry of excitement.

He smiled at her. 'You really have a pink bikini. I thought you were winding me up.' He tried not to stare at her lovely figure.

She laughed. 'Shall we brave the cold water? It doesn't feel too bad.' She trailed her fingers in the waterfall.

Brodrick held her hand, steadying her as she stepped into the water.

'It's refreshing, not too cold, not cold at all really.' She waded over to the water pouring down, getting ready to stand under it.

Brodrick joined her. He sank down into the pool and splashed the water on his face, sweeping his hands through his hair, acclimatising himself to it.

Elspeth stopped in front of the cascade of sparkling water, and then...she stepped forward, letting herself be drenched in the flow of the clear, fresh water, feeling it energise her.

‘Wow!’ She gasped as the waterfall fell around her shoulders, soaking every part of her. ‘It’s wonderful.’ She closed her eyes and let it flow over her head and face, then shook the droplets off. And all the while, smiling at Brodrick, sharing these moments with him.

‘Come on,’ she beckoned him.

He’d been momentarily mesmerised by her, admiring her enthusiasm, her willingness to be a little bit wild in the wilds of the Scottish island. He’d never met anyone like her. He knew he never would again.

She held out her hand and clasped hold of his, as if pulling him under the waterfall. But he didn’t need cajoled, not when it came to being with Elspeth, and he laughed as the water hit him in an invigorating rush of sparkling energy. Rather like the effect Elspeth had on him since the first day he’d met her.

She started to splash him playfully, even though they were both soaked.

He joined in her playfulness, without overstepping the mark or using his strength to overpower her and soak her twice as much.

She seemed to sense the gentleness in his strength, and was encouraged to have all the fun she wanted and dared to enjoy.

‘You’ll sleep tonight, Elspeth, after expending all that energy.’

‘No, I won’t. I’ll be buzzing well into the wee small hours.’ Her smile was sheer happiness.

It made him want to love and protect her all the more. He especially liked that this was Elspeth. No false bravado. No

pretence. His heart warmed to her in ways he'd never felt before.

She swam around in the pool, pausing to smile at him, like a shining bright star. Just like the ones in the sky above them, he thought.

He joined her, swimming and then relaxing back, gazing up at the clear night sky sparkling with stars.

When she noticed him do that, she did it too.

'This has to be the best way to stargaze in the world,' she said, lying back, floating on the surface of the water. She pointed up at the night sky. 'There's the bright North Star. And the Plough. I'll never be lost again. I'll always know what way to go now.'

He agreed. 'If I'm out at sea or up on the hills looking at the North Star, and you're in Glasgow gazing up at it too, remember that it's directly above the North Pole, and that we'll both be looking in the same direction at the same time.'

'I like that thought,' she said, gaining comfort that they'd still remain connected from time to time when she was back living in the city. 'Grab my phone, take a few pictures of us.'

He did as she asked, capturing her standing under the waterfall and swimming in the pool.

She took the phone from him and took pictures of him too. Then she stepped close and captured them standing smiling together with the waterfall in the background.

'It's getting late,' he said reluctantly, putting her phone back in the car. 'We'd better start heading home.'

She sighed, knowing he was right, but dived under the water and emerged from under the downpour of the waterfall one last time before stepping out on to the grass.

'See you in a few minutes.' He grabbed his towel from the car, draped it around his shoulders, and walked over to the beach hut.

Elsbeth shook off the excess water, dried herself with a towel and put her clothes back on. Wrapping her bikini in her

towel, she popped it in her bag, and slipped on her shoes. Seated in the car, she waited for him to join her.

He threw his bag in the back seat, got in and drove them away from the waterfall.

Elsbeth looked at the diminishing glow of the fairytale waterfall in the rear view mirror, promising herself that this wouldn't be the last time they'd do this.

The drive back was so fast, making her realise how close the coast was to the forest.

He pulled up outside the knitting shop.

'That was so much fun,' she said.

He nodded, admiring her. Even with her hair still damp and pinned up in a butterfly clasp with stray strands framing her smiling face, she looked beautiful.

He waited until she was safely inside the shop before driving off, feeling the pull of his heart, urging him not to leave.

Elsbeth was right. In the depth of the night she was still buzzing, sitting by the fire knitting another softie instead of the scarf she'd started. The owl was knitting up nicely in fuzzy yarn in shades of autumn tones from amber to yellow ochre and chocolate. Making herself another cup of tea, she cosied down again on the sofa, stuffing the parts of the owl with scraps of yarn, and then sewing them secure. The owl's eyes were fun to stitch on with yarn, and she'd learned from using this pattern she'd designed herself that yellow and amber yarn with dark chocolate circles created a cute look to the owl softie.

She sat the owl on the sofa, tidied her knitting in her craft bag, and then went to bed.

She didn't remember falling asleep, and woke up feeling refreshed in the morning.

A bowl of porridge with creamy milk for breakfast set her up for the busy day ahead.

Customer orders needed packed and posted, the stock required updating, yarns that were selling well reordered, she had to buy fresh milk and bread, water the flowers, and she wanted to design a star filled night sky quilt. In her knitting notebook that was filled with pattern ideas and scribbled colour combinations, she sketched a rough pattern for the quilt. She planned to take it with her to Ailsa's crafting evening later and ask the members for their quilting advice.

And next up on her knitted softies, was a robin. She loved robins, and the pattern she'd designed for this was one of her favourites.

She had such a busy day she forgot to put the owl in the shop window, and only noticed him still sitting on the sofa when she got ready to go to the night out at Ailsa's cottage. Stuffing him on top of her craft bag to show him to the ladies, she headed out. She wore comfy boots suitable for walking up the hill rather than take the car. It wasn't far and she wanted the fresh air and exercise.

The further up the hill, the better the view. She could see the lights of the mainland way off in the distance. Still no regrets or longing to be back in the city.

Ailsa's cottage glowed like a beacon in the night. Twinkle lights were draped around the door, using the wayward wisteria to anchor them.

The climbing roses were fighting off the wisteria quite well by the looks of them clambering up the whitewashed walls, blossoming with pink petals and gorgeous greenery. Maybe Ailsa could arrange for them to call a truce and share the limelight. Then again, other flowers were starting to thrive along the borders, creating a colourful and fragrant atmosphere to the cottage.

The sound of chatter filtered out from the open door, along with beams of light shining from inside, illuminating the entrance.

Elsbeth headed inside and peeked into the living room that was abuzz with creativity and chatter.

‘Come in, Elspeth,’ Ailsa said, waving her into the main room that was at the core a living room, or had been in the past. Now it was a crafter’s paradise, filled with a fabric stash for quilting, balls of yarn for knitting and crochet, embroidery thread, crewel wool, a tapestry hoop with a thistle being stitched, cross stitched houses, watercolours framed on the walls, along with a treasure trove of beads and gems that Ailsa used to make jewellery. Necklaces, bangles and bracelets dangled from a display carousel that Elspeth fought to resist browsing through and buying things she didn’t need but wanted. She wanted a lot of the things she saw. This was a cottage where temptation was allowed and encouraged.

‘The kettle is on for tea,’ Primrose called through to Elspeth from the kitchen, where Rosabel was setting up the cupcakes, and a few other ladies were arranging the cups and plates. Everyone was assisting where needed. The atmosphere was bright and cheerful, and Elspeth felt this was a world where she truly belonged.

‘What did you bring with you?’ Ailsa said to Elspeth, seeing that her knitting bag was full to bursting.

Elspeth pulled the knitted owl out and sat him aside while she dug out the quilt pattern.

But the owl grabbed the ladies interest.

‘Is that your owl softie?’ Holly said to Elspeth, picking the owl up and studying the yarn she’d used to create his fluffy feathers.

‘Yes, I forgot to put him in the window, so I brought him along.’ Elspeth shrugged. ‘I wasn’t sure if anyone would be interested in seeing one of my softies.’

A ripple of laughter erupted.

Ailsa looked at Elspeth and then gestured around her, to the members, indicating what most of them were working on. It wasn’t quilts, embroidery or crochet. It was knitting. Specifically the softies Elspeth had designed.

Elspeth frowned, wondering what was going on.

‘When the gossip got around about the knitted sheep in your shop window,’ Ailsa began to explain, ‘it made us check out your website for the pattern, and we found lots of your fantastic softie patterns including the owl, sheep, bees, fairies, a cat, dog, fox — and the robin.’ Ailsa held up what she’d been knitting. The first few rows of the robin were on her needles, and she’d picked the perfect red yarn for him as well.

Elspeth smiled. ‘You’re all knitting tonight, not quilting, dressmaking or—’

‘Nope,’ Ailsa cut-in. ‘We’re having a soft toy knitting night.’

‘I’m knitting the unicorn,’ Skye told Elspeth, holding up the pink and lilac rows of garter stitch on her needles. ‘And I want to knit the fox.’

Elspeth was still holding on to her quilt pattern.

Skye peered at the pattern. ‘Is that a star filled sky design you want to quilt?’

‘Yes, I thought I’d rifle through Ailsa’s fabric stash, but if everyone’s knitting—’

‘Help yourself,’ said Ailsa, gesturing to the shelves in the living room where part of her fabric stash had taken over.

Rosabel came through with a tray of tea. ‘I love the free patterns on your website, Elspeth. I’ve started knitting the robin.’

‘I put up the patterns as a bonus for customers,’ Elspeth explained. ‘It helped grab knitters interest when I first started up my business. I love designing new patterns.’

‘I like the cat design,’ said Nettie. ‘It reminds me of my cheeky faced kitten.’

‘Do you have a pattern for a stag with antlers?’ Rowen asked Elspeth.

‘I don’t, but I have a reindeer pattern that could easily be adapted,’ Elspeth told her. ‘I’ll give you a copy.’

‘Thanks,’ Rowen said, busy knitting a floppy eared rabbit.

Holly was still studying the owl, comparing it to what she'd knitted so far. 'Did you stitch the eyes on before the beak?'

'Yes.' Elspeth dug into the depths of her knitting bag and pulled out some of the yarn she'd been using the previous night. She'd stuffed it into the bag before going to bed and it was still there. 'Use this.' She handed the remainder of the small balls of yarn to Holly.

'Oh, thank you.' Holly was delighted, eager to create the owl pattern. 'I love owls. This is perfect. Your patterns knit up so well. They're easy to knit and yet so pretty.'

'Do you want any help with your quilt pattern?' Ailsa said to Elspeth.

Elspeth nodded. 'This is what I have in mind. I was looking up at the sky last night and thought it would be lovely as a quilt theme.'

A ripple of giggles circled the room. The gossip had started, Elspeth realised.

'Did you have a fun night at the waterfall with Brodrick?' Primrose said to her, offering her a cupcake to go with her tea.

Elspeth picked up a strawberry buttercream cupcake. 'I did. And I suppose you know all the details.'

'No, we were hoping you'd tell us,' said Primrose, settling down to knit a cupcake softie. Apart from the creatures and fairies, Elspeth had several little knitted cake patterns, and Primrose thought she'd knit cupcakes and iced doughnut designs for Innis' shop display. Just like the other softies, they were quick and easy to knit.

Elspeth told them a few snippets of what happened at the waterfall while looking through Ailsa's fabric stash.

'A pink bikini?' Rosabel gasped and giggled.

'I'm sure Brodrick was delighted,' Primrose remarked, casting on stitches to start knitting a cupcake.

'We had a great time.' Elspeth showed them the pictures she'd taken. Her phone was passed around for everyone to see.

‘You do look happy with Brodrick,’ Aisla remarked, putting her knitting aside to help Elspeth select fabric for her quilt. She had lots of bundles and pre-cuts.

‘Were you smooching with him?’ Skye said to Elspeth.

‘No, nothing like that,’ Elspeth assured her. ‘Just friends.’

‘What about this lovely ultramarine blue fabric for your night sky,’ Aisla suggested, digging out the bundle of quilting weight cotton fabric. ‘And this other fabric has stars printed on it. These would be ideal for your quilt blocks.’

Elspeth loved the fabrics. ‘Yes, are you sure you don’t need them?’

‘I’ve plenty,’ Aisla assured her, and then continued to search through her stash. ‘There were another two or three fabrics with stars and comets. Yes, here they are.’ She studied the design Elspeth had sketched, and then went over to a folder where she kept all her quilt patterns. ‘This pattern would work. It’s close to your design.’ She handed it to Elspeth.

‘This is so handy,’ said Elspeth.

‘It’s important to select your colour combinations so they contrast and work well together,’ Aisla advised. ‘This golden yellow fabric with the inky blue will help to make the design pop.’

Elspeth agreed, feeling excited.

‘Okay, let’s get some of it cut ready for piecing to make your blocks for the quilt top,’ Aisla said, taking the fabric over to her cutting table that was set up near the back of the living room beside her sewing machine. On a shelf she had rolls of fabric suitable for the quilt’s backing, and soft textured batting for the middle layer of the quilt’s three layer sandwich.

Skye opened a bag she’d brought with the box of chocolates Innis had given her. ‘I haven’t even opened the box yet. I thought we could eat the sweeties with our tea.’ She opened it and handed it around.

The ladies helped themselves to the chocolate truffles, bonbons, salted caramels, Scottish tablet and all sorts of chocolate temptations.

‘Innis’ chocolates are delicious,’ Holly enthused.

The others agreed, and amid enjoying the chocolates, cupcakes, knitting softies and chatting, the evening was a cheerful and creative success.

When it was time to pack up and go, everyone helped tidy up Ailsa’s cottage.

She gave them a quick tour of the new decor in her the kitchen where the pale sunshine yellow painted walls, yellow gingham curtains, and the bumblebee tea cosy brightened everything up beautifully.

Taking her quilting with her, and her owl, Elspeth headed out along with Holly and Skye. They thought she’d walk down the hill with them, but Elspeth’s night out was far from over.

‘Brodrick said I should drop by for a cuppa,’ Elspeth told them.

They smiled.

‘Have fun,’ Holly told her.

‘And we’ll hear all about it later,’ said Skye.

Waving to them, Elspeth walked the short distance to Brodrick’s cottage. The lights were on, and her heart started to beat with excitement as she approached it. The property was far bigger than Ailsa’s cottage, and the garden was tamed but still pretty and blooming with flowers and greenery.

In the distance, she saw the sea glistening along the coast and the twinkle lights of the main street sparkling in the night air.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Elsbeth was about to knock on Brodrick's cottage door, but it opened, and he stood there smiling at her.

'Come in. I saw the ladies leaving Ailsa's cottage. I was hoping you'd drop by. And I hope you're hungry. Or are you topped up with cake?'

She followed him inside and stood in the hallway, admiring the decor immediately. The light cream walls reminded her of something she'd seen in home decor magazines. And yet there was a homeliness to it as well.

'I had a cupcake. I was so busy working on my star quilt. I didn't even have one of Innis' chocolates. Skye brought the box to share with everyone.'

He smiled. 'Great. I hope you like rumbledethumps.'

'Rumbledethumps! I used to love that, but I haven't had it in years.'

He helped her off with her coat and hung it up in the hall. She wore her moss green velvet trousers and white jumper. Her hair hung around her shoulders, and he thought she looked beautiful as always.

'Want to help me in the kitchen?' He led the way through.

She followed him. 'It smells delicious.'

He pulled the dish of rumbledethumps from the oven. The cheese topping had melted nicely. 'Want to eat it here in the kitchen or in the dining room?'

He had a dining room? 'The kitchen feels cosy.'

He smiled and set up two plates for them at the kitchen table. The kitchen was as she'd imagined a chef like him would have. A wonderful fitted kitchen with a top of the range cooker, gleaming pots and pans, a light wooden dresser, white

cabinets, a traditional wooden table and chairs, everything light wood, cream and white, well lit, and clean and tidy. His spice rack was filled with some she hadn't even heard of. And an area was designated for making cakes with baking bowls, mixers and cake tins.

Cookery books and folders brimming with recipes were lined up on the shelves.

Brodrick himself matched his kitchen, wearing an elegant cream shirt, open at the neck with the sleeves folded up, and classic dark trousers.

'This is one of my favourites.' He scooped out two portions of the chopped cabbage, onion and turnip mixed with mashed potatoes and topped with melted grated Scottish cheddar cheese.

'I had such a busy day, that lunch was a tomato sandwich, and I skipped dinner as I was running late and thought I'd be plied with cake at the cottage.'

'All the better that you have an appetite for your rumbledethumps.' He added a salad garnish and sat a plate of fresh cut, crusty bread on the table for her to help herself.

'Dig in. I'll make the tea.'

Elsbeth scooped up a forkful of the rumbledethumps. 'This is tasty.' She helped herself to a slice of bread as he poured their tea and sat it down.

'Were you working late? Is this your supper?' she said, tucking into her meal.

He shrugged, giving her the impression he'd made it in the hope that she'd drop by after the craft night.

'Did you have a nice night?' he said, changing the focus back to her evening.

'I did.' Then she smiled and told him about the ladies knitting the softies because of the sheep in the shop window.

'You've started something now. Listening to you describe these cute softies, I've a notion for one myself.'

She'd hung her craft bag on the back of her chair and reached in and produced the owl.

'It's gorgeous. No wonder the ladies want to knit these. If I could knit, I'd make one myself,' he said.

She laughed. 'I find them relaxing and fun to make.' She tucked the owl back in the bag.

'What will you do with the owl?'

'Put it in the knitting shop window. Take photos for the shop's website, advertising the yarn I used, and then hopefully someone will buy the owl, as they did with the sheep. A bit of promotion for the new yarn.'

'You really love your knitting, don't you?'

'Yes, I've been knitting since I was a wee girl.'

'But you don't have an actual shop in Glasgow?'

'No, I sell my yarn and patterns online, from my website.'

He looked thoughtful. 'So if you were to move somewhere else, you wouldn't have to sell any business premises.'

'No, I'm not tied down that way.'

They continued to eat their meal, and as he topped up their tea and cleared the dishes, he made her another offer.

'I know it's late, but as we're night owls and scallywags, would you like to have tea on the balcony? The view is magnificent.'

'Yes, I'd like that.'

He carried their tea and led the way upstairs, past his spacious double bedroom. The door was wide open and she glanced in at the sheer luxury of the rich cream decor, the large bed with what looked like silk sheets and an expensive quilt runner along the bottom of the bed. The lighting was subtle, almost seductive, again reminding her of something she'd seen in a home decor magazine. Her mind flashed to wicked thoughts of Brodrick lying there in bed, and what the silk sheets would feel like against her bare skin.

‘The balcony is through here, Elspeth.’ His confident voice jarred her thoughts back from the wayward route they were taking her.

She smiled tightly, and followed him into a lounge with comfy cream sofas and armchairs that opened out on to a small balcony. Chairs and a table were arranged to offer them a panoramic view of the island’s coastline, sweeping along the bay.

The air was mild and the design of the balcony with its glass barrier raised slightly above the balustrade provided a snug niche for them to relax and gaze out at the spectacular view.

Elspeth admired the lights glistening along the main street, highlighting the shops, restaurants and bars that were still aglow with activity. The boats were anchored in the harbour, and the night sky arched across the island.

‘You’re fortunate to have such a beautiful view. The sea looks like liquid silver,’ she said, taking it all in.

‘It’s nice to share it with you. Thanks for taking the time to drop by.’

The sincerity in his tone touched her heart, and she smiled at him, then gazed out at the silvery sea and the stars twinkling above, committing it all to memory. Another night she’d never forget.

‘When is your hill running race?’ she said.

‘A few days from now. We cover a few miles over the hills. The route isn’t too long, so we keep up a brisk pace. If you’re not busy, I hope you’ll come along.’

‘I’ll be there to cheer you on,’ she promised.

‘If you need to spot me up on the hills, I’ll be the one with the new patches on his jumper.’

She laughed.

‘I checked the weather forecast for that day,’ he told her. ‘It’ll be bright and dry. Ideal for running. But a couple of days later the summer temperatures kick in, so I thought maybe we

could go sailing after the hill running event rather than before it. We'd be more assured of a lovely summer night to sail around the island.'

'That sounds like a plan,' she agreed. What other plans they'd make for the summer, she wasn't sure, but her heart was longing to take a chance with Brodrick, while her head warned her to hold back.

'You look lost,' he told her, gently, in a deep voice that pulled her back to the present.

She sipped her tea and gazed out at the view. 'It's hard to make plans when nothing is really settled.'

'You mean like settling here, on the island, instead of going home to Glasgow?'

She nodded. 'I'm being careful not to be swept up thinking this is a real fresh start, when it's going to be so fleeting. Everything's happened so fast since I arrived.' She gestured to them sitting together on the balcony. 'Look at us, sitting here like long-time friends.'

He shrugged his broad shoulders. 'We could be. It's not how long you know someone, it's how well you know them.'

Elsbeth entirely agreed with that sentiment. 'I've unfortunately been through that with people I'd known for years, only to find out that I didn't know them at all. Pulling verbal knives out of my back is something I have experience of.'

'The island's community is close-knit, with few secrets and plenty of gossip. But it helps to weed out the bad apples. If you're a rotter, you'll be sussed out.'

The welcome she'd received from the community signalled she'd passed muster.

'I prefer that,' she said firmly. 'I'm just worried that the summertime will spark in too fast and it'll be time to leave.'

'Find another way of looking at things,' he advised her. 'Your way is all or nothing. Rewind and approach your

concerns from a different angle. That's what I do. Maybe it'll work for you too.'

'Thanks for the advice. I'll try that.'

She finished her tea and stood up, stretching, easing off the tense excitement of the day. 'I could get too comfy here.'

'You can do that anytime. You're always welcome. Even if I'm busy and you want to sit and relax away from the world and all its bluster, you can come here.'

She sensed he meant every word, and there were no sneaky clauses involved. Maybe she would take him up on his offer, on a sunny day when the knitting shop was closed and he was working in his cafe bar. What a view of the sea. She felt herself relax just looking at it.

The opposite could be said when she looked at Brodrick. In the evening light, sitting there on the balcony, so handsome and strong and stylish. He could've been pictured in the home decor magazine too, the perfect advertisement for the perfect man for her.

Her heart jolted, realising that she was in jeopardy of falling for him.

'Thank you for the rumbledethumps — and the view, but it's getting late. I have to go.'

'I'll walk you down to the knitting shop.'

'There's no need, really, I'm fine to go on my own.'

He refused to let her do this. 'I could drive you down, but the walk is wonderful at night. You can see the lights along the shore all the way down to the main street.'

'Okay, let's go.'

As they headed out of the lounge, she glanced again into Brodrick's bedroom, and then tried to contain the blush forming across her cheeks.

He caught her looking, and the blush, but made no comment.

Downstairs in the hall he helped her on with her coat, and insisted on carrying her bag.

‘Parts of the hillside are steep, so don’t go tumbling down to the bottom,’ he warned her.

‘It would be quicker,’ she teased him. ‘I used to love to roly-poly down hills when I was wee.’

For a moment he thought she was going to attempt it, then he saw the cheeky smile on her face.

‘Okay,’ he said, lifting her up and putting her over his shoulder. ‘You asked for it.’

‘No, Brodrick!’ she squealed and laughed at the same time. ‘No!’

But he continued to run with her, tackling the hillside with easy, the hill runner in him adept at handling the grassy terrain.

Within a couple of minutes they were at the bottom of the slope and behind the back garden of her shop.

Brodrick put her down gently in her garden and handed Elspeth her bag. ‘Do you have a key for the back door?’

Breathless, she swept her hair back from her smiling face and dug out her set of keys. ‘I do. It’s the small silver one.’

He gestured for her to unlock the door. He wanted to see her safely inside.

The door clicked open, she stepped in and flicked the light on. The beam shone out on to the garden and highlighted the tall figure of Brodrick standing there not even slightly out of breath.

‘Goodnight, Elspeth,’ he said, and started to walk away.

‘My money is on you by the way,’ she called after him.

He looked round and frowned.

‘To win the hill running race,’ she told him.

His sexy smile lit up the night, and with a wave, he started to run back up the hill, disappearing like a swift shadow into the darkness.

Elsbeth sighed, breathed in the fresh air, and then went inside and locked the door to another night on the island she'd never forget.

Tucked up in bed, but still buzzing with the excitement of the night, especially the unexpected sprint down the hill on Brodrick's shoulder, she thought about his advice.

Was there another way of looking at things? Could she find a way to have a real fresh start here on the island, instead of going home to Glasgow? Tiredness overtook her before she could consider another angle to her situation.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The cute owl looked even more photogenic sitting in the knitting shop window. Elspeth sent one of the pictures to her aunt, and added a copy to the shop's website. A couple of online orders for yarn to knit the sheep indicated some interest had been sparked in the knitted softies already.

Sipping her mid-morning cup of tea after packing the orders ready for posting, she saw Innis storm past the window and hurry into the knitting shop.

'It's a hectic morning at the cake shop, and I need to buy something for Rosabel and Primrose while they bake another batch of butterfly cakes,' he said, sounding slightly wound up.

Elspeth sat sipping her tea and let him continue without interruption.

'Those knitted cakes have been a hit this morning with customers commenting on them. Rosabel and Primrose plan to knit more cupcakes and iced doughnuts, but they said it would be handy if they had extra items to create them.' He took a deep breath. 'They could be winding me up, but I said I'd buy them from you. I need two mushrooms, preferably two different sizes if you have them.'

Innis had barely finished asking when Elspeth reached into a drawer and put two darning mushrooms on the counter — one large, one small.

Innis stared at them. 'They're wooden mushrooms.'

'Yes.'

He lifted one up and studied it. 'What are they for?' He didn't disguise the disdain in his tone.

'Darning socks mainly, or holes in jumpers,' she told him.

‘Like the holes you mended in Brodrick’s jumper? I heard you’ve added stylish patches.’

‘Yes, he wanted it repaired for the hill running race. It’s his lucky jumper.’

Innis scoffed lightly. ‘He’ll need all the luck he can get this year to win.’

Elsbeth frowned, wondering why.

‘My brother, Ean, is competing in the race this year. He hasn’t participated recently. He used to be a front runner. Now he’s stronger and faster than ever. I’ve seen him training on the hills. I think he’ll give Brodrick a run for his money.’

‘Does Brodrick know, or is it a secret?’ She wondered if Ean was entering as a last minute wildcard.

‘A secret?’ He smirked. ‘Around here?’

She made a mental note to tell Brodrick that Ean was competing in case this was news to him.

‘Aren’t you competing?’ she said.

A glint shone from his lone wolf eyes. ‘No, I leave the race running to Ean. I prefer to run alone.’

She nodded and didn’t press him any further.

Innis paid for the mushrooms. ‘Why would Primrose and Rosabel need mending mushrooms to knit the cakes? They don’t need mended.’

‘Because in my patterns I recommend using the darning mushrooms to hold the tops of the knitted cakes firm while sewing on the coloured pearl beads to create the sprinkles effect. And then stuff the cakes. The different sizes of mushrooms are handy for various sizes of cakes.’

He gave a tight-lipped nod, and then asked for her advice. ‘Does the top button on my shirt look dangly?’

Trying to keep a straight face, she leaned over for a close look as he held his open neck shirt for her to see the button.

‘No,’ she said. ‘But...’

‘But what?’

‘The thread looks slightly worn, indicating that you could have a dangly button issue soon.’

He stood upright and nodded. ‘That’s exactly what Skye said when she was in buying cakes this morning. She looked me up and down and assessed that I had a dangler.’

Elsbeth kept a hold of her giggles. ‘Skye’s the expert when comes to clothes and couture.’

‘Clearly.’ His expression was thoughtful. ‘I’ll pop along to the boutique, take my shirt off and give it to her.’

‘You may want to rephrase that,’ she said, stifling a laugh.

‘Yes...yes, what I mean is, I’ll change into another shirt and take this one along and give it to her so she can sort the button. I wouldn’t want it falling off. I like to look tidy for my customers.’

‘You’ve probably got a spare button tucked into the seams.’

‘Really?’ He started to fiddle around with his shirt, and found a button stitched into a niche on a bottom seam. ‘You’re right. I’ve always wondered what those buttons were for.’

‘Spares.’ Then she told him about the box of chocolates. ‘Skye brought your box of chocolates to the craft night at Ailsa’s cottage and shared them with the ladies.’ She thought he should know that Skye probably felt slightly guilty for tricking him into the bet he’d lost.

He looked pleasantly surprised. ‘That was very decent of her. And perhaps that’s why I’ve sold four special boxes already this morning to customers popping in for their usual cakes.’

‘The ladies loved the chocolates. A few of them said they intended treating themselves to a big box of your special flavours.’

He gave her a look as if realising that despite all the nonsense, the outcome had worked in everyone’s favour.

‘Thank you for your help, Elspeth. I hope you’re feeling fine after your wild night.’

‘Wild night?’

‘I was working late, baking in the cake shop kitchen. I had the back door open for fresh air when I heard you shrieking all the way down the hill as Brodrick ran with you over his shoulder.’

‘Ah, yes, I’m fine, okay, nothing wrong, it was just fun.’

‘Great. Well, thanks again.’ And then he left, but popped back to say, ‘Love the knitted owl.’ Then he went back to his cake shop.

Elspeth smiled to herself, feeling buffeted by the whirlwind encounter with Innis. Her priority was to tell Brodrick about Ean, in case it made a difference to his plans. Didn’t runners suss out their competitors and plan their tactics?

Locking the shop, she hurried next door to the cafe bar and found Brodrick topping up the ice cream display. The chocolate and vanilla ice cream looked soooo tempting.

Brodrick turned round hearing her come in. His smile brightened her day.

‘It’s about your race,’ she began, keeping her voice down so that the staff didn’t overhear.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Innis was in my shop buying mushrooms, and he told me that you’ll need all the luck you can get to win the race this year because his brother Ean is competing.’

Brodrick’s expression showed this was indeed news to him. ‘I didn’t know Ean was entering. He hasn’t competed the last two years. He used to be a front runner, but then he was always away furthering his qualifications in the city. And he’d had his heart broken by a woman he’d intended to marry.’

‘Well, he’s competing this year, and according to Innis, he’s stronger and faster than ever. He says he’s seen Ean training on the hills, and he’ll give you a run for your money.’

‘Thank you for telling me.’

‘I thought you should know in case it affects your running strategy.’

He nodded. ‘I get on well with Ean, always have. But despite his pleasant nature, he’s a fierce competitor when it comes to the hill running. I barely beat him by a whisker the last time we raced against each other.’

‘I hope you win. Oh, and, Innis saw our antics on the hill last night.’ She explained briefly.

Brodrick shrugged. ‘It doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t change a thing about our evening.’

She smiled up at him.

As she turned to leave he offered, ‘Would you like a pokey hat?’

Her face lit up.

‘Vanilla or chocolate?’ he said.

‘Yes, please.’

Brodrick laughed and scooped a portion of both in a cone and handed it to her. ‘Enjoy.’

‘I will,’ she said brightly and hurried back to her shop.

Elsbeth ate her pokey hat. The ice cream tasted delicious.

She’d just finished her cone when a customer peered at the owl in the shop window. The woman came in, bought the owl and balls of yarn for knitting a cardigan.

After the customer left, Elspeth packed the orders, refilled the shelves, and then made a start on knitting a robin. She’d cast on the stitches to knit the body when Skye came breezing into the shop carrying a bag. She wore a midi dress and cardigan, and her hair was pinned up in a messy chignon.

Skye’s bright blue eyes shone with glee. ‘The race organisers have purchased a load of vintage bunting from the boutique. I got it in a job lot of vintage stuff, and Holly and I have been sorting through it all morning. Anyway...’ She held

up the bag. ‘I wondered if you’d like a strip of bunting to hang outside your shop to celebrate the race. We’ve hung it outside the boutique and I gave a strip to Ailsa for her craft shop.’

‘Yes, thank you.’ Elspeth accepted the bag and peered in at the pretty vintage bunting.

‘I thought you’d like the pink bunting to go with your pink shop,’ said Skye.

‘It’s very thoughtful of you.’ She offered to pay, but Skye was giving it to her for free.

‘If you need me to help you hang it up, give me a shout, but I’m betting that Brodrick will want to lift you up while you hang it.’

‘You heard what happened last night?’ Elspeth surmised.

Skye giggled. ‘Everybody’s heard.’

Elspeth gave her the news about Ean taking part in the race.

Skye already knew. ‘Primrose phoned this morning to tell us.’

‘I’ve told Brodrick.’

‘Ean is supposed to be a sweetheart, but I don’t really know him,’ said Skye.

‘It could be quite a competitive race.’

‘You’ll need to be there to cheer Brodrick on.’

‘I will be,’ said Elspeth.

‘Holly and I will be cheering for Brodrick too.’

A glint of sunlight shone through the window.

‘Right, I have to run while the sun’s shining. We got a delivery of gorgeous vintage dresses, and Holly and I are modelling them outside our boutique. We’re taking pictures for a magazine feature. It’s a feature on vintage clothes fashion.’

‘That’s wonderful.’

‘I’m wearing a glamorous, oyster satin Art Deco style evening dress. I love it,’ said Skye, and with a cheery wave she hurried away.

Elsbeth peeked again at the pink bunting. She could hang this herself, she thought. There was a step ladder in the storeroom cupboard. She’d seen it when stashing the tables and chairs during the knitting bee night.

Rummaging through the drawers for pieces of sticky tape to help her hang the bunting, she gathered it up, carried the ladder outside, climbed up and attempted to hang it. Easier said than done, she thought, getting the string in a fankle.

‘I’ll help you with that,’ Brodrick said, coming out of the cafe bar to assist her.

Elsbeth told him what the bunting was for while he climbed up the ladder and hung it across the top of the front window. The little flags fluttered in the light breeze wafting in from the sea.

Brodrick jumped down, folded the ladder and carried it inside. ‘I appreciate your support for the race.’

She smiled warmly at him.

‘What’s this you’re knitting now?’ he said, seeing the knitting needles and yarn on the counter where she’d left them.

‘A robin.’

‘What happened to the owl?’

‘Someone bought it. I’d just finished eating my pokey hat, which was delicious by the way.’

‘I’m glad you liked it.’ Then he paused before heading back to the cafe. ‘Any plans for tonight?’

‘Knitting, quilting, relaxing by the fire, which means I probably won’t do any of those. Every time I plan an evening like this, the plans fly out the window. What are you up to?’

‘Running. Twilight running. Golden hour is lovely this time of year.’

‘Getting some training in?’

‘Yes, especially now that Ean’s in the race. I don’t mind if I don’t win, but I always try to give it all I’ve got. Ean’s the same, so it’ll be a fine race this year.’

‘Are there many competitors?’

‘A fair few,’ he said. ‘There have been races to whittle it down to the finalists. Ean must have entered as a wildcard or I would’ve seen him.’

‘Enjoy your run tonight then,’ she told him.

He nodded and smiled, and then went back to get on with his business. And Elspeth got on with her work.

Skye posed in the sunlight outside the boutique while Holly took photos of her. Skye wore the oyster satin dress. It skimmed over the slender curves of her model-like figure and the front split revealed the length of her long, lithe legs. Her pearly beige classic heels suited the 30s style of the era, and she wore her long, strawberry-blond hair rippling in shiny waves around her shoulders.

‘Gaze out to the sea, chin up, with a faraway look,’ Holly instructed her, using a camera rather than her phone to take the pictures.

The various elements of their modelling, fashion training and fashion work came in useful.

Holly wore one of the vintage dresses too, a pale blue silk dress, cut on the bias, and her chestnut hair shone beautifully in the sunlight.

They were taking photos of each other in front of their boutique, with the mannequins in the window wearing vintage tea dresses, to give to the magazine for the feature. And to put them on their website to advertise their fashions.

Skye was posing happily when Innis approached them. He’d changed into another white shirt and had the one with the button for stitching in a bag to give to Skye.

He hesitated as he approached, changing his mind, deciding not to interrupt them. And he was really taken aback seeing

them dressed like models in their beautiful dresses.

‘It’s okay,’ Skye told him. ‘We’re nearly finished.’

He held up the bag. ‘I just wanted to give you the shirt to sew the button on secure. I’ll put it on the counter.’ He stepped inside the boutique, put the bag down and then came back out with the intention of heading back to his cake shop.

Holly was showing Skye the pictures on the camera’s screen.

‘These look great,’ said Skye. ‘Come and take a look, Innis. We’re going to be in a magazine feature to promote our vintage fashion.’

He glanced at the pictures, impressed by the quality of them. ‘These are excellent.’

Skye’s wide blue eyes focused on him, causing him to view her in a different light. Standing there in that satin dress, with her long hair, lovely face and figure, he thought she was beautiful. He’d had a vastly different impression of her. He was used to seeing her wearing long, floaty skirts and dresses with cardigans or jumpers, and with her hair pinned up in wispy pleats or messy buns. He’d never actually seen her with her hair down, or wearing a dress that showed off her model-like figure.

‘Do you know what’s missing from the pictures?’ Skye said to him.

‘No, what?’

She smiled at him. ‘You. Come on, let’s get a picture with you as well,’ she encouraged him.

He held up his hands. ‘I’m not sure.’

‘Just stand and look handsome,’ Holly said, getting the camera ready.

The bright smile and lovely cheerful attitude of Skye broke any reservations he had, especially when she pulled him close.

Holly clicked the camera into action, capturing Skye standing beside Innis.

‘Come on, Innis, crack a smile,’ Skye encouraged him. ‘The brooding look is great, but let’s have a happy photo to finish with. These aren’t for the feature, unless you want to be included.’

He wasn’t sure. He was so thrown by the situation and taken aback how gorgeous Skye, the impish young lady who was always teasing him, looked in the sunlight in that dress.

Holly glanced over at his cake shop. ‘Your window display looks wonderful. Do you want me to take a picture of you outside your shop before we finish?’

He considered her offer. His window did look good. His new chocolates were on display along with a selection of cakes iced with floral fondant. The sunlight made the yellow and pink shop front look lovely.

‘Yes, okay,’ he said to Holly.

While Holly took a couple of shots of the shop without Innis in the frame, Skye advised Innis where to stand.

‘Don’t look grumpy,’ she told him. ‘Smile, and stand near the door so we can see all the cakes and chocolates in the window.’

His heart tensed. Skye thought he was grumpy. Maybe he was sometimes, and he had a reputation as such, but it bothered him, so he tried not to look like a grouch for the photographs.

‘Nice,’ Holly enthused, capturing Innis looking tall and handsome, and happy, outside his cake shop. ‘I’ll send these to you so you can use them on your website.’

Skye hurried over to peek at the pictures. ‘You look like a happier version of yourself,’ she told him, not meaning to insult him.

He wasn’t insulted. Was he?

‘Take one of Innis and me while he’s smiling,’ Skye said to Holly, running over to stand beside Innis.

He made no move to object, and her comment did make him smile.

‘Make sure you get a close-up of Innis’ handsome face, especially his eyes,’ Skye said to Holly.

Adjusting the focus, Holly captured Innis looking straight into the camera. She checked the preview and cheered. ‘Oh, you’ve got to see these. Innis looks like a model.’

Skye rushed to see the pictures and smiled with delight. ‘You look amazing.’

He inwardly agreed that the pictures were good.

‘I’ll send all the photos to you,’ Holly promised him.

Skye smiled at him. ‘Okay, we’ll let you escape back to your cake baking.’

‘Thanks for the pictures, and for offering to sew my shirt button,’ he said to them.

Waving and smiling with excitement, Skye and Holly walked over to their boutique, happy that their photo shoot had gone well.

Innis went into the cake shop and headed through to the kitchen. His mind was whirring with what had just happened as he started to make icing for one of the cakes.

Primrose came bustling through to the kitchen. ‘We saw you taking part in the girls’ fashion shoot.’

Rosabel rushed through as well. ‘I hope you’ll get copies of the pictures.’

‘Holly is sending me a copy,’ he told them.

‘Didn’t Holly and Skye look gorgeous. They used to do modelling before they set up their boutique,’ said Primrose.

‘They still do a bit of modelling,’ Rosabel said, picking up a tray of chocolate scones.

‘I barely recognised Skye,’ he said.

‘Skye’s a real beauty,’ said Primrose. ‘So is Holly.’

Innis nodded thoughtfully.

‘They told us they’re planning to have a fashion show later this year,’ Rosabel said to him.

He frowned. 'On the island?'

Rosabel nodded. 'Yes, maybe in the function room at the castle. Skye says she's going to talk to Finlay about the cost and practicality. Her other option is a marquee in one of the farmers' fields. That would work too.'

'Tell Skye to leave it with me. I'll talk to Finlay,' said Innis.

Primrose and Rosabel looked thrilled. 'Oh, that would be good of you. We've never had a fashion show on the island.'

They left Innis in the kitchen and scurried back through to serve customers in the front shop.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Elsbeth sat in the shop and continued to knit the little robin. The sunshine was still brightening the day, making the colours of the boats in the harbour pop with extra vibrancy against the blue–green sea.

She finished the body and reduced the stitches to shape the head. The robin was knitting up nicely, and she loved the soft texture of the double knit yarn and the bright red, white, light brown and grey colours.

Stopping to take the orders to the post office, she walked back to the knitting shop along the main street, gazing out at the sea and enjoying the bright day.

For her afternoon tea she indulged in a scone with strawberry jam and cream. The latest message from her aunt had put her in the notion of it:

We're zig-zagging our way up the West Coast. The days are glorious and the nights amazing. We stop for our morning and afternoon tea in every town and village we encounter. By the time I come home to the island I will be a connoisseur of scones with jam and cream.

Elsbeth's working day came to a close with a gold and amber sunset casting a glow across the sea, making it look like liquid gold rather than the silver sea her aunt had pictured recently.

Checking her phone she saw she had another message and photos from Morven's travels. She smiled as she saw her aunt's happy face in the first picture:

The owl you knitted was wonderful. What a great way to promote the new yarn in the window! We were at Gare Loch and now booked into a lovely hotel. Whether it's a large hotel or a cosy wee village nook, they've all had live music, even if

it's someone singing a song in a corner of the bar and playing a guitar. We're singing and dancing every night! We're having a hoot of a time.

Inspired by the beauty of the early twilight, Elspeth put on a pair of comfy boots with her jeans and jumper, secured the shop and headed out. Dinner could wait. Evenings like this shouldn't be frittered away.

Walking along the main street beside the harbour, she continued on until a walkway from the esplanade led down on to the shore. The white sand glowed in the golden light, and the sea lapped gently on to the beach.

Above her on the esplanade's main street, the sounds of the friendly nightlife filtered in the calm air. She ventured on, walking along the shore, glancing back to where the knitting shop was tucked between the cafe bar and cake shop, both lit up like beacons, providing a compass point for her bearings.

From the shore a ramp road led up towards the countryside, and the air changed from salty sea to lush greenery and pine. There was a calmness that settled her soul as she walked along the edge of the deepening forest, feeling shielded by the trees. Not a breath from the breeze got past those dense trees. And the only sound she heard was the undertone of her boots pressing down on the purple, pink and white heather and greenery.

Tempted to continue, maybe walking all the way to the forget-me-not waterfall, she decided to be practical and head back to the shop. She planned to visit the waterfall in the daylight, but she hadn't ruled out an evening stroll again. It was relaxing but invigorating. The essence of both, rebalancing the end of her busy day.

As she turned and traced her route back towards the main street, she looked up at the outline of the hills against the darkening sky. Somewhere up there, Brodrick was running, training for the forthcoming race. Her heart squeezed just thinking about him.

And there, in the inky sky, was the bright North Star, connecting them even when they were apart.

Elsbeth made herself an easy dinner, popping a small pizza in the oven, serving it with salad, and then set up her knitting by the fireside in the living room. She'd changed into her comfy jim-jams and socks she'd knitted herself. The socks had been mended, twice, but she'd hand knitted them herself and she loved the bright colours. She'd mended them with equally colourful patches. There may come a time when they had more patches than original sock, but she was nowhere near that end of the equation yet.

The robin just needed stuffed and stitched. She planned to do that so it would be ready to be put in the window in the morning. The scarf she'd started knitting was tucked in her craft bag. But the new local, hand-spun yarn had tempted her to knit a cardigan. The blue colour was a fair match for the Scottish bluebells up at the waterfall.

She liked having a few knitting projects on the go at once so she could pick whatever she had the time or urge to work on. Tonight, the cardigan won the choice, and she used one of her favourite patterns to cast on and start knitting it.

The sound of the fire crackling in the hearth soothed her, and her thoughts drifted to the things she was looking forward to. The hill running race was one of them. Not long now until Brodrick would be challenged by Ean's wildcard move.

The race day clashed with the knitting bee night, so she planned to move the bee night to the following evening. After the racing day there were parties to celebrate the winner and other competitors. Brodrick's cafe bar was laying on a night of dining and dancing, as were other local eateries catering for the number of locals participating in watching the popular event. He'd invited her to attend the cafe bar feast and fun, and she'd told him she'd be there. Hopefully the winner's cup would still be on the shelf behind the bar where it was currently. Brodrick said that either way, he liked to compete, and seemed to be looking forward to the race.

She'd told Holly, Skye and Ailsa about changing the knitting bee night, and they promised to pass the news on to

the other members. Apparently, the nights were changed when local events merited it.

Relaxing knitting by the fire, she managed to have the type of evening she'd planned, and rather than knit well into the late hours, she decided to have an early night.

She set her alarm a little bit earlier than usual because she wanted to walk up the hillside to see the race route that had already been mapped out, and familiarise herself with it. And she was curious to see how far and steep it was. She'd never been to an event like this.

Falling asleep with thoughts about the race and the forthcoming knitting bee, she woke up early, got showered and dressed, and headed out the back door into the fresh, new morning.

The pale sunlight filtered through the light blue sky, and the layer of clouds over the island had yet to be burned off to reveal another mild summery day.

Following the route from behind her shop, she stepped over the hedging in her garden and ventured up into the hills.

Little flags marked the route and blew gently in the breeze. She saw the end of the race marked with the bunting from the boutique. Brodrick explained that the bunting marked the finishing line so that the competitors could see it easily in the distance while running, and head in the right direction.

Excitement charged through her, and from the hillside she had a great view of the island's coast and the shimmering sea, so bright in parts she had to cup her hand over her eyes to shield herself from the glare. The sun was already burning off the morning haze and it promised to be a lovely day. If she'd time, she thought, she'd eat her lunch in the back garden, and make the most of having a garden at the rear of the shop.

Elsbeth was suddenly pulled from her faraway thoughts by the sound of someone running nearby. She heard the sound of their sturdy running shoes sprinting through the heather and grass terrain — at speed.

Instinct cut in, and she stepped behind a tree, peering out to see the fast and athletic figure of Ean pelting across the hillside. And he was wearing a kilt!

Elsbeth blinked and peeked out, sure that he'd no idea she was there.

His kilt was made from the same black and grey tartan she'd seen Innis and Finlay wearing at the castle. With it he wore a white, open neck shirt and a black jumper. Thick grey wool socks protected his legs from the greenery, and his shoes were sturdy and yet looked sporty — made for running fast. And Ean was fast.

She felt the rush of air as he ran past, swift, like one of the island's stags, thundering across the land. Her heart dipped in confidence that Brodrick could win the race this year if this was the calibre he was up against.

No way was she going to tell Brodrick, to dampen his spirits. She'd keep this to herself and cheer even louder to spur him on.

Elsbeth's day at the knitting shop was a happy one with lots of knitting bee members, including Rosabel and Primrose, popping in to confirm they were fine about the change of bee night. Most of them bought yarn, needing their weekly top up, and tempted by the gorgeous colours and textures of the new ranges.

The robin wasn't for sale in the window. She'd put it in, taken pictures for the website, but then taken it out again and sat it upstairs. She was keeping this one. She loved robins, and the softie had knitted up so well. This would be her own reminder from her time at the shop. Something to take back with her to Glasgow. For now, the robin sat on top of a cushion on the sofa looking bright, cheery and at home there.

At closing time, Brodrick breezed into the knitting shop. 'I'm training up on the hills again.' He wore his grey jumper, dark trousers and mountain running shoes. The inflection in his voice showed he wanted to be with her, but before he could

apologise for being missing for a few evenings from her world, she smiled at him.

‘You do what you need to for your training,’ she assured him. ‘I’m having another cosy night by the fire knitting. I may even get on with sewing my quilt.’

His shoulders relaxed. ‘I’ll make it up to you.’

‘You don’t need to make anything up to me.’

‘I feel I do.’ His eyes took on a soulful gaze, a look of longing. Longing to be with her.

Her heart ached, seeing his genuine turmoil, but she kept her voice soft and steady. ‘Do your training, Brodrick. I’ll be there to cheer you on, waving a flag.’

He laughed.

‘Seriously, Skye made them from the excess bunting. We’ve all got one.’

‘I’ll be looking out for you.’

‘You won’t miss me. My flag is bright pink.’

Feeling assured, he smiled, nodded and left to head up into the hills.

Good luck, Brodrick, she wished him in her mind, watching him disappear into the amber twilight.

The vegetable stew that Elspeth was making for her dinner, with a rich, savoury gravy, simmered on the stove. The local vegetables, fresh from the farms, were a treat in themselves.

When it was ready, she served it up and sprinkled chopped greentails over it. She cut two thick slices of bread to go with the stew, and brewed a strong mug of tea.

Sitting eating her dinner at the kitchen table, she gazed out the window at the hills, picturing Brodrick powering across them. She missed him, and yet...the short separation provided the perspective she needed to sort out her feelings for him. She found that she truly missed him, in the best sense, realising he

was someone she wanted to spend more time with. The mix of feeling comfortable in his company while equally feeling a strong attraction to him, was a heady elixir.

Finishing her dinner, she settled down in front of the fire to work on knitting her cardigan. The glow from the fire was comforting. Before starting to knit, she checked her phone for any messages from her aunt. There was a message with two pictures:

The wind blew us over to Falkirk. I'm the wee figure standing next to The Kelpies — the magnificent, huge, metal horse sculptures. Beautiful during the day. Breathtaking at night all aglow with lights.

Elsbeth snapped a picture of the knitted robin perched on the cushion and sent it to her aunt:

Robin — the latest knitted softie. But not for sale. I'm keeping this one. I'm having a cosy night by the fire, knitting a cardigan the colour of Scottish bluebells.

Knitting by the relaxing sound of the crackling fire, Elspeth then heard the pitter-patter of rain on the windows. Snug on the sofa, she hoped the forecast was right and that the weather for the race day would be bright and sunny.

Putting the kettle on for a cup of tea, she peered out the kitchen window, but the view of the hills was obscured by the rain, glistening like scattered diamonds on the glass, highlighted by the kitchen lights.

Brodrick would surely be back from his run by now and working in the cafe bar.

She suddenly wondered, as she gazed out the window, what the view would look like during other seasons. She's only visited in the summer. She pictured it glowing burnished gold and bronze in the autumn, and covered in pure white snow in the heart of winter. She'd be back home in Glasgow by then. Maybe her aunt would send her pictures.

Pouring a cup of tea, she helped herself to a piece of shortbread from the biscuit tin, a petticoat tail, and went back

through to the living room to knit some more before going to bed.

Elsbeth's days leading up to the race event were extra busy. She updated the accounts and the website, restocked the shop with more yarn, kept everything clean and tidy, watered the flowers, posted the parcel orders, planned how much milk she'd need for the forthcoming knitting bee night, made progress with her quilt, and cardigan, and knitted more softies including a yellow and chocolate striped bumblebee. The bumble was the biggest softie pattern, over twelve inches tall.

She sent a picture of the bumble from the window display to her aunt with the message:

I've been a busy bee!

Elsbeth continued to happily be a busy bee.

Time with Brodrick had been fleeting, especially as he was planning the extra catering for the cafe bar after the race. He'd been cooking and baking before and after training, so he'd been a busy bee too.

The evening before the race, he sent her a message:

Are you awake?

Moments later she replied:

Yes, knitting late. Are you all set for the race tomorrow?

I am, except for what to wear. I've heard a rumour that Ean is running in his kilt. I wondered if I should run in mine. But maybe the rumour isn't true.

Elsbeth was quick to reply:

Wear your kilt, with your jumper.

He smiled to himself and then replied:

I will. Any other advice?

Run. Like. The. Wind.

I'll try.

Good luck.

It should be on my side. I'm wearing my lucky jumper and you mended it, so that's double lucky.

I'll be there waving you on.

Whatever the outcome, have dinner with me at the cafe bar afterwards.

I will.

Goodnight, Elspeth.

Goodnight.

She clicked her phone off and got ready for bed.

The sun shone bright in the cobalt blue sky, and the sea breeze wafted up into the hills.

Elspeth wore her comfy boots with jeans and a pink jumper. She'd walked up with Holly and Skye and met up with Primrose and Rosabel.

'Where's Innis?' said Skye.

'He should be around here,' Primrose told her.

'Innis closed the cake shop so we could all attend the race,' Rosabel explained.

Holly spotted Innis. 'There he is, along with Finlay. They're talking to Ean.'

Elspeth noticed that Ean was wearing his kilt, the same outfit she'd seen him running in. She gave a sigh of relief that her advice to Brodrick was merited.

Cupping her hand over her eyes against the bright midday sun, she searched for Brodrick, and finally saw him talking to people in the crowd. Spectators were scattered around the edges of the route eager to see the race.

As if sensing he was being watched, Brodrick glanced over his shoulder, saw Elspeth, smiled and waved to her.

She waved back. He wore his kilt with a white, open neck shirt and his lucky grey jumper. His hair looked like rich copper in the sunlight, and even from this distance she could see his handsome face smiling at her. Only her. For a moment, they looked over at each other, and then he became distracted when one of the race officials reminded him of the rules, along with the other competitors, including Ean.

Innis wore dark casuals. In contrast, Finlay with his blond hair stood out from the crowd in his casual but moneyed look of an expensive shirt and trousers in light beige and neutral tones.

Skye waved her hand in front of Holly's distracted face. She'd been looking at Finlay.

Holly brushed aside Skye's insinuation that she was admiring Finlay.

'Everyone says that Finlay has movie star looks,' said Holly. 'But he's not my type, not that he'd be interested in me.'

Skye linked her arm through Holly's and steered her over to a stall selling tea and soft drinks.

'You're too good for him,' Skye told her sister.

Holly laughed. 'Just like you're too good for Innis.'

They giggled and went to buy their tea.

'Want a cuppa, Elspeth?' Skye called to her.

Elspeth hurried to catch up. 'Yes, I'll have a tea.'

Rosabel and Primrose had brought a picnic basket with flasks of tea and cakes. Putting their blanket down on the grass, they set up their picnic ready to see the start of the race. The route ran full circle, so they planned to sit in the sunshine having their tea and cake, and watch the winner run through the tape at the finishing line.

Ailsa came hurrying over to join Elspeth, Holly and Skye.

'Have you seen Ean? He's running in his kilt!'

'I know,' said Skye. 'But have they gone commando?'

They all giggled.

‘Brodrick is wearing his kilt too,’ Elspeth told Ailsa.

Ailsa tried to peer over the heads of the officials and competitors around Brodrick. ‘Is he?’

‘They’re the only two wearing kilts,’ Holly explained. ‘Maybe it’ll make them run faster.’

‘It’ll certainly make us run faster so we don’t miss any of the action,’ said Skye.

They laughed again, bought their tea and biscuits and then stood where they could see the start of the race.

‘They’re all lining up,’ Elspeth said in a whisper as the crowd settled down to watch the starters orders. Brodrick and Ean stood out as the tallest, strongest and fittest looking competitors.

‘Who is your money on?’ Ailsa whispered.

‘The one who runs the fastest,’ Skye joked.

Elspeth and Ailsa laughed.

‘Shhh!’ Holly scolded them. ‘They’re about to start the race.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

And they were off!

Brodrick shot out into the lead, powering ahead with every strong stride. He wore his dark blue and green kilt with thick cream, wool socks and mountain running shoes. His white shirt unbuttoned at the neck was topped with his grey jumper.

Elsbeth saw the patches on the elbows as he thundered ahead.

Brodrick's tactic was to run with all his heart from the start of the race, leaving the other competitors in no doubt who they had to beat. To get past Brodrick, they'd have to run with every fibre of their being. It was a tactic that could break the spirit and energy in the best of competitors, especially if they'd planned to pace themselves.

Elsbeth hadn't known when she'd advised Brodrick to *run like the wind*, that this was his plan. Strength to the runner that could overtake him. None of them were close on his heels. They were sprinting in his slipstream, unsurprised as Brodrick had been the recurring champion for the past three years, and rather than decline, his strength and endurance had increased with slight maturity, and he'd yet to hit his prime.

Closest to Brodrick was Ean looking powerful in his own right with a swiftness that altered according to the terrain. Rough ground was trampled hard underfoot. But the low-ground heather created a spring in his step, making him look like he had lightning in his running shoes.

To the crowd watching it was a two-man race. The best would win. As both Brodrick and Ean were well-liked throughout the community, a popular winner was assured, making the cheers and excitement all the happier. They knew it was going to be a great race.

Elspeth didn't know if Brodrick had seen her wave her flag as the race kicked off, but she'd waved it anyway, and cheered him on. 'Go, Brodrick!'

The main core of competitors disappeared into the hills.

Skye stepped close to Elspeth. 'You've studied the route, where should we go to see them next?'

'Over there.' Elspeth pointed to a dip in the hills. 'They'll run round the rear of the mound and pop up there.'

'Right, let's go!' Skye shouted to Holly and Ailsa.

Having agreed that they'd follow the race at specific points, and with all of them wearing jeans, trousers, tops, jumpers, boots and training shoes, they set off to watch the runners.

Brodrick emerged from the hill dip well ahead of the others. Second was Ean, but the gap between him and Brodrick had substantially increased.

Elspeth jumped up and down, waving her flag. She smiled when Brodrick saw her as he ran on to the next part of the route — a tricky incline merging with a curving path across the hillside.

Holly and Skye waved at Brodrick too, and seeing them all there helped bolster his resolve to keep up the fast pace.

Elspeth led them to the next part of the route, cutting across the grassland and then bounding up a hill. They kept outside the marker flags, careful not to encroach on the race route. Having walked the route each morning recently, Elspeth was now familiar with the terrain and kept them on the right path.

Running up the hill, Elspeth felt she was having a real workout. The runners were close-by, and due to pop up on the other side of the hill. Keeping up with the race runners was made difficult for Elspeth and her friends because they couldn't cut across the marked route and had to run around to get to where they could view the progress.

Skye was right behind Elspeth as she neared the top of the hill, along with Holly and Ailsa.

‘Is there a trophy for the spectators who run parts of the course just to see who’s winning?’ Skye joked.

Holly laughed. ‘Elsbeth would win, but maybe we could share in the runners–up trophies.’

Elsbeth glanced back at them and laughed. ‘Come on, we’re nearly there.’

The four women finally reached the top and were able to look down on the runners. Catching their breath while giggling, they saw that Brodrick was still way ahead.

‘There’s Innis and Finlay over on the hillside.’ Skye jumped up and down and waved her flag at them.

Both men responded, and then everyone’s attention was pulled back to the race as Ean kept up, but was still nowhere near the lead.

The race continued, and the four women darted about the hills, watching the runners.

At one point, when the finishing line flags could be seen fluttering in the distance, Ailsa paused to film the runners with her phone.

‘You go ahead,’ Ailsa called to the women. ‘I’ll catch up once I’ve filmed them running.’

Nodding to her, the three women hurried on towards the finishing line so that they could cheer on the winner.

Ailsa held her phone up, capturing the runners in the sunlight against the lush greenery and colourful heather.

As they ran closer, she stood steady, filming the determination on Brodrick’s face as he powered past. Ean ran well, Ailsa acknowledged, and he was looking more handsome than ever, but with the finishing line now in view it seemed that Brodrick would pick up the trophy again this year.

Letting Brodrick run on, Ailsa focussed on Ean approaching, running at a fair clip, but obviously the runner–up.

Securing a great piece of footage of Ean, she put her phone down, lifted up her flag and cheered him on.

‘Come on, Ean! Go! Go! Go!’ Ailsa shouted to him, smiling and looking so beautiful that his heart jolted seeing her cheering for him.

Had she changed her mind about dating anyone? Would she date him? Numerous hopeful thoughts charged through him, igniting hope in his heart, and the surge of raw, masculine power gave him the boost he needed. Within seconds he’d already reduced the gap between him and Brodrick. The finishing line was ahead, but at this rate he could still catch up and win.

Spurred on having seen Ailsa, Ean ran with everything he had in him, and caused Brodrick to glance back, sensing him on his flank. Ean was even opting to take the hard racing line across the thick grass to shorten the gap.

Brodrick was already at full power, now time would decide the winner. At this rate, it would be close, so he kept on running, seeing the bunting fluttering in the short distance ahead. The rest of the runners weren’t near them. It really was a two–man race.

But then something happened...

Ean saw a sheep had tumbled on to its back and needed help. Without hesitation, and with his experience and duty to tend the estate’s wildlife, looking out for their welfare, he turned back to help the sheep, thereby throwing in the towel for the race.

Brodrick saw what was happening, and paused.

Everything happened in seconds.

As Ean turned to run towards the sheep, a farmer hurried in the opposite direction to rescue it, carefully righting it. The sheep bounded off unharmed, but Ean knew he’d lost his chance to win the race.

‘Ean!’ Brodrick shouted to him.

Ean looked over his shoulder to see Brodrick waving, beckoning him to hurry up. So he did, feeling the warmth of fair play between them.

Waiting until Ean had caught up, the two of them nodded, an understanding, and then both of them ran like the wind, smiling, feeling the breeze through their hair and kilts.

Side by side, Brodrick and Ean ran across the finishing line, breaking through the tape with their chests in tandem.

The loudest cheer rose up from the crowd that they'd heard in years.

A draw was announced, with Brodrick and Ean shaking hands and holding the trophy aloft together.

Elsbeth and the other women, including Primrose and Rosabel, applauded and cheered in the sunlight, with the sea in the bay glistening in the distance. The perfect ending to one of the most heavily contested races the island had seen in years.

Brodrick beckoned the women over to join them in a group photograph. He wrapped his arms around Elspeth and Rosabel, while Ean pulled Ailsa close by his side.

Ailsa smiled at him. 'Well done, Ean.'

Ean smiled back at her. 'Thanks for cheering me on.'

Innis and Finlay joined them and stood between Skye and Holly for the photographs.

'What a great day!' Finlay said, smiling at Holly.

'Yes, it is,' Holly replied, feeling the strength of Finlay's arm around her shoulders as everyone gathered for a group photo.

'I'm exhausted watching the race,' Skye told Innis.

Innis kept his arm around her shoulders. 'Finlay and I were exhausted watching you lot darting about, as well as the official runners.'

'I'm existing on a run round the table in my kitchen for breakfast and the fumes of a cup of tea,' said Skye.

‘Come and refuel at the cafe bar,’ Innis offered. ‘I’m bringing cake and chocolates.’

Skye smiled. ‘I’ll take you up on that.’

Elspeth stood beside Brodrick and gazed up at him. ‘You ran like the wind,’ she said as the flurry of pictures were taken.

Brodrick gazed down at her and smiled. ‘Thank you for being here.’

They both wanted to say more, but in the happy meleé, with everyone crowding around him at the end of the race, they didn’t get a moment alone together.

Photographs galore were taken, and then the contestants and spectators started to filter home to get changed into their gladrags ready for the early evening parties.

Brodrick’s cafe bar was jumping when Elspeth arrived wearing the red dress from the boutique. Looking at the busy cafe, she thought she wouldn’t be finding a quiet moment with him anytime soon.

Brodrick saw Elspeth and waved her over to where he was mixing jugs of cocktails at the bar. He poured the potent contents into a tray full of glasses that were then scooped up by one of the waiting staff and taken over to a table where the customers were seated.

‘Cocktail?’ Brodrick offered her. ‘Or a cup of tea?’

‘Yes, please,’ Elspeth said, causing him to laugh.

He mixed up another jug of fruit juice, lemonade, whisky and other ingredients with the skill of a mixologist. He poured a cocktail glass of the amber liquid and handed it to her.

Elspeth took a sip. ‘Wowsa! That’s powerful stuff.’ She wasn’t much of a drinker. She was more of a tea jenny.

‘Careful,’ he warned her, smiling. ‘It’s potent. Sip it slow. I don’t want you throwing caution to the wind and dancing on the tables.’

Elsbeth downed the remainder of her cocktail in two gulps, and sat the empty glass down in a gesture of triumph and mischief.

Brodrick smiled and shook his head. ‘You’re nothing but trouble.’

‘That makes four of them.’ A man’s rich voice poured over Elspeth’s shoulder.

She looked round to see Finlay standing there.

Elsbeth frowned. ‘Four?’

Finlay reeled off the names. ‘Holly, Skye, Ailsa and you.’

Elsbeth smiled.

Brodrick was surprised to see Finlay in the cafe bar. Surprised, but glad to see him. ‘I thought you’d be celebrating up at the castle.’

Finlay shrugged and eyed the cocktail glasses on the bar, waiting to be filled. ‘I heard all the action was down here.’

Holly, Skye and Ailsa were up dancing together. Holly and Skye wore vintage cocktail dresses. Holly’s dress was a figure-flattering green velvet and Skye’s drop-waist, white and silver beaded number sparkled under the lights. Ailsa wore an azure blue satin tea dress that suited her perfectly. They were dancing and having fun until the dinners were ready.

Everything was being cooked up in the kitchen. The menu was one of the most popular — Brodrick’s special fish and chips. The thick cut chips were made from local potatoes. The fish was coated in breadcrumbs sprinkled with Brodrick’s special seasoning, or dipped in batter and deep fried until the coating was bubbling crisp and delicious.

Other options were available, but no one had yet veered away from the fish and chips, further emphasising that this was the customers’ favourite.

Ean joined Finlay at the bar. He’d changed out of his kilt and wore a blue shirt, silk backed waistcoat and dark trousers.

‘Would you like to have something to eat?’ Brodrick said to Finlay and Ean. ‘The special tonight is fish and chips. But I have other options on the menu.’

‘Fish and chips sounds great,’ said Finlay.

‘Make that two,’ Ean agreed.

Innis came in carrying a tray of cupcakes and truffles, making his way through the crowd to the bar. Primrose and Rosabel, wearing their yellow and pink aprons, followed him carrying another two trays full of cakes. Under their aprons they wore their party dresses, but were helping Innis contribute to Brodrick’s event.

‘I thought you could use some extra cakes,’ Innis announced to Brodrick as he approached the bar.

Brodrick blinked, but hid his surprise. ‘Yes, thanks, it’s a busy night and a lot of hungry folk.’

‘We’ll put them through in the kitchen,’ Innis said, leading the way, with Primrose and Rosabel following.

By now, Skye had come over to the bar and pulled Elspeth away from Brodrick. ‘Come and dance before we have our fish suppers.’ She saw Ean glance at Ailsa. ‘Join us, Ean, you too Finlay.’

Ean needed no encouragement to go over and dance with Ailsa, and Finlay was happy to join them. They danced as a group, but Ean’s attention was focussed on Ailsa.

Primrose and Rosabel had taken their aprons off in the kitchen and came through wearing their dresses, ready to party. Innis saw that the staff in the kitchen needed a hand and had offered to help them serve out the food. They welcomed an extra pair of skilled hands.

Brodrick popped into the kitchen for more fruit juice for the cocktails and was taken aback seeing Innis working there. His speed and efficiency gained from working in his own cake shop kitchen, and the kitchen up at the castle, was handy.

As plates of fish and chips, garnished with lemon wedges and served with tartare sauce, pickled onions, vinegar and sea

salt were taken through to customers, Innis took a moment to tell Brodrick something.

‘I want to thank you for what you did for my brother, Ean, at the race,’ Innis told Brodrick. ‘That was extremely decent and fair of you to share the accolade.’

Brodrick nodded acknowledging of the thanks. ‘But you were right, Ean is running stronger and faster than ever. It could’ve gone either way.’

‘It went the best way,’ Innis said firmly.

‘Any extra pickled onions?’ one of the waiting staff called into the kitchen.

Brodrick reached into the store cupboard and lifted down a large jar. ‘Plenty.’

The organised buzz in the kitchen was quiet in comparison to the merriment in the cafe bar as customers ate their fish and chips, washed down with tea or something stronger, and Innis’ cakes were distributed to those wanting something sweet for afters. Pokey hats galore were popular all evening, and Elspeth succumbed to another vanilla and chocolate cone.

The music was lively and the dance floor remained busy from the start of the night until the close.

At times, Brodrick stole a dance with Elspeth.

‘You look gorgeous in your red dress,’ Brodrick whispered to her.

They both promised to get together when the hullabaloo of the race day and party night were by.

Before the last of the stragglers left the cafe bar, Elspeth bid goodnight to Holly, Skye, Ailsa, Primrose and Rosabel. Then she said goodnight to Brodrick.

‘I’m holding the knitting bee tomorrow night,’ she reminded him.

‘That’s fine. We’ll get together soon.’ He fought the urge to kiss her goodnight and let her go.

‘Well done again with the win,’ she told him, and waving, she headed outside and into the knitting shop.

Getting ready for bed, her heart was pumping with happiness and she could still feel the buzz of the cafe bar lingering in her, along with the excitement of the party night. She’d danced with Brodrick, Innis, Finlay and even Ean, though it was hard to pry Ean away from Ailsa.

Snuggling under the quilt, she gazed out at the starry sky, wondering if she made a wish on the North Star, would it come true.

Closing her eyes, she made a wish anyway, and with hopes and dreams in her heart, she fell asleep.

Elspeth made herself a bowl of porridge the next morning to keep herself going, knowing she had another busy day at the knitting shop — and the knitting bee night to organise later.

The day was a pleasant blur of stocking the shelves with new yarn, posting the orders away early, then tidying the shop up and going through to set up the tables and chairs for the knitting bee members arriving.

She’d just finished setting everything up, when a message and two photos came through from her aunt:

I’m standing in Princes Street, Edinburgh. Had a great day shopping. And this is me outside wonderful Edinburgh castle. We’re booked into a hotel in Edinburgh for the next two weeks to explore the city. But there’s something I have to tell you...

Some of the ladies from the knitting bee have been in touch with me. They’ve told me how well you and Brodrick are getting along, but that you’re holding back on romance because you’re only on the island for the summer. So, I have a suggestion...

When I come back home to the island, would you like to stay with me? There’s a spare room, and we’ve always got along great. We could run the knitting shop together, while both of us take our romances further with the men in our lives. You could stay initially for a year, or more if things work out

for you. I'd be happy to have you stay for as long as you want. I don't think there's anyone waiting for you in Glasgow, though I understand you'll have to sort out the flat you share with your friend, Catriona.

Think it over. I know that I love living on the island, and I think you'd find more happiness there than if you went back to the city.

Elspeth read the message and felt her world tilt, offering a chance of hope for a better life, on the island, and maybe with Brodrick. But before she could think it all through, the chattering voices of the members filtered into the shop as the ladies arrived for their knitting bee night.

Rosabel and Primrose brought cakes again and bustled through to the kitchen, as did Holly, Skye and Ailsa, and started rattling the tea cups and filling the quietude with their cheerful chatter.

Primrose paused from putting the small vanilla and cream sponge cakes covered with fondant icing on the plates. She looked at Elspeth. 'Are you okay? You're looking a bit pale.'

'I've just read a message from Morven.' Elspeth held up her phone to let Primrose read it.

The others read it to. And all of them smiled.

'That's wonderful,' Primrose told Elspeth. 'But you seem perturbed.'

'I wasn't expecting her to offer me this,' Elspeth explained. 'I love the idea, but it's a bold move, there's things to consider.'

'You should sleep on it,' Rosabel advised her. 'But for what it's worth, if it was me, I'd jump at the chance.'

The others agreed.

'You'd be able to get involved with Brodrick,' said Skye. 'We all see how well the two of you get on. If it wasn't for the restriction of going back to Glasgow, we think you'd start dating him.'

Elspeth nodded.

‘You’d be able to enjoy the summer without thinking about leaving,’ Primrose told her.

‘We don’t want you to leave,’ Holly said to Elspeth.

Elspeth’s eyes filled up. ‘I’d love to stay.’

Rosabel put a comforting arm around Elspeth’s shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. ‘Well, then. Stay, for a year if that makes it seem long enough with being permanent. But I sense you’d have a better life here. You’ve fitted in so easily. Sleep on it though.’

‘Okay, thanks for the advice,’ Elspeth told them.

The kettle clicked off and the tea was made and taken through to the other members sitting ready for their knitting night.

A few of the members were still knitting softies, Ailsa had almost finished her cardigan, and Elspeth worked on her cardigan too.

The knitting bee night was another success, with plenty of tea, cake, chatter and of course knitting.

The members helped clear everything away and tidy up before filtering out into the night, bidding Elspeth good luck with whatever she decided to do about Morven’s offer to stay.

Closing the door on yet another pleasant evening in likeminded company, Elspeth went upstairs and got ready for bed. She wanted to sleep on her decision, and so she didn’t stay up late.

As she snuggled under the quilt, she started to feel relaxed, as if the decision to stay made total sense. It was still a bold move, making a life for herself on the island rather than in the city.

A message came through on her phone from Brodrick:

*Are we still on for a sail around the island tomorrow night?
The weather forecast is ideal.*

Yes, I’m up for it.

Don't eat dinner after you lock up the shop. I'll bring a picnic.

Okay, it sounds like a plan.

I'll see you tomorrow night, Elspeth. Don't stay up too late knitting or quilting. Remember, you'll need all your strength for sailing the boat.

She laughed. Goodnight, Brodrick.

Goodnight.

Elspeth turned her phone off, snuggled down and went to sleep with a lot on her mind.

A sunny morning dawned bright and clear.

Elspeth woke up with a firm decision in her mind, and the uneasy task of telling Catriona she wasn't coming back to Glasgow after the summer.

Finishing breakfast, she phoned Catriona after sending her a copy of Morven's message.

Catriona's voice sounded delighted. 'That's perfect. I've been wondering how to tell you my news.'

'What's that?'

'I'm getting married.'

'He's asked you to marry him?' Elspeth was pleased. She liked Catriona's boyfriend and thought that they made a lovely couple.

'Yes. Getting a chance to live together here at the flat showed us that we get along so well,' Catriona explained. 'But we want a place of our own. I was wondering how to tell you that we'd started flat searching in Glasgow.'

'But now you wouldn't need to.'

Catriona sounded excited. 'We can have the flat?'

'Yes, and I wish you all the happiness.'

'Promise you'll come over for the wedding.'

‘I promise. And we’ll keep in touch. You’ll always be welcome to come and visit on the island.’

Agreeing to stay good friends, Elspeth and Catriona both ended the call happy with their plans.

Elspeth smiled and gazed out the shop window at the bright sunny day. Now all she had to do was send a message to her aunt confirming she was staying. And tell Brodrick. She planned to tell him when they went sailing that night.

Her day sparked in, and soon it was time to lock up the shop for the evening. As she locked the door, a message came through from her aunt:

I’m so happy you’re staying. Now we can both enjoy our summers knowing that you won’t be leaving.

Elspeth hurried upstairs, put on her pink bikini under her jeans and jumper, slipped on a pair of flat shoes, stuffed a towel in a bag, and hurried back down. Brodrick was due to arrive.

The tall figure of Brodrick was waiting for her outside the knitting shop. He wore dark grey trousers and a white shirt. Presumably, he wore his swimming trunks under his trousers, but she didn’t ask.

He smiled as she hurried out.

‘Are we coming back home after we go sailing tonight?’ she said to him.

Brodrick frowned. ‘Yes, why?’

She glanced at the very large picnic basket he was holding. ‘I thought you’d packed enough food supplies to last us a week adrift at sea.’

He laughed. ‘Come on, let’s set sail while there’s still plenty of light.’

Following him down to his boat secured at the harbour, he lifted her onboard, deposited the picnic basket, untied the mooring ropes and set sail out into the golden twilight.

‘The water looks like liquid amber,’ said Elspeth.

He nodded. 'I thought we'd head round to the large cove and go swimming or exploring the cove before having our picnic. We don't want to go deep diving on full stomachs.'

'Deep diving?' Elspeth's tone shot up a few levels.

The smirk forming on his firm lips showed he was only fooling with her.

As she smiled at him, he pulled her over to take charge of the controls.

'You seriously want me to steer the boat?' she said.

'Yes, now take a firm, but not too tight a grip on the wheel. That's it, nice and steady. There you go, you're sailing.'

'I am!' She laughed and tried to keep the boat steady on its course. Glancing up at the darkening sky, she searched for the North Star.

'Focus on the sea, follow the coastline.'

Standing behind Elspeth, towering over her, Brodrick helped her sail the boat to the large cove further along the edge of the island. He stopped the boat and they bobbed gently on the calm surface.

'I can take the boat in further and then carry you over the last part so you don't get wet. Or we can swim to shore. It's not far. The sea is really calm, and we'd be there in a couple of minutes at this close distance.'

Elspeth looked at the cove. 'This is my favourite cove. I used to love visiting it during the day.' She told him about writing her name in the sand and then watching the waves roll in and washing the lettering away.

'Let's swim to shore, and you can write your name on the sand again.'

'Okay.' She slipped off her jeans and jumper to reveal her bikini. Brodrick took his shirt and trousers off and he was wearing his swimming trunks.

Standing together on the side of the boat, they dived into the sea in tandem. It felt quite cold but refreshing.

They bobbed to the surface around the same time and then swam towards the cove.

Brodrick strode out of the water first, with Elspeth following him.

He picked up a wooden stick and handed it to her. 'Write your name.'

She wrote it in large letters near the front of the cove and then handed the stick to him.

He wrote his name in the sand, finishing it moments before a gentle wave washed in and covered the lettering.

Elspeth expected that their names would be washed away, but she was wrong. As the wave swept back into the sea, their names were still visible on the sand.

'My name didn't wash away this time.' She sounded incredulous. 'It always used to. But I can still see the lettering.'

Brodrick shrugged his wet shoulders, and she tried not to look at his fit, sexy body. 'Maybe it's a sign that you're meant to stay here.'

Elspeth's heart jolted. He didn't know how close to the truth his comment was.

'Is something wrong?' he said, seeing the reaction on her face.

She took a deep breath and told him about her aunt's offer.

Brodrick blinked, taken aback. 'Have you made your decision?'

'Yes, I've decided to stay.'

His smile lit up his face, and he lifted Elspeth up in his strong arm and swung her gently around.

She squealed with delight.

He put her down and then clasped her hand. 'Come on, let's swim back to the boat. This news calls for a celebration.'

'You brought champagne?'

‘No, a flask of strong tea.’

‘Even better,’ she told him, and then ran towards the sea.
‘Race you.’

Brodrick ran after her, and they both waded into the water and dived in.

He powered ahead and then treaded water until she caught up, then they swam to the boat together. He hoisted her in, and she wrapped her towel around herself while he opened the picnic basket.

‘Don’t look until I connect the lights.’

She gazed out at the sea.

‘Okay, you can look now,’ he said.

Elsbeth gasped and laughed when she saw that he’d rigged up battery powered twinkle lights to illuminate their picnic.

‘It looks magical.’

He glanced up at the night sky. ‘And there’s our North Star, shining the brightest in the sky.’

She told him about making her wish. ‘I’m not usually into that, but I thought, why not.’

‘I hope your wish comes true,’ he said.

‘It sort of has.’ She smiled at him, and he pulled her close, gazing at her lovingly, and kissed her. She kissed him back, and for a few moments, they were lost in each other’s warm embrace.

‘Well,’ he said, feeling his heart fit to burst with happiness. ‘We’d better pour our tea and drink a toast.’

With their cups filled with tea, they tipped them together, drinking a toast to Elspeth staying on the island. He’d made sandwiches and there was cake — carrot cake and chocolate cake. He remembered he’d promised her both.

Relaxing on the deck by the glow of the twinkle lights, they enjoyed their evening picnic.

Packing up the picnic, they sailed on, completing a full circle of the coast, and then he brought the boat back safely into the harbour and tied it secure.

‘That was amazing,’ she said as they walked back to the knitting shop together.

‘Let’s make the most of the summer,’ he said, gazing down at her.

‘Yes! We’ll go swimming up at the waterfall during the day, as well as at night. I want to have fun on the swing over the river. Trips to thistle loch. And sail around the island on bright, sunny days, have picnics at the coves and run wild in the hills.’

And they did. Elspeth and Brodrick became a couple, taking things slowly, keeping their friendship strong while building hope of becoming a long-lasting and loving couple.

At the end of a particularly hot summer’s day, Brodrick had made them dinner at his cottage, and then they sat outside on the balcony enjoying the warm, night air and the view of the lights along the coastline.

Elspeth sat beside him and snuggled into his broad shoulders, feeling the happiest and most content she’d ever felt.

Brodrick leaned close and kissed her, with love, with passion and with a promise that they’d build a future together, starting with a long, happy summer.

‘I love you, Elspeth,’ he whispered, knowing he’d love her more as the summer ended and they planned their autumn and winter together. He planned to ask her to marry him, when the time was right, and deep in his heart he sensed they would be happy here on the island.

‘I love you too, Brodrick. I love being here with you,’ she said.

He kissed her again, and held her close as they sat out on the balcony with the sea breeze wafting gently over the island.

Gazing up at the stars in the sky, Elspeth smiled. 'There's the North Star. So bright and hopeful.'

'Our star,' he told her. 'Our one true north.'

End

About the Author:

De-ann Black is a bestselling author, scriptwriter and former newspaper journalist. She has over 100 books published. Romance, thrillers, espionage novels, action adventure. And children's books (non-fiction rocket science books and children's fiction). She became an Amazon All-Star author in 2014 and 2015.

She previously worked as a full-time newspaper journalist for several years. She had her own weekly columns in the press. This included being a motoring correspondent where she got to test drive cars every week for the press for three years.

Before being asked to work for the press, De-ann worked in magazine editorial writing everything from fashion features to social news. She was the marketing editor of a glossy magazine.

She is also a professional artist and illustrator. Embroidery design, fabric design, dressmaking, sewing, knitting and fashion are part of her work.

Additionally, De-ann has always been interested in fitness, and was a fitness and bodybuilding champion, 100 metre runner and mountaineer. As a former N.A.B.B.A. Miss Scotland, she had a weekly fitness show on the radio that ran for over three years.

De-ann trained in Shukokai karate, boxing, kickboxing, Dayan Qigong and Jiu Jitsu. She is currently based in Scotland.

Her 16 colouring books are available in paperback, including her latest Summer Nature Colouring Book and Flower Nature Colouring Book.

Her latest embroidery pattern books include: Floral Garden Embroidery Patterns, Christmas & Winter Embroidery Patterns, Floral Spring Embroidery Patterns and Sea Theme Embroidery Patterns.

Website: Find out more at: www.de-annblack.com

Fabric, Wallpaper & Home Decor Collections:

De-ann's fabric designs and wallpaper collections, and home decor items, including her popular Scottish Garden Thistles patterns, are available from Spoonflower.

www.de-annblack.com/spoonflower

Also by De-ann Black (Romance, Action/Thrillers & Children's books). See her Amazon Author page or website for further details about her books, screenplays, illustrations, art, fabric designs and embroidery patterns.

Amazon Author page: www.De-annBlack.com/Amazon

Romance books:

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1. Scottish Island Knitting Bee

Embroidery, Sewing & Baking series:

1. Sewing & Mending Cottage

Quilting Bee & Tea Shop series:

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2. The Tea Shop by the Sea
3. Embroidery Cottage
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Sewing, Crafts & Quilting series:

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