

Jessica Redland

Summer Nights
At The
Starfish
Cafe



SUMMER NIGHTS AT THE STARFISH CAFÉ

THE STARFISH CAFÉ SERIES BOOK 3

JESSICA REDLAND

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Boldwød

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*To the incredible staff and volunteers at the RNLI who
give their time and commitment to saving lives at sea.*

What you do is phenomenal.

*Particular thanks to the crew and volunteers at
Scarborough Lifeboat Station, especially Amy, Colin,
Eve, Lucy, Matt, Paul, and Rudi for your invaluable
help and support.*

‘With courage, nothing is impossible.’

— SIR WILLIAM HILLARY, 1823, FOUNDER OF
THE ROYAL NATIONAL LIFEBOAT INSTITUTION
(RNLI), EST. 1824 (ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS THE
NATIONAL INSTITUTION FOR THE
PRESERVATION OF LIFE FROM SHIPWRECK)

Recurring characters from The Starfish Café series so far

Hollie Brooks

Owner and full-time manager of The Starfish Café

Owner of wood craft business Hollie's Wood

RNLI crew member

Engaged to Jake

Jake 'Mouse' MacLeod

Charge nurse on A&E at Whitsborough Bay General Hospital

RNLI crew member (helm)

Engaged to Hollie

Pickle

Hollie and Jake's shih tzu (found abandoned)

Heather Brooks

Hollie's mum, who set up The Starfish Café

Died of cancer seven and a half years ago

Joe 'Sparky' Brooks

Hollie's dad, RNLI crew member, killed in tragic rescue eight and a half years ago

Isaac 'Silver' Brooks

Hollie's brother, RNLI crew member, killed in tragic rescue eight and a half years ago

Kerry Marsden

Works in The Starfish Café during term-time weekdays

Mum to four primary school-age children

Lives with her mum, Nadia

Nadia Marsden

Kerry's mum

Artie ‘Chief’ Briars

RNLI Coxswain (full-time paid crew member)

Angie Swinton

Assistant Manager of The Starfish Café

Was best friends with Hollie’s mum for fifty years

Estranged from husband Martin

Martin Swinton

Funeral director

Estranged from wife Angie

Victoria (Tori) Tennyson

Interior designer/architect

Friend of Hollie’s

Lives with Finley in Jake’s house, Lighthouse View

Finley ‘Bart’ Scott

RNLI crew member (obsessed with *The Simpsons*)

Dentist/trainee architect

Lives with Tori

Demi, India and Roman Scott

Finley’s ex-girlfriend and her children, who regularly see Finley

Vivienne and Ralph Tennyson

Tori’s parents

Authors of historical romance

Robyn and Brett Allard

Tori’s younger sister and brother-in-law

Kyle ‘Jaffa’ Bradbury

RNLI mechanic (full-time paid crew member)

Was Isaac’s best friend since childhood

Married to Bex

Rebecca (Bex) Bradbury

Was Isaac's girlfriend

Married to Kyle

Mia and Isaac Bradbury

Kyle and Bex's children

Violet MacLeod

Jake's nanna, who raised him

Died following a stroke seven years ago

Robert (Bobby) Reynolds

Jake's dad

Drowned trying to save Jake on Jake's ninth birthday

Michelle Reynolds

Jake's mum

Died from complications following Jake's birth

Larissa Kent

Jake's older estranged sister

Blames Jake for the death of their parents

Andrew Kent

Larissa's husband

Irene Trent

Former neighbour of Jake's and a family friend

Lives in Bay View Care Home

Adrian Daniels (Uncle Adrian)

Retired police sergeant and Bobby's best friend

Recently reconnected with Jake

Maggs Daniels (Auntie Maggs)

Had been friends with Michelle and Bobby

Recently reconnected with Jake

Katie O'Sullivan, née Vickers

Recruitment consultant

Hollie's best friend

Married to Trey

Trey O'Sullivan

Recruitment consultant

Married to Katie

Betty and Tommy

Longstanding customers at The Starfish Café

Sylvia Braithwaite aka Mrs Sultana

Regular customer at The Starfish Café

Recently befriended Hollie

Avril and Javier

Work in The Starfish Café

Grace

Works in Driftwood Dell – the shop and gallery within The Starfish Café – during the summer holidays

'Spaniel', 'Belle' and 'Simba'

RNLI crew members



‘I’m going to bring out Betty’s birthday cake,’ I whispered to Kerry and Avril, who were topping up the salt and pepper shakers behind The Starfish Café’s serving counter. ‘Have you got your singing voices ready?’

They both gave me a smile and a subtle thumbs up.

Avril followed me into the kitchen to retrieve the bouquet of sunflowers – Betty’s favourites – while I added the candles onto the eighty-fifth birthday cake. I’d made and iced a two-tier sponge cake but had asked Carly from Carly’s Cupcakes in town to make decorative sunflowers and a yellow eight and five.

‘Betty’s going to love that,’ Avril said. ‘And so will Tommy.’

Betty and Tommy were longstanding favourite customers at The Starfish Café, which was set on a clifftop two miles south of the popular North Yorkshire seaside town of Whitsborough Bay. It was a family business which had passed down from my granny to Mum to me. All the staff adored Betty and Tommy, who came in most days for tea and scones. As today was Betty’s birthday, they’d been joined by another favourite customer, Sylvia, and her friend Dorothy.

Candles lit, I slowly shuffled out of the kitchen.

‘Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you...’

My heart glowed as other customers joined in, a slight mumble over the name from those who didn’t know her.

‘Oh, my goodness, darling girl!’ Betty gushed as I placed the cake in front of her. ‘I wasn’t expecting this.’

Her eyes sparkled and I glanced at Tommy, who pressed his hand to his heart and mouthed ‘thank you’ to me.

‘Blow the candles out and make a wish,’ I said to Betty.

She smiled and winked at me before blowing them out to a round of applause. Avril handed her the bouquet of flowers and she breathed in the scent.

‘Thank you all so very much. What a lovely birthday surprise!’

Kerry, efficient as always, already had a knife, plates and forks ready so, while she cut and I dished the slices out, Avril took the flowers back to the kitchen to keep in water.

‘You’ve made them so happy,’ Kerry said as we watched the four of them finishing their cake amid much laughter a little later. ‘You make everyone happy here.’

‘Aw, that’s such a lovely thing to say. Thank you.’

‘I mean it. What you’ve created here – for the staff and the customers – is really special. I’m so lucky I landed a job here.’

‘We’re lucky to have you,’ I said. ‘You do realise you can never leave?’

She smiled. ‘No intention of ever doing so. I’m already thinking about how much I’m going to miss it during the school holidays. Five more weeks to go.’

Kerry was a single parent with four primary school-aged children, and the Monday to Friday 10.30 a.m. till 2.30 p.m. term-time-only shift couldn’t be more ideal for her. It gave me extra cover across the busiest time of the day and wasn’t a problem during school holidays because I had several students eager for the work.

A bit later, I returned to Betty and Tommy’s table to clear the plates and take the cake away to be boxed up for home.

‘You must all take a slice,’ Betty insisted. ‘Get one for Jake and Avril’s husband and save one for Angie when she’s

back in tomorrow. Oh, and get Kerry to take one home for her mum and each of those lovely children of hers.’

‘You’ll have none left for you two at this rate.’

‘We’ve already had four slices and we’ve barely made a dent. There’ll be plenty left.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Betty. Thank you.’

‘Are you all set for Saturday?’ Sylvia asked.

My heart leapt with excitement, as it did any time anyone mentioned the wedding. After nearly a year of planning, I could hardly believe there were only four more sleeps until I’d say ‘I do’ to Jake.

‘Just about. I picked up the dresses last week, Jake and I are finalising the details with our photographer tonight, and I’m making the favours on Thursday.’

‘The Bay Pavilion is such a lovely venue for a wedding,’ Betty said. ‘It’s going to be a wonderful day. How’s the forecast looking?’

‘Very good, so we should be able to have the ceremony outside in Pavilion Court.’

The Bay Pavilion, just beyond the commercial part of South Bay, was the most amazing building. Originally opened in the 1840s, the function and concert venue had been extended over the years. I’d attended several events there and loved it, but the biggest selling point for our wedding was Pavilion Court. The large outdoor area had a curved ‘wall’ of windows providing a stunning panoramic view of the coastline. A bandstand in the middle of the ‘wall’ acted as the altar during a wedding ceremony and Jake and I loved the idea of making our vows with the sea as our backdrop. It was the closest we’d get to having our families with us in spirit.

‘I love weddings,’ Dorothy said, giving me a warm smile. ‘I’m so looking forward to Saturday.’

I headed into the kitchen to cut off some slices of cake and box up what was left, then followed them out to the car park. Sylvia and Dorothy wished me all the best with the final

wedding preparations then headed off in Sylvia's car with a wave.

'Thank you again for the cake and flowers, Hollie,' Betty said, hugging me. 'You really are the sweetest.'

'You're welcome. Enjoy the rest of your birthday. I hope you have plans to spoil her, Tommy.'

Betty answered for him. 'He spoils me every day just by being himself.'

The look of love they exchanged brought tears to my eyes.

'Did I ever tell you we met on Betty's seventeenth birthday?' Tommy asked. 'She went to the picture house with some friends and I was there with my brother. I couldn't take my eyes off her. Missed the film. And she's just as beautiful today as she was back then. Monday's child – fair of face.'

Betty laughed. 'That rhyme's nonsense and you know it because you were born on a Wednesday and that would make you full of woe.'

She turned to me. 'He makes me laugh every single day. There's nothing woeful about my Tommy.'

'There certainly isn't,' I said, 'but I do agree with fair of face for you. You're a beautiful woman, Betty.'

'As are you, darling girl, and I can't wait to see you in your wedding dress on Saturday. You'll be the finest bride there ever was.'

'Hear, hear!' Tommy said.

I hugged my arms round myself, feeling all warm and fuzzy as they drove away. They'd celebrated sixty-six years of marriage in February and if anyone wanted to know what enduring true love looked like, they need look no further – amazing role models for a happy marriage.

I looked up at the pine trees which surrounded the café and car park, giving the place an alpine feel and inspiring the log cabin-style exterior of the two-storey building. It was the last day of spring today and the colours seemed more vibrant, the bird song louder, the sun warmer on my face and arms, as

though nature was displaying a grand finale for spring and a fanfare for the arrival of summer.

Lunchtime customers would start arriving soon but there was time for five minutes of peace first. I sat on one of the picnic benches near the steps down to the beach, watching a grey squirrel running up a tree trunk, and a couple of blue tits pecking at a feeder. I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, letting the sounds of nature relax me.

With the café thriving and me marrying the man of my dreams this weekend, life was looking really good right now. And about time. I'd been dealt more than my fair share of heartbreak, as had Jake. I'd lost my dad and brother, both RNLi crew members, during a rescue on a stormy night just after Christmas eight years ago, and Mum had lost her battle with cancer a year later. Jake's mum had died when he was born and his dad when he was nine, and we'd both struggled in the years that followed. We'd come a long way in coming to terms with our grief by the time we met, but had taken several further steps together.

And then a different type of disaster had hit when the café was broken into and completely trashed a little over a year ago.

The sound of a car engine made me open my eyes. Time to get back to work. I stood up, brushed off my jeans, and took one last look out at the sea beyond the café.

'We want only positive things from now on, please,' I whispered into the gentle breeze. 'That would be lovely.'



One of the many things I loved about working for Hollie was that, no matter how busy it was when 2.30 p.m. arrived, she'd shoo me out of the door with reassurances that she and my colleagues could handle things, ensuring I was never late for the school pick-up.

This morning had been fairly quiet but there'd been a constant stream of customers since lunchtime, leaving very few tables free, including on the large terrace outside. We'd had a couple of damp weeks, but the last day of spring had brought gorgeous blue sky and sunshine, enticing all the fair-weather walkers out.

I grabbed a tray to clear a couple of recently vacated tables before I left, but Hollie took it off me.

'Oh no, you don't! It's half two. Off you go, and don't forget your cake.'

I gave her an appreciative smile as I untied my apron. 'Thank you.'

Outside a couple of minutes later, I loaded my bag and the cake into the boot of my car. A trio of three women climbed up the last few steps from the beach and headed up the car park. I couldn't let them bypass the café.

'Big climb, isn't it?' I called to the group.

They laughed as they agreed.

‘You know what you need now? Tea and a scone or a piece of cake. Everything in The Starfish Café is freshly made on site and mouth-wateringly delicious and, let’s face it, you’ve earned it after that climb. And the terrace is open with the most spectacular view up and down the coast.’

‘Are you on commission?’ one of them asked, laughing.

‘Just someone with a passion for home cooking and stunning views.’

They thanked me for the recommendation and, after a brief discussion, changed direction towards the café. I drove away, feeling proud that I’d introduced three more customers who, if they were local, would hopefully return and spread the word.

I meant what I’d said earlier to Hollie about how lucky I was to work there. I’d started in January four years ago and loved everything about it – Hollie, my colleagues, the customers, the location, the food and the convenient hours. When I’d applied for the job, I didn’t think I’d stood a chance as I had no experience of working in a café or restaurant. Fortunately, Hollie viewed my time as a hotel receptionist as transferrable customer service experience and took a chance on me. She frequently complimented me on how good I was with customers and my ability to convince them to make an extra purchase like a tray bake ‘for the road’, so I knew she valued me as much as I valued the job.

* * *

‘Mummy!’ My youngest daughter, six-year-old Freya, ran across the playground as soon as she saw me, abandoning her twin brother, Jayden.

‘I have a poorly!’ She lifted the skirt of her lilac and white gingham school dress, revealing a *Dora the Explorer* plaster across her right knee.

‘Aw, sweetie, what happened?’ I asked, crouching down to give her a cuddle.

‘I fell over at morning playtime.’

‘I put a wet paper towel on it,’ Jayden declared proudly as he joined us in his grey shorts and white polo shirt.

‘He made me better.’ Freya flung her arms round her twin and kissed his cheek, making my heart melt. The pair of them had very different personalities and did a lot of things independently, but they were fiercely protective of each other.

Eight-year-old Noah sauntered across the playground with his purple school sweater slung round his neck, followed by my eldest, eleven-year-old Maisie, who was growing up far too fast. She refused to wear a gingham dress – apparently too babyish for someone in their final year at primary school. Where had the years gone?

They talked over each other as we weaved our way back to the car and I didn’t catch any of it, but I’d get the detail later on the way to or from their various clubs. Every day after school, there was something on, but Tuesdays were the most chaotic. Freya and Jayden had ballet and gymnastics, Maisie went to Junior Sea Cadets and Noah, who I swear was half-fish, went to swimming club. It would be impossible to manage the logistics on my own, so Mum took Noah swimming and I spent the evening ferrying the other three all over town. Maisie had christened it ‘Trippy Tuesday’ because of the number of trips I had to make and it had caught on. Although the speed at which she was growing up terrified me, I couldn’t help looking forward to the day we could laugh together about the real meaning of ‘trippy’.

Fitting in all the clubs and activities was exhausting but I didn’t begrudge them a single moment of it. I didn’t need a social life – my friendships with my lovely colleagues at The Starfish Café were enough – and I certainly wasn’t interested in another romantic relationship after how badly their father let us all down.

* * *

‘Another Trippy Tuesday survived.’ Mum smiled as she placed a jacket potato and salad in front of me just after 9.00

p.m. and sat opposite me at the table in the kitchen-diner at Park Lodge – formerly my grandparents' B&B and now our family home.

‘Just about!’ I said. ‘How was Howard?’

Mum’s face lit up, as it always did when his name was mentioned. They’d met through Noah’s swimming club, which Howard’s grandson also attended, and had been a couple for about a year now, but they were so in tune with each other that it seemed like they’d been together for decades.

‘He’s good. Looking forward to a day with the kids on Saturday.’

‘Are you sure you don’t mind? It’s a lot to ask.’

‘Of course I don’t mind! I get to spend some quality time with my gorgeous grandchildren – always a good thing – and it makes me happy knowing you’re getting some time to yourself for once. You know I worry about you.’

‘There’s nothing to worry about. I’ve got the kids, you, and a job I love. That’s all I need.’

She raised her eyebrows at me.

‘Seriously, Mum. I don’t want or need a man in my life. Been there, done that, got the broken heart.’

I shovelled in a forkful of fluffy potato.

‘But you’re only thirty-one. Not all men are like Cameron, you know.’ She started laughing and clapped her hands to her cheeks. ‘Yes, I heard it. Not all men are like your father either and, before you say it, I know I was younger than you when I swore off men for life. I still had a social life, though. Even if you’re not interested in dating, there’s nothing stopping you going out with friends on a weekday. Well, most days except Tuesdays.’

‘I know, but that would put on you even more.’

‘And I don’t mind.’

‘But *I* do. You already do so much for me and the kids. Honestly, Mum, I’m happy with things as they are.’

Mum was my best friend, my rock and my saviour and I counted my blessings every day for how amazing she was. I have no idea how I'd have got through those final months of my pregnancy with the twins if she hadn't been so selfless. She'd had her world turned upside down by the five of us, but she'd never once grumbled about it. During those earlier darker days, I'd wondered how different my life might have been if I'd stuck to my first impressions of Cameron or listened to Mum when she'd shared her concerns. I'd been convinced she was wrong, though. I thought I knew him. I thought I was enough for him.

*Fourteen Years Ago*

When I was only three, my dad decided that he'd rather go out drinking with his mates than be tied down with a girlfriend and baby. Mum and I temporarily moved back into Park Lodge with her parents – a thriving B&B at that point – before relocating to Huddersfield in West Yorkshire for a fresh start. Her experience working at Park Lodge helped her secure a job in a hotel and, later, promotion to manager. I'd always wanted to follow in her footsteps so, after school, I started at the local technical college, studying my diploma in travel and tourism.

That was when I first saw Cameron Fullerton. Correction – that was when I first *heard* Cameron Fullerton. I've never known anyone to be so loud. It was as though everything he said and did was performed to the other students, seeking adulation. Weirdly, it worked. There were a bunch of lads who hung onto his every word and mucked about with him, clearly trying to impress, and a group of girls who seemed to find him hilarious, always giggling at his jokes and stories.

I was so relieved he wasn't on my course, but my best friend Saffy wasn't so fortunate.

'Urgh, he's just like this in class too,' she said one morning a few weeks into term as Cameron raced his gang along the corridor. 'He's always trying to make his mates laugh. Does my head in.'

‘Fancy swapping to travel and tourism?’ I asked, bending down to pick up the pieces of ripped poster off the floor which they’d destroyed by bashing into the noticeboard.

‘It’s very tempting.’

Cameron and his mates were laughing and patting each other on the back and I couldn’t bite my tongue any longer.

‘I’m glad you find it funny,’ I called to them as I placed the pieces on a filing cabinet.

They turned round, surprise evident on all their faces.

‘What’s that?’ Cameron asked.

‘I said I’m glad you find destroying someone else’s work funny. I’m sure that, when they spent time planning that display and putting it together so neatly, they were secretly hoping that a bunch of cretins would rip it down within a few weeks just for a laugh. Nice one, lads!’

My voice sounded confident but I was shaking inside. I’d always opted for a quiet life, blending into the background, keeping off the radar of the bullies, so I had no idea why I’d chosen this moment to draw attention to myself so publicly. Cameron and I stared at each other and I braced myself for a snarky response, but our tutors appeared and ushered us into our classrooms.

The following day, the posters had been carefully taped back together.

After that, there were no more corridor races or pushing and shoving, so maybe my words had had an impact after all, although they were still noisy. Sometimes, after a particularly loud incident, I’d catch Cameron looking at me, a strange expression on his face which I couldn’t read. Was he challenging me to have a go at him again, perhaps so he could say what he hadn’t been able to say on the race day? Saffy noticed it too and loved winding me up that Cameron was crushing on me. I doubted it but, even if he was, hell could freeze over and I still wouldn’t be interested.

At the start of the summer holidays between the first and second year at college, I spotted a removals van on the drive of

the big house at the end of our road. The house had been empty all year, with builders coming and going, but the new owners were obviously now ready to move in. My heart sank when a car pulled up behind the van and Cameron got out the back. Of all the people who could have moved in, why did it have to be him?

‘If he gets the bus, can you imagine how awkward it’ll be waiting at the bus stop with him?’ Saffy asked when I met her in town the following day. ‘Or sitting next to him on the bus.’

‘Don’t! I can’t bear it. What if he talks to me?’

‘What if he asks you out?’

‘Shut up!’ I cried, giving her a shove. ‘He does *not* fancy me, and I definitely don’t fancy him.’

‘My grandma always says hate is the closest thing to love.’

‘Well, your grandma’s wrong in this case.’

* * *

A week later, I was meeting Saffy in Huddersfield. As I stepped out of the house, I had my head down, texting her, but was vaguely aware of someone pushing a wheelchair along the path. I waited by the gate to let them pass and could hear a man giving a running commentary on the surroundings – the type of doors, whether there were blinds in the windows, the colours and types of flowers in tubs in the small front gardens. I wondered why he was giving so much detail and glanced up. There was a frail-looking woman in the wheelchair with wispy white hair, dressed in bright colours, and wearing dark glasses.

The man stopped mid-sentence and, as I looked up at him, my eyes widened in shock. Cameron! His eyes locked with mine for a moment and he looked just as surprised to see me there.

‘Hi!’ he said. ‘You live here?’

I couldn’t exactly deny it while I was standing in my garden, so I nodded.

‘I’ve just moved in up the road,’ he said.

‘Who are you talking to, Cameron?’ the woman asked. For someone who looked so frail, her voice was unexpectedly strong.

He crouched beside the wheelchair, adjusted the blanket across her knees and raised his voice. ‘Sorry, Granny, this is Kerry from college.’

‘The one you were telling me about?’

A look of panic flickered across his face. ‘Erm, yes.’ He cleared his throat. ‘Kerry, this is my granny. You can call her Granny. Everyone does.’

‘Hi, Granny,’ I said, at a loss for more words. I didn’t know Cameron even knew my name and was reeling that he’d been talking about me.

‘What do you look like, Kerry?’ She pointed to her glasses. ‘I can only see shapes now and that’ll go soon, but I like to picture things up here.’ She tapped her forehead. ‘Hearing’s going too, so you’ll have to speak up.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Cameron said, his voice low.

‘No, it’s fine.’ I raised my voice for Granny to hear. ‘I’m five foot eight. I’ve got shoulder-length blonde hair and blue eyes, but I’m on my way out to catch a bus, so I need to go.’

‘Then we’d better not keep you,’ she said. ‘Bye, Kerry. I hope we meet again soon.’

Cameron gave me a half-smile before pushing the wheelchair away.

I set off but Granny’s voice drifted towards me. ‘Is she as pretty as her voice?’

I slowed my step, straining my ears for his response.

‘She’s stunning.’

Stunning? Did that mean Saffy was right about him crushing on me? I quickened my pace, not daring to turn around in case he was looking back.

By the time I made it to the bus stop, my heart was racing and I was pretty sure it wasn't completely down to the pace of my walk. On the route into the town centre, all I could think about was Cameron. Hearing him patiently describe the area to his visually impaired grandma and carefully tucking in her blanket showed a caring side I hadn't expected. And as for those final words I caught – *she's stunning* – I felt completely unnerved by the fizz of excitement they gave me.

After that, I saw him pushing Granny past our house at the same time every day. I clearly wasn't discreet enough with my spying as, after a few days, he paused outside and waved. It made my stomach fizz and I found myself watching the clock the following day, eager to see him.

It seemed pointless hiding behind the curtains when he clearly knew I was there so, after about a week, I started waving back. He looked so happy when I did that, bending down and speaking to Granny, who waved enthusiastically too.

On the Monday of week four of the six-week summer holidays, they waved as usual but, instead of moving on, Cameron applied the brake on the wheelchair and pushed the garden gate open. My stomach did a backflip as he walked up the path and knocked on the door.

'If you're free, Granny says she'd love it if you could join us on our walk today,' he said when I answered.

'And what about you?' I'd never flirted with anyone in my whole life, so I had no idea where that came from.

He smiled. 'I'd love it too.'

'Okay, then.'

I slipped my trainers on and grabbed my keys.

'Hi, Granny,' I said, joining her on the path. 'How are you?'

'Not so grand today,' she said, her voice sounding weaker than last time. 'I have the start of a dratted summer cold. Cameron wanted me to stay home, but I get so bored indoors.'

My walk is...’ She broke off, coughing, and Cameron handed her a tissue.

I glanced up at his furrowed brow and could see he was worried about her.

She finished coughing and rested back against the chair, patting her chest.

‘It’s the highlight of my week,’ she wheezed.

‘I get bored of staying indoors too,’ I said, walking beside her as we set off. ‘My mum’s a hotel manager and can’t get time off in the summer holidays. I work on the reception at weekends but I’m on my own during the week.’

‘Then you must join us every day,’ she said. ‘Tell me about your course. Cameron says it’s different to his.’

We walked slowly round the block as Cameron and I described the differences between our studies. She quizzed me about my weekend job and my plans for the future.

‘I want to be a hotel manager like my mum,’ I said. ‘I’m hoping the course and my time on reception will help fast track that.’

‘Cameron’s going to be a manager too. He’s off to university, aren’t you, love?’

I glanced at Cameron questioningly, surprised to hear this. With his *don’t care* attitude at college, I’d assumed he’d scrape through his course and get a job afterwards. Aspirations to get a degree and be a manager seemed out of kilter with his behaviour, but so did taking an old lady for a walk every day and patiently describing the surroundings. It looked like I’d made some unfair assumptions about Cameron Fullerton based on a snapshot of behaviour in the corridor. I’d only spoken to him once to challenge him on the posters and he hadn’t had a chance to respond. I hadn’t thought of myself as being judgemental until now.

‘What do you want to do at university?’ I asked him.

‘Business studies. I want to join a graduate programme with a big multinational, maybe as a project manager.’

‘That sounds impressive.’

Granny reached up and patted his hand. ‘He wants to be a CEO by the time he’s thirty, don’t you, love? Reckon he’ll do it too. Straight A-stars in his GCSEs, you know. He’s got the brains and the ambition to go far, just like his parents.’

The grades surprised me too and I wondered whether the messing about at college could be boredom.

‘What do your parents do?’ I asked.

He sighed and his voice was flat as he answered. ‘My dad owns a construction company and my mum owns a storage business.’

‘Cameron doesn’t get on with his parents.’

‘Granny! You can’t say that.’

‘Why not? It’s true, and it’s not like it’s your fault.’

‘Yeah, but—’

But he didn’t get to finish his protest because Granny started coughing again and he announced it was time to get her back inside for a rest.

They called for me every day that week. Granny claimed she felt no better but no worse either. She seemed in good spirits as she quizzed me about everything from where I was born to the music I liked to my favourite colour. Cameron shared the same details for him – or Granny did on his behalf – and I really enjoyed getting to know him.

There was only one subject which appeared to be taboo – his relationship with his parents. Every time they were mentioned, he steered the conversation away. I shared that my dad wasn’t in my life, but it didn’t lead to him opening up about his own parents.

I adored Granny and told her that I’d officially adopted her as my grandma, which she loved. She was so warm and friendly, full of interesting stories and so clearly proud of her grandson. I wished she really was my grandma. We had no contact with anyone on my dad’s side of the family, and my mum’s parents were nice but we hardly ever saw them.

Running Park Lodge had kept them too busy during the school holidays when I was younger and, now that they'd stopped taking in paying guests, there were still issues. They wouldn't come to Huddersfield to see us because Grandma couldn't drive, Granddad wasn't confident on motorways, and they refused to use public transport. I couldn't visit on weekends due to my job and there was always an excuse for me not going during the week, so I'd taken the hint and stopped suggesting it.

'It's meant to get colder and rainy tomorrow,' Cameron said as we paused outside my house on the Friday. 'We might not be out for a few days.'

'I'm working over the weekend anyway, but call for me when you're out again.'

He smiled and his whole face lit up, giving me butterflies. 'We'll do that.'

'I'll see you soon, Granny,' I said, lightly patting her hand. 'I hope you improve over the weekend.'

She grasped my hand in hers and pulled me closer.

'Be patient with him,' she whispered. 'He's had a tough life.' She squeezed my hand then released it. 'I'm ready to go home now, Cameron.'

I stood by the gate, watching him wheel her towards the big house, feeling puzzled. Why had she asked me to be patient with him? And how tough a life could someone have who lived in the biggest house in the area? Money clearly wasn't a worry, but maybe that stuff about not getting on with his parents was. Cameron Fullerton was clearly more complex than I'd expected and it intrigued me.

On Tuesday, the rain finally let up and I eagerly awaited my walk with Cameron and Granny, but they didn't appear at their usual time. Late that morning, an ambulance whizzed past, blue lights flashing, and my stomach churned as it pulled onto the drive of the big house. Had Granny taken a turn for the worse? If she had, it felt disrespectful to stay by the window, watching.

On Wednesday evening, there was a knock on the door and Mum called up the stairs that it was for me. Cameron was on the doorstep, his face pale.

‘I wanted to let you know that Granny died last night.’

‘Oh, Cameron. I’m sorry. I saw the ambulance yesterday morning.’

‘She went to hospital but...’ He shook his head. ‘Anyway, she really liked you and wanted you to have this.’

He handed me a purple heart-shaped pendant which I’d admired when Granny wore it last week.

‘I can’t take her jewellery. Doesn’t your mum want it?’

‘If it’s not gold, she’s not interested. It’s yours.’

It was the most he’d said about his mum, but that small insight was very telling.

‘I know it won’t be the same without Granny, but do you want to go for a walk?’ I asked.

He nodded, so I slipped my trainers on and grabbed a jacket. He didn’t speak as we walked side by side to the nearby children’s playground and neither did I.

The roundabout was wet but we sat on it anyway and Cameron pushed on the ground intermittently with one foot, turning it ever so slowly.

I ran my fingers over the pendant I’d put on.

‘It suits you,’ he said.

‘It’s beautiful. I know I’d only just met her, but I’m going to miss her.’

‘She had that impact on everyone she met. She was always so friendly and interested in people. Shame my mum didn’t inherit those genes.’

‘Is that why you don’t get on with her?’

He stopped moving the roundabout and looked up at me with a sigh. ‘I know what you’re thinking. That it’s all my fault because I piss about and it winds people up.’

‘I wasn’t thinking that, actually.’ I couldn’t help sounding defensive.

‘Sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. It’s just that...’ He shook his head and sighed again. ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do without Granny. She was the only one who ever cared. My parents never wanted me and they could pretend I didn’t exist with Granny around doing the grandparent and parent role, but now...’

‘They never wanted you? They actually told you that?’

‘Hundreds of times. So when Granny said I don’t get on with my parents, what she actually meant is that they hate me and rue the day I was born.’

‘That’s harsh. Why didn’t they want you?’

‘Because they never wanted kids. They only care about three things – their businesses, their bank balance, and each other. Having a child was a drain on all three of those.’

‘Then why have a child?’

‘Because Mum didn’t realise she was pregnant until it was too late to do anything about it. That was a cheery thing to be told.’

I couldn’t believe I was hearing it. ‘That’s awful!’

‘They’re awful. They were going to have me adopted but Granny stepped in and said she’d move in and help raise me. She did more than help – she did everything.’

I shuffled closer to him, not caring how wet my jeans were getting, and entwined my fingers round his. There were no words. I knew something of rejection from the situation with Dad, but Mum had been an amazing parent and I’d never felt like I missed out. How horrendous must it feel to be rejected every day, and to know your parents wished you’d never been born? That was brutal.

‘I felt bad about the posters,’ he said eventually. ‘I did my best to tape them back together.’

‘That was you?’

‘I hate myself when I’m doing stuff like that, but I can’t seem to stop it. One day at primary school, I made a joke in the middle of a maths test and everyone laughed. I was in trouble with the teacher but the kids thought I was a legend. The teacher said that, if I did it again, my parents would have to come into school. Back then, I still believed I could make them notice me and here was my teacher presenting me with a way to make that happen, so I played up again and, sure enough, my parents were hauled into school. Even though I was in trouble with them, it felt good to be on their radar, so I continued to muck about, but they passed the buck to Granny. It wasn’t fair on her, so I calmed it down a bit, getting attention from my classmates but not pushing it far enough with the teacher to haul Granny into school. It was years later when I realised that it had got me nowhere with my parents except to give them more proof as to why having kids was a waste of time, money and effort. By then, mucking about was a habit.’

I could hear the pain in his voice as he told me what I suspected he’d never shared with anyone before and, at that moment, I felt like I understood who he was and why. I pictured him in the corridor at college and that strange expression on his face and wondered if it had been his way of trying to silently convey to me that what I saw wasn’t who he was.

‘You don’t need to be that person anymore,’ I said softly. ‘Granny saw you and I see you too. You’ve got my attention.’

His eyes filled with tears and that was the moment I fell in love with him. I saw a vulnerable, confused, lonely teenager and I thought I could make everything better. I thought he was broken and I could fix him.

We sat on the roundabout and talked for hours, but the darkness brought a chill and we were soon shivering. My legs had cramped up and, as I got off the roundabout, I stumbled into Cameron’s arms. Our faces edged closer and his lips met mine with the softest, most tender of kisses.

We spent what was left of the summer holidays together, but my relationship with Cameron cost me my friendship with

Saffy. She had a hissy fit when I told her he was my boyfriend. Apparently I was making a big mistake and she wouldn't be sticking around to pick up the pieces when he inevitably dumped me.

Granny's funeral was a couple of days before we returned to college. I went to support Cameron and had the displeasure of meeting his parents. He hadn't been exaggerating about them. Doug and Margo Fullerton were even colder and more self-absorbed than I'd expected. They blanked Cameron, as though he was a stranger, while welcoming the other mourners, many of whom Cameron told me were business contacts rather than relatives or friends of Granny. They didn't even leave space for him to sit on the front pew with them in the church.

We were a couple of hours into the wake when he finally managed to pin them down long enough to introduce me as his girlfriend. His dad laughed and said, 'Good luck with that.' His mum looked me up and down, sneered and said, 'I give it a month, and that's being generous.'

Looking back, that's when it all started. I couldn't bear to see him so starved of love and attention, so I overcompensated. I made him the centre of my world, which worried Mum.

Why are you going to see a horror film? You hate them.

Why are you growing your hair? It drives you mad when it's long.

Why are you watching rugby? You don't like watching sport.

And the answer to all those questions was *because Cameron likes it*, although my response to Mum was always *I'm giving it a try* or *I fancied a change*. I didn't mind and it's not like Cameron forced me into any of it. I was the one who offered. He'd been ignored by his parents all his life, so my gift to him was making him feel important, especially with Granny gone. Did it matter if that meant a few nightmares, tangled hair, and several hours spent watching a sport I didn't understand? It made Cameron happy, which made me happy.

Or so I thought.

*Present day*

The Starfish Café opened seven days a week during peak season and Angie was the manager on Sundays, giving me a valuable day off. In my life before Jake and Pickle, I'd spent that day and most evenings in my workshop – the double garage at my childhood home, Sandy Croft – making my Hollie's Wood products. Keeping busy had been one of the things that kept me going through my grief.

Now everything had changed. My evenings were busy with RNLI training every Monday, responding to emergency callouts at other times, and Jake. The only evenings I spent in my workshop now were when Jake was working nights.

I still spent Sunday mornings foraging for driftwood and sea glass on the various beaches up and down the Yorkshire Coast, but was often accompanied by Jake and Pickle. I sometimes had a few hours in my workshop later that day while Jake went out with his camera or processed the photos he'd taken, but I'd really needed another day away from the café, spent in the workshop building up my stock for Driftwood Dell – the shop and gallery we'd opened on the top floor as part of the refurbishment after the break-in.

I'd chosen Thursdays for my Hollie's Wood day and, if Jake was between shifts at the hospital, he kept me well

supplied with mugs of tea but was otherwise brilliant at leaving me to it.

It was a Thursday today but, as it was only two days until our wedding, I had other plans – going to Charlee’s Chocolates to make my wedding favours. I’d been so excited when Charlee had asked if I wanted to create them with her.

Jake was on a day shift at the hospital, so I took Pickle to the café first thing rather than leave him alone all day, then walked into town. Sandy Croft was on the corner of a side street off Sea Cliff – a long clifftop road into town with hotels, guest houses and flats on one side and a wide esplanade on the other – and I loved the walk, taking me past beautiful flower beds and benches. Trees and shrubs lined the cliff top, broken by entrances to the various cliff paths down to South Bay, some of which twisted through woodland and others which went via Cascade Gardens – a hidden gem of a garden which had been a favourite haunt of Mum’s and where I was going to have some photos taken before my wedding.

At some points, the trees weren’t quite so dense, providing glimpses of the sea, but my favourite part was where the trees ended. Reaching that spot now, I paused to drink it in – the curve of South Bay with the ruins of Whitsborough Bay Castle perched on the distant cliff top and the River Abbleby weaving its way to the sea below. There was the Old Town, where Jake had lived in Lighthouse View when we met but which he now rented out to our friends Tori and Finley. The colourful frontages and flashing lights of the arcades overlooking the beach contrasted with the candy-coloured ice cream parlours. On the same side as the beach was a small fair called Pleasureland, the harbour, and the lifeboat station.

The D class ILB – the small inshore lifeboat – was heading towards the station, so they must have been out on a shout. There weren’t any ambulances on the harbour slipway and I couldn’t hear the air sea rescue helicopter, so presumably it hadn’t been anything too serious. The crew would likely be Artie ‘Chief’ Briars and Kyle ‘Jaffa’ Bradbury, who were the station’s only full-time paid staff – coxswain and mechanic respectively – and probably Simba, who lived towards the

bottom of the Old Town and worked from home so was nearly always the first to reach the station.

The ILB reached the beach and the shore crew took over, getting the lifeboat onto the trailer to transport back up the ramp for checking over and cleaning. That was my role with the RNLI now, having transitioned from lifeboat to shore crew at the beginning of April so Jake and I could try for a family. I couldn't be boat crew and pregnant as it was too risky. I'd have loved to spend longer as boat crew, but we'd both turned thirty-six at the end of last year and didn't feel like time was on our side to delay things for too long.

I tore my gaze away from the ILB and continued my journey into town. I was going to help Charlee make the chocolates this morning and, while they were setting in the moulds, I was meeting my bridesmaids – Katie, Tori and Bex – for lunch in The Chocolate Pot. Katie and Bex would need to return to work afterwards, but Tori was taking the afternoon off to help bag up the favours.

Charlee's Chocolates was on the left-hand side of Castle Street, about two thirds of the way up. I was a little early, so I zigzagged along the street, admiring the window displays in the various independent shops.

Several of my wooden cottages were displayed in the window of Yorkshire's Best. It was predominantly a gallery run by local artist Jed Ferguson, but he also sold Yorkshire-made crafts, providing retail space to creatives who would typically only be able to sell their wares online or at craft fairs. Jed and I supported each other's businesses, with his artwork for sale in Driftwood Dell and some of my Hollie's Wood products in his shop. I'd been really touched when he unveiled a picture at the start of the year of Tank – the largest and most recognisable of the grey seals in the colony below the café – perched on a rock on the beach with Starfish Arc and the lighthouse in the background. For sale exclusively at The Starfish Café, it had been a really popular print. In return, I'd created a wooden Castle Street collection only available in Yorkshire's Best, which had also sold well.

Opposite Charlee's Chocolates, an empty unit was in the midst of refurbishment. I cupped my hands to peer through a gap in the whitewash on the windows but the piles of wood, plasterboard and the loose cabling gave me no clue as to what it would become.

I crossed over to Charlee's Chocolates and pushed open the door. Breathing in the delectable aroma of chocolate and caramel, my stomach rumbled appreciatively.

Charlee's best friend and business partner, Jodie, was restocking what they called the 'posh chocs' stored in the glass serving counter. She looked up and smiled.

'Happy nearly wedding day! Two more sleeps!'

'I know! I can't believe it's nearly here.'

'Are you all sorted?'

'Yes. The favours are the final thing.'

'Charlee's in the workshop. You can go through.'

I pushed through the wooden saloon doors into the large room where Charlee and Jodie made the chocolates and ran chocolate-making parties. Charlee appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a cloth, and gave me a welcoming hug.

'I'm so excited about this,' I said.

'Me too. I've done a practice run. Do you want to wash your hands while I grab the samples?'

We'd agreed on a bag of three large chocolates – a white chocolate starfish, a seashell made from a mix of white and milk chocolate to give it a mottled effect, and a dark chocolate anchor as a nod to the RNLI, whose logo included one.

She emerged from the kitchen with a plate.

'Oh, wow! They're amazing.' I picked up the white chocolate starfish, admiring the shape of the five arms, each one different, and the bumpy texture. The shell – a clam – was also realistic, with curves and grooves, and the anchor looked fabulous too.

‘I put them in a clear bag, but I reckon they look even better with sprinkles included. What do you think of this?’

She handed me a bag tied with a turquoise ribbon in which the chocolates sat on a bed of turquoise sugar sprinkles.

‘They look like they’re in the sea,’ I exclaimed. ‘I love them. Yes, please to the sprinkles.’

Charlee passed me an apron. ‘You’ll *definitely* need this. Let’s get creative.’

She talked me through each stage of the process, explaining why the chocolate needed to reach a certain temperature and what could go wrong. It was really interesting, although it made me very hungry.

‘I heard you telling Jodie that the favours are the last thing to be done,’ she said as we poured chocolate into the moulds. ‘I’m impressed. I was still faffing about with the seating plan in the early hours of my wedding day.’

‘Everything has gone smoothly so far. You hear these horror stories about things going wrong, but we’ve had none of that and hopefully it’ll stay that way.’

I held up my crossed fingers and Charlee mirrored me.

‘When I was getting married, I remember reading about couples splitting up because of the stress of it all,’ she said. ‘It should be fun, not a nightmare.’

As we continued to work – a constant cycle of filling moulds, letting them set in the fridge, emptying them, and starting over – we shared some of the stories we’d heard about venue disasters, disengaged grooms, bridezillas, demanding guests and overbearing parents.

‘I’ll have the last set of moulds in the fridge by the time you’re back from lunch and they’ll be set by the time we’ve bagged the first ones.’ Charlee carried a mould of anchors through to the kitchen.

‘I see the unit opposite you is getting done up,’ I called to her as I removed my apron and retrieved my jacket and bag.

‘About time too,’ she said, returning to the workshop. ‘I hate looking out at an empty unit.’

‘I can’t remember what it was before.’

‘A clothes shop, but they were only open for a couple of years and they struggled from the start. Bit too pricey for Whitsborough Bay.’

‘Do you know what it’s going to be now?’

‘I do, but only because Matt’s doing the refurb.’ Matt was Charlee’s husband and the plumbing part of a building trades company he ran with his dad and brother. They’d done the refurbishment of The Starfish Café after the break-in.

‘Can you tell me? It’s okay if you can’t.’

‘I can, but can you keep it to yourself? The new owners have a publicity campaign all worked out, so they don’t want it out there yet. It’s going to be a cat café.’

‘Oh, wow! Really? I’ve always wanted to go to a cat café. I’ll have to take Angie when it opens.’ Angie adored cats and had two of her own – siblings Felix and Pixie.

I said goodbye and left to meet Katie, Bex and Tori in The Chocolate Pot, but was unable to resist one last peek through the windows of the cat café to be, imagining how amazing it would look with walkways and cat trees. I’d definitely be paying it a visit.



When I picked the kids up after school on Thursday, we experienced the usual chaos of everyone talking at once on the way back to the car, except Noah. I glanced at him in the rear-view mirror several times on the drive home, concerned to see him staring out of the window and frowning. I knew better than to pick him up on it in front of the others. If something was bothering my girls, they'd come straight out with it, Jayden would share his concerns if prompted, but Noah liked time to think things through then discuss it privately. Fortunately, we'd have that chance tonight as I'd be taking him to Cubs after I'd dropped Freya and Jayden off at gymnastics. The timings meant sitting in the car outside the Scout hut for twenty minutes, but I'd grown to love that time, as we had some of our best conversations without any of the other three butting in.

'Something on your mind?' I asked gently, cutting the engine but leaving the music on low when we pulled into the car park outside the Scout hut later that evening.

Noah undid his seat belt with a sigh. 'Why don't I have a dad?'

The question took me by surprise. None of the kids had mentioned their dad in a very long time.

'You *do* have a dad, sweetie. You know that. I used to be married to him, but we're not married anymore.'

'Why not?'

I picked my words carefully, not wanting to expose Noah to the full truth about the circumstances in which his dad walked out, especially when I'd never had an explanation for Cameron's actions. It would have been so easy to be negative about him, but I'd vowed I wouldn't do that.

'Because your dad and I don't love each other anymore. Some couples try to stay together when that happens but it doesn't make them happy and other couples, like your dad and me, decide that ending the marriage is best. Your dad moved out and we got divorced when the twins were little.'

'Did Dad divorce us too?'

My heart broke for him. It was such a reasonable question.

'No. Parents don't get divorced from their children, but sometimes one of them moves away, which makes it harder for them to see the children. Your dad moved to London – or at least I think he did – which was a long way from where we were living in Huddersfield and even further from where we live now.'

'But London is in England?'

'Yes.'

'So he could have come to see us if he wanted?'

Tears pricked my eyes and I busied myself adjusting my position in the seat so Noah wouldn't notice. Yes, he could have seen them, but the key was at the end of that question – *if he wanted*. I presumed he hadn't wanted to, although I'd had to presume a lot of things.

'What's brought all this on?' I asked, deflecting Noah's question.

'Caleb told everyone I didn't have a dad and, when I said I did but we never saw him, he said my dad must hate me.'

'Aw, Noah, that's a horrible thing for him to say and it's not true.'

'Caleb's mum and dad are divorced and his dad lives in Germany but he still sees him in the school holidays. He kept

going on about it all day and Mrs Lester told me off because I shouted at him to shut up.’

‘He should have let it go, especially when it’s nothing to do with him, but you do know you can’t shout at people, don’t you?’

He hung his head and nodded. Maisie could snap if pushed too far, but Noah didn’t have a temper. He was quietly spoken and the only time I’d ever heard him raise his voice was in encouragement at a swimming gala, so Caleb had clearly really pushed him.

I hated Cameron for putting me in this position. I had no explanation for why he’d cut the kids out of his life because the last time I’d spoken to him was when he’d dropped his bombshell that it was over. Next thing I knew, there was a letter from his solicitor initiating divorce proceedings.

I’d kept the same email address and mobile number for two years, hoping he’d finally help me understand why he’d left, but I never heard a peep out of him so I changed both, unable to bear that constant feeling of hope that he might reach out.

I sent him letters via his solicitor, updating him on things I thought he should know – including our move to Whitsborough Bay – and even sent him copies of school reports and photos, but he never responded. The only way I knew he hadn’t disappeared off the face of the earth was the generous monthly payment direct into my bank account via his solicitor. ‘Guilt money’, Mum called it. She meant guilt for abandoning us, but I couldn’t help wondering if it was also guilt for letting me love him when he wasn’t capable of loving me back. Why else would he cut off ties? He *had* been broken, but it seemed that fixing him had been beyond my capabilities.

‘Caleb’s horrible to everyone but his dad still loves him,’ Noah continued, bringing my attention back to him. ‘I’m kind to people, so why doesn’t my dad love me?’

I hugged him as best as I could across the gearstick. ‘I love you, sweetie,’ I assured him. ‘And so do Nanna and Howard

and your brother and sisters. We know how kind and fabulous you are.'

I couldn't keep avoiding mention of Cameron. 'I'm sure your dad loves you too.' *In his own weird way.*

Noah pulled back from my hug and fixed his eyes on mine. 'Then why doesn't he ever see me?'

'I really wish I could answer that for you, but the truth is I don't know. I'm sorry.'



Twelve years ago

When we finished college, I secured a full-time receptionist job in a large hotel in Huddersfield and Cameron started his business studies degree at the University of Bath, as planned. The distance scared me – four hours by car, five by train – but there was no way Cam would consider an alternative closer to home. Bath was one of the top three universities for business studies and he wanted the best.

We were determined not to let the distance come between us, so I used my annual leave to book a long weekend in Bath twice a term. The longest we'd end up spending apart was four weeks, which was still too long for my liking, but I couldn't see an alternative. Mum was worried again.

'Why do you have to do all the travelling?' she asked. 'You're using up your annual leave and it'll be costing you a fortune.'

'I know, but what's the answer? Not see him at all?'

'The answer is taking turns. You go to Bath one weekend and he comes up here the other.'

'But he doesn't want to see his parents.'

Mum knew the history and had experienced herself how cold they could be after she'd invited them to a party for my eighteenth in April and they'd turned her down flat, telling her

they had no interest in celebrating with me because they couldn't care less who their son was dating.

'He'd be coming to see you,' she protested. 'He can even stay here.'

I didn't want any conflict with Mum, so I changed the subject. I'd actually suggested the same thing to Cameron but he'd said he wouldn't be able to leave until lectures finished on the Friday and would have to be back for first thing Monday so we'd hardly get any time together. Then he suggested we could just do once a term if it was too much, so I backed down and we stuck to the original plan of me doing all the travelling.

During his second term, I went on a big night out with Cameron and his friends, knocking back far too many Jägerbombs and WKD Blue. I'd never been so sick and spent Sunday in bed. I still felt ill on the way home on the Monday and, a month later, discovered that the consequences of that drinking session had been a little more enduring than a two-day hangover. I'd never thought about vomiting making the pill less effective, but it made sense – no time to absorb into the body.

I was all fingers and thumbs as I unboxed the pregnancy test, but a feeling of calm washed over me at the sight of the positive result. I was going to have a baby! For as long as I could remember, I'd wanted children. I'd babysat our neighbour's two young kids since I was twelve and found them such a joy to be around. I hadn't imagined starting my family quite so young, but the prospect of being a teenage mum didn't scare me. The only thing that worried me was how Mum and Cameron would react.

As the father, Cameron should be the first to know, but this wasn't the sort of news to give over the phone and, with no more trips to Bath planned, I needed to wait until he was home for the Easter holidays. His potential reaction occupied most of my waking thoughts. Much as he hated being compared to his parents, Granny had been right when she'd said that he shared their ambition to succeed. He was so driven and, during the eighteen months we'd been together, I'd learned that if he

was going to do something, he had to excel at it. Top grades. Top university. Big plans for a graduate job. His parents hadn't wanted a baby getting in the way of their career plans and I couldn't help fearing that history would repeat itself with Cameron. If he was going to be a father, he'd want to be a brilliant one – especially after he'd experienced first-hand what bad parenting looked like – but how could he do that if he was away at university? Would he want to dip out rather than do it badly?

Cameron called round the evening he arrived home and my stomach churned as I led him up to my bedroom to break the news. It didn't go well. He sat on my bed ashen-faced, firing questions at me – when, how, was I sure – before storming out, less than fifteen minutes after he'd arrived, slamming the door behind him.

I slumped onto the bottom stair, my arms hugging my body.

Mum opened the lounge door and peered into the hall. 'Was that Cameron leaving?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

She sat on the stair beside me and I released a deep, shaky breath. Might as well break it to Mum too.

'I'm pregnant.'

She breathed in sharply. 'Oh!'

'I'm sorry.'

She put her arm round me and cuddled me to her side. 'Aw, love, don't apologise. These things happen. How are you feeling?'

'Good. Excited. I hoped Cam would be too but, from that reaction, I guess I'll be doing it alone.'

'What did he say?'

'That a baby wasn't part of the plan and he's right. He's got three more years at university including his year out, a

two-year graduate programme after that – probably in London – and then he'll work his way up the management ladder. Now I've messed everything up.'

'Firstly, it takes two people to create a baby, so you can't blame yourself.' She gave me a gentle squeeze and kissed the top of my head. 'And, secondly, that sounds like a great career plan for Cameron, but what about you? And are you expected to follow him round the country as he climbs the ladder?'

I opened my mouth to respond, but closed it again. I'd never stopped to question where I fit in before. Cameron had commented on hotel management being a great career for the flexibility it gave in fitting around what *he* wanted to do and where *he* wanted to be, but what about what *I* wanted?

'I thought you hated the idea of living in London,' Mum added.

I did. Too big. Too loud. Too many people.

Mum pulled me closer and rubbed my arm. 'It'll be all right. He might come round when he's had some thinking time but, whatever happens, you won't be doing it alone. You've got me.'

I'd always known Mum would be supportive when she found out, but I cried with relief at hearing her say those words. I wasn't sure I could do this completely on my own.

It took Cameron two days to come round. He texted, asking me to meet him at our roundabout, which gave me hope for good news – he wouldn't be so callous as to dump me in the place we'd shared our first kiss.

'I shouldn't have walked out like that, Kezza,' he said as we sat side by side on the stationary roundabout. 'You probably hate me.'

'I love you. You know that.'

'How much do you love me?'

I didn't have the energy to give him the reassurances he frequently craved when I had no idea where I stood. 'You know how much.'

‘Enough to marry me?’ he asked.

I frowned at him. ‘That’s not funny, Cam.’

‘I’m being serious.’ He dipped one knee towards the ground and held an open ring box out in front of him. ‘Will you be my wife?’

My heart leapt. ‘Oh, my God! You don’t have to do that.’

‘I want to. You and I are meant to be together, Kezza.’ He fixed his eyes on mine, pleading with me. ‘Please say yes.’

‘Yes!’ I squealed, thrusting my hand out for him to push the ring onto my finger. ‘Yes!’

The Easter break whizzed past. Every moment I wasn’t working was spent with Cameron, planning our future. He was going back to Bath to finish his first year, but we had options for year two – for us to rent a small flat locally while he continued his degree by distance learning or for me to move down to Bath.

‘Which do you think Cameron would prefer?’ Mum asked after I ran through the pros and cons of each with her while we prepared our evening meal together.

‘Bath.’

‘And you?’

‘Here.’

‘Then let me throw in a third option – Cameron goes back to university and you stay here with my support. I can’t afford to reduce my hours, but I can be around for you on evenings and weekends.’

It was way more appealing to me than moving to Bath, where I couldn’t help feeling I’d be completely isolated. But it wasn’t just my decision.

‘Cam’s not going to go for that. We’ll be married. We should be together.’

‘What if you weren’t married? This isn’t the 1940s, you know. You won’t be disgraced if you have a child out of wedlock. I did it!’

I slowly chopped the mushrooms, mulling over what she was saying. ‘You think we’re rushing into it?’

‘Yes. You know I like Cameron and have always made him welcome in our home, but you also know my concerns. I don’t think he’s the one for you. You want different things from life and I worry that the only way you’ll stay together is if you put your needs aside and go along with everything Cameron wants.’

‘What if what Cameron wants is what I want too?’

‘Then you have nothing to worry about. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be happy. If what Cameron wants makes you happy, then so be it.’

‘It does.’ I said the words with a conviction I didn’t feel.

‘Is that what you’d prefer?’ Cameron asked when I tentatively presented him with Mum’s third option later that evening.

‘I can’t help thinking you’d rather go back to university. You love it there.’

‘Yeah, but things have changed. We’ll be married with a baby, so we should be living together, not miles apart.’ He frowned at me. ‘Do you hate the idea of moving to Bath? Be honest with me.’

‘It’s not that I *hate* the idea, but I don’t love it either. I’m scared of being so far away from Mum. I think we’ll need her help.’

‘Can I think about this overnight?’

‘Of course. It’s a lot to consider. I know none of this was part of your plan.’

He linked his fingers through mine and gently kissed me. ‘It was. Just maybe not in this order. We’ll work something out.’

I saw no need to rock the boat further by suggesting a long engagement, as I wasn’t sure how not being married would benefit either of us. My parents hadn’t been married and, even though I’d never have voiced it to Mum, I couldn’t help

thinking that the lack of commitment on Dad's part had made it easier for him to walk away rather than try to work through their problems. I didn't want that for Cameron and me, or our baby.

The following day, he surprised me by coming back with a fourth option. He wanted to do this properly, so what if he stayed in Huddersfield too but we lived with Mum instead of renting? That way, I'd get the support I'd need with the baby and he wouldn't feel so guilty about taking time out to study. It sounded like the perfect solution for everyone.

Cam hadn't told his parents about the baby, so Mum and I went with him to break the news and share our plans. Their verdict was that I'd trapped him into marriage and fatherhood, he was an idiot for letting a 'shameless hussy' ruin his career, and him moving out was long overdue and cause for celebration.

Mum's face was purple. I'd never seen her lose her temper and I clung onto Cameron's hand, waiting for the explosion. But it didn't come.

'You two go and start packing up Cameron's room,' she said, calmly. 'I'll be up to help shortly.'

She refused to share what she'd said to them, but it clearly had an impact because a subdued Doug helped load Cameron's belongings into his van, drove the short distance to our house, and helped unload them too. He said 'good luck' to us both and left. That was the last time Cameron spoke to his parents. They put the big house on the market and didn't even give him a forwarding address when they moved out.

I was nineteen years old and twenty-four weeks pregnant when Cameron and I married at the start of August. The only guests at the registry office were Mum and our next-door neighbours. It wasn't how I'd imagined my wedding day, but it was still lovely. After all, wasn't the person you were marrying – and the love you shared – far more important than the big dress, fancy meal and large guest list?

Mum's wedding gift to us was a mini-break in Whitby. Neither of us had visited the popular North Yorkshire seaside

town before, but we both loved it. We walked along the cliff top, ambled round the gift shops on the cobbled streets, explored the abbey, dined out, and lazed in bed. I'd never had so much time alone with Cameron and it was amazing. Mum was right about us wanting different things but Cameron's suggestion to move in with Mum showed that it wasn't all about him getting what he wanted. He was willing to compromise and that was what made us strong. With a little give and take from both of us, we could get through anything.

* * *

The rest of that first summer as a married couple was great but, as we approached the end of September and the time Cameron would have been returning to the University of Bath for his second year, he became steadily more subdued. I tried to get him to talk to me but he said there was nothing to talk about, he'd made the right decision for us as a family, and he was happy with it. That was his first big lie.

On the weekend Cameron would have been moving into a student house with his friends ready for the start of the academic year, we went shopping for baby gear. He swore the deer-in-headlights expression was because of the overwhelming choice of buggies and nothing to do with how different his plan was versus his reality. That was his second big lie and the guilt weighed heavily on me.

'Go back to university,' I said, unable to stand the silence as he drove us back home, the car packed with all the new baby essentials.

'I *am* going back.'

'I mean physically.'

A week later, I kissed him goodbye, blinking back the tears. It was my turn to make another sacrifice for the good of our relationship.

'You did the right thing,' Mum said, holding me as I sobbed that evening.

‘Then why do I feel like it’s the start of the end for us?’

‘If he’d stayed, would you feel differently?’

‘No.’ And that terrified me. Had his parents been right when they said I’d trapped him? It hadn’t been intentional, but I feared that was what had happened.

Maisie arrived at the end of November but Cam wasn’t there for her birth. He’d gone on a big night out with his mates and missed my calls. By the time he picked up the messages, it was too late to catch a train, he was too drunk to drive, and he’d never have made it home in time anyway. Mum was by my side throughout and honoured to see the arrival of her first grandchild, but I was seething. My one condition on supporting him going back to Bath was that he’d keep his phone switched on and stay sober so he could get home for the birth. He’d promised me he would. His third big lie.

I told him not to bother rushing back. There was only a fortnight left of term and he might as well see it out. It probably wasn’t fair of me to test him like that, but I had to know where I stood. If he truly cared, nothing would have stopped him getting home to see his wife and newborn daughter.

‘You were right about Cameron,’ I told Mum as we bathed Maisie together after Cameron confirmed he’d stay in Bath until the term ended.

She sighed. ‘I didn’t want to be.’

‘I didn’t want you to be either. I convinced myself he was so hurt about how his parents had treated him that he’d be 100 per cent in with his own child. Seems the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Hope he gets his act together and realises what he’s missing and what an arse he’s being. In the meantime, I’ll try to be the best mum ever for our daughter.’ I gave Mum a teary smile. ‘Joint best.’

As for being the best wife, that depended on whether Cameron still wanted me. I couldn’t help thinking he’d

returned to university life and realised he'd made a huge mistake. Had I made one too?

HOLLIE

*Present day*

Charlee's Chocolates had closed for the day and Jodie was mopping the shop floor while Charlee, Tori and I bagged up the final handful of favours. A notification came through on my phone.

FROM JAKE

Hope the chocolate-making has gone well. Pickle and I are on the beach in front of The Bay Pavilion if you want to join us when you're done. Finley's with me so we wondered if you and Tori fancy a chippy tea xx

I read Tori the message and she nodded enthusiastically. 'I haven't had fish and chips for ages.'

TO JAKE

We're nearly done so see you soon. It's yes to chips from both of us xx

'You're welcome to join us too,' I said to Charlee.

'Thank you, but Thursday night's date night.'

'Going anywhere nice?' I asked.

'The cinema and probably a quick drink afterwards.'

We discussed which film she was going to see and, before long, the favours were finished.

‘I’ll keep these cool here and then drop them off at The Bay Pavilion tomorrow,’ Charlee said.

‘You superstar. Thank you for these.’

I settled the bill, refusing to accept the overly generous mates-rates discount.

‘But you helped make them,’ Charlee objected.

‘And massively slowed you down.’

‘But you saved my life.’ Charlee, Matt and Tori had got into difficulties paddleboarding last year and they’d been my very first RNLI rescue.

‘And I got your friendship in return.’

She rolled her eyes but adjusted the amount and accepted my card. ‘You drive a hard bargain.’

‘Fair’s fair. I’ll see you on Saturday. Thanks again.’

* * *

Tori and I headed through Castle Park – a small grassy area over the road at the end of Castle Street full of benches overlooking the sea – and took the zigzag path through the rose gardens down to South Bay.

We joined the seafront beside Caesar’s Fun Palace, formerly the Golden Galleon – Sebastian Smythe’s flagship business. Crossing over to the beach side of the road, we looked back at the building.

‘How does it feel to see it under new ownership?’ Tori asked.

I studied the shiny new fascia and signage.

‘It’s a relief. Makes it feel more like he won’t return because his business empire doesn’t exist anymore.’

Crooked businessman Sebastian Smythe had been behind the break-in and vandalism at The Starfish Café, hoping it would finally push me into selling him the café after I'd turned down several very generous offers. Instead, it made me curious as to why he was so desperate to get his hands on it, leading to the discovery of a well in the woods which his minions used to smuggle drugs up from the sea. He was now behind bars for charges including drug smuggling and money laundering, and long may he stay there.

'I can't believe that was over a year ago,' Tori said as we set off along the esplanade towards The Bay Pavilion.

'Me neither. It was horrific at the time, but it's ended up working out for the best.'

'Still happy with the changes?'

'You promised to "crank up the awesomeness level" and you delivered. There's still nothing I'd change.' Tori had redesigned the interior and it had been her genius idea to make use of the upstairs by opening Driftwood Dell.

'Aw, that makes my heart sing.'

Dogs weren't allowed on the main stretch of beach during peak season but could go in front of and beyond The Bay Pavilion. We spotted Jake, Finley and Pickle from the covered walkway and descended the steps onto the sand to meet them.

Pickle dropped a stick of seaweed and raced up to me. He was a soggy sand-covered mess.

'Just as well you're off to the groomer's tomorrow,' I told him as he bounded round me in excitement.

Jake and Finley joined us and we chatted about our days as we watched Pickle exploring the rock pools. When we all decided we were ready to eat, Jake attached Pickle's lead and we took the steps onto the esplanade.

'We wanted to talk to you both about Lighthouse View,' Jake said as we walked along the seafront. 'Do you remember when you looked round it, you asked whether I was sure I didn't want to sell it and I said I wasn't ready to part with it yet, but didn't want to let it out to strangers either?'

Tori and Finley exchanged concerned looks.

‘You want to sell it now?’ Tori ventured, her voice full of trepidation.

Jake shook his head. ‘Don’t panic. I’m not about to evict you, but I have hit the point where I’m ready to let go so, if you want to buy it from me, you can.’

Tori gasped and grabbed Finley’s arm and looked from Jake to me. ‘You’re being serious?’

‘Completely serious,’ Jake said. ‘There’s no rush. I’m just putting it out there that it’s an option this year, next year... whenever you’re ready.’

‘We’ll have a chat about it,’ Finley said, a big smile on his face. ‘Cheers, mate. That’s really good of you.’

I knew from conversations with Tori that they were in a deeply committed and loving relationship, so buying a house together wouldn’t be a step too far for them. I didn’t know their financial situation but couldn’t imagine Lighthouse View was out of reach for them. The biggest unknown was Tori’s special project. Her parents owned what she jokingly called their ‘country pile’ – a manor house called Redamancy Castle twenty miles away – and Tori had spent years designing her dream home in the unfinished church in the extensive grounds. Now that she and her family were close again after a long-term estrangement, building a home there could be a reality, but would they really want to move there? It would take them away from easy access to India and Roman – Finley’s ex-girlfriend’s children who he saw regularly and who viewed him as their dad – and would mean the end of volunteering at the RNLI. Tori had started training with us last October and had been immediately hooked and I couldn’t imagine either of them wanting to step down.

We’d almost reached the chippy when the pagers sounded. We collectively groaned, united in our frustration at the timing right before food.

‘Must be the ALB,’ Tori said. ‘Mine hasn’t gone off. Give me Pickle. I’ll follow you.’

Tori had only been trained on the small inshore lifeboat so wouldn't get paged for a rescue on the large all-weather lifeboat. Jake handed her Pickle's lead and the three of us ran the short distance to the lifeboat station.

Artie was in the corridor already in his kit and laughed as we burst through the door. 'Did you three just race each other?'

'We were about to get chips,' Jake said, breathing heavily.

'Bad timing! Simba, Jaffa and Belle are here too.'

The ALB took a crew of six so, including Artie, there were enough boat crew to go out, but the Launch Authority had the final say on who was sent, based on the details relayed by the Coastguard and the skill set needed for the rescue.

We bundled into the locker room to get kitted up and I went off in search of my shore crew colleagues. It was our role to assist with the launch and recovery of the lifeboats, a role which frequently involved ensuring the ramp and beach were clear of people. It never ceased to amaze me that the general public could think that the launch ramp – or the beach in front of it when the tide was out – were good places to sunbathe or have a picnic. It was surely obvious that the lifeboat needed constant access to that space.

It was low tide this evening so the tractor needed to push the ALB some distance across the sand with the boat crew aboard while the shore crew flanked either side, ensuring the crew, public and the equipment were safe. We attracted an audience but everyone had the sense to stay back and let us get on.

The shout was to a fishing boat. The owner had called the Coastguard, concerned that the friends he'd loaned it to – which included a child – hadn't returned at the expected time. A Mayday call had come in from the stricken vessel shortly afterwards. The boat had been intermittently losing power but had now lost it completely and needed a tow. In theory, it shouldn't be a problematic rescue as the sea was reasonably calm, we knew the coordinates and could calculate for any drift, but we knew better than to take anything for granted

until everyone was safely back. Sometimes the easiest of rescues could take a dramatic turn.

After a successful launch, we made our way back into the lifeboat station to wait for further news. The training room had floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the sea. We often had guests and this gave them a perfect unbroken view of a launch, whatever the weather. Set back from the window was a large table with a map of the coast and the sea where we could plot out the lifeboat's route. Pickle had settled under the table and was lightly snoring, no doubt exhausted after his run.

About forty minutes after the ALB's launch, a message came through on the radio to say the vessel had been found and the three occupants – a man, woman and child – were safe. A little later, we had a second message to say they were now onboard the ALB and that 'Mouse and Jaffa' – the nicknames for Jake and Bex's husband Kyle – were on their boat, ready to tow it in.

On returning from a rescue with casualties on board, the lifeboat always went straight to the harbour as it was easier, safer and quicker for them to disembark there. If medical attention was needed, the ambulance would be waiting on the slipway.

I walked round to the harbour with a couple of my shore crew colleagues while the others stayed with the tractor, preparing for the ALB's return later. We took the ropes and tied the lifeboat to the moorings. When it was secure, I looked up at the three casualties on the deck, wearing lifejackets. The blond-haired boy had a youthful face and wasn't particularly tall, so I guessed his age at maybe eleven or twelve. The adults with him were both grey-haired and, assuming they were related to him, could have been his parents or grandparents. The woman caught my eye and I smiled at her, but she looked away. I sighed inwardly. Most of the people we rescued were extremely grateful but occasionally they were embarrassed at needing to be rescued and were hostile towards the crew. It wasn't personal and, although a thank you was lovely, that wasn't why we did what we did.

Artie disembarked and held his hand out towards the woman, but she gave him a withering look and stepped onto the boardwalk unaided. She removed her lifejacket and thrust it at Artie, shoved past me and stormed off up the jetty. It was possible she was angry with the man – dragged out to sea when she didn't want to go, perhaps – but there was no need to take it out on the crew who'd just rescued her. Unless something had kicked off during the rescue.

The boy was next. He gave Artie a big smile and a high-five once he was on the boardwalk and Artie said something which made him laugh. He removed his lifejacket and waited for the man, whose reaction was also positive. He shook Artie's hand with vigour, so clearly the issue was with the woman.

'That was awesome, wasn't it, Dad?' the boy said, confirming the relationship. The father/son resemblance was very strong – same heart-shaped face, strong cheekbones and bluey-grey eyes.

The man nodded. 'I've always wanted to go on a lifeboat, although we could have done without the boat conking out to get one.' He ruffled the lad's hair then drew him into a hug.

'Can I take your lifejackets for you?' I asked.

The boy handed me his lifejacket with a smile and a thank you and his father did the same, although I didn't miss the shadow cross the man's face as he glanced up at the esplanade where the woman was standing by the railings, arms crossed, face like thunder.

'Go and join your mum, Reuben,' he said. 'I need to speak to the men who towed John's boat in.'

Reuben ran up the slipway and the man headed along the boardwalk to where Jake and Kyle were securing the fishing boat. I'd have expected to see the pair of them laughing together after a successful rescue, but Jake's expression was serious, his body taut.

'I'm sensing some drama,' I said to Artie in hushed tones as I passed the lifejackets up to Belle.

‘Big time!’ he confirmed. ‘Jake’ll fill you in.’

After supporting the return of the ALB into the lifeboat station, my shore crew responsibilities continued with giving it and the tractor a thorough hose down and clean. It was vital we removed all the salt and any other debris which could cause damage and decrease the lifespan.

I went in search of Jake as soon as I’d finished, and Artie told me he was waiting outside. He didn’t usually leave the building without me, but Pickle might have needed to do his business, so I wasn’t unduly concerned until I spotted him on the wall running alongside the forecourt, his head hung, his body hunched.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked Jake as we set off walking.

‘Tough shout.’

‘It looked it. The man and his son seemed decent but it’s a long time since I’ve seen someone storm off like that woman.’

‘The man *is* decent. Always was, despite the best efforts of his wife.’

‘You know them?’

‘That was Andrew Kent.’

The name was familiar and I needed a few seconds to place it. I stopped dead when I did, my stomach churning. ‘No way! That woman was...’

Jake nodded, his expression grim. ‘That was Larissa. My sister. Wasn’t expecting to see her again and I bet you can guess how delighted she was to see me.’

I wrapped my arms round his waist and held him close. We stood there for several minutes with his head resting on mine. I’d never met Larissa and, after what I’d heard about her, had never wanted to. She’d been twelve when Jake was born and she blamed him for their mother dying from childbirth complications. She’d made Jake’s childhood hell and, when their father drowned trying to save Jake after he was swept into the sea on his ninth birthday, her vendetta escalated. The family home was sold and Jake moved in with their nanna,

Violet, but Larissa – who’d moved out and was living with Andrew by this point – wanted nothing to do with her brother and bombarded Violet with hateful letters, trying to force her to choose Larissa over Jake.

When Violet passed away seven years ago and Larissa discovered she’d been disinherited, she attacked Jake with a garden fork before being pulled off by neighbours and taken away by the police. Jake hadn’t wanted the police to press charges, but the incident had left him scarred, more than physically, and he’d never seen or heard from Larissa since. It helped that she’d moved to Wakefield in West Yorkshire not long after she and Andrew married. I hoped for Jake’s sake that them being in Whitsborough Bay today was just a visit.

‘It was such a shock,’ Jake said, when we set off walking again, hand in hand. ‘For her as much as for me. It was one of those time standing still moments when we clocked each other and I thought for a moment that she’d come quietly, but this is Larissa we’re talking about. *I’m not getting on a boat with that killer. Do you know what he did? Do you know you have a murderer on your crew?*’

I cringed at his mimicking, knowing the volume and bitterness of tone wouldn’t be exaggerated.

‘Oh, Jake! That’s awful. And in front of the young lad?’

‘Fortunately, Jaffa had already transferred to their boat and was helping him into his lifejacket. The wind was behind Larissa so her words carried to us, but Reuben wouldn’t have caught them.’

‘So you had to go on her boat to shut her up?’

‘It was the only option, although she kicked off about not wanting me on her boat either. Belle had taken Reuben below deck, but Andrew was still there and he shut her down, saying it wasn’t their boat anyway and her choices were to travel on the ALB with me, let me travel on their friend’s boat, or all three of them could get back on the boat and wait to see whether they capsized or starved first.’

‘That must have been hideous.’

‘I was mortified. You know I don’t like talking about what happened. Artie knows about my parents but the rest of them knew nothing, so I’ve had to explain. Well, obviously nobody made me – they’re not like that – but when there’s an accusation of being a murderer...’

I squeezed his hand. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘They were all great – wouldn’t have expected anything less – and I suppose it helped meeting Larissa and seeing her delightful personality first-hand.’

‘She blanked Artie when she got off the ALB and gave me a filthy look, although I’m guessing she didn’t know who I was.’

‘Yeah, it’d have been because you were crew and therefore presumably one of my allies. So now you’ve met my sister. Lucky you.’ His voice was heavy with sarcasm.

‘The lad, Reuben, called Andrew “Dad”, so I’m guessing Larissa’s his mum.’

‘Yeah, that was another surprise. When Nanna was ill, she often talked about how sad she was about Larissa. She couldn’t decide whether her being childless was a good thing because of how she’d treated me when I was little, or whether becoming a mother could have been the making of her. But Larissa wasn’t childless after all. If Reuben had been born after Nanna died, he’d only be six now and that lad was maybe twice that age, so Larissa obviously decided to keep it from Nanna. Funny thing is, if Nanna had known she had a great-grandson, she might not have disinherited her.’

‘So how do you feel knowing you have a nephew?’

‘Flat. It should be great news, but there’s no way Larissa will let us see each other. He’s the only nephew we’ll have and, with Andrew being an only child, we’re the only auntie and uncle he’ll have.’

We walked the rest of the way to Sandy Croft in silence. I could have continued to fire questions at Jake, but I knew he’d want to spend time thinking it all through. I’d be here when he was ready to talk some more.

I pictured Larissa's pinched face, the scowl on her forehead, the stiffness in her body. It must be exhausting to carry that much hate and anger with you all the time. I hoped she didn't take it out on her husband and son.



‘I’m sorry for dragging you out of bed at stupid o’clock,’ I said to Katie as the lower curve of the sun rose over the horizon, wrapped in a deep band of gold, ‘but just look at that! A perfect wedding day sunrise. You can’t say it’s not worth it.’

Katie, Pickle and I had been up ridiculously early to get down to the beach at Starfish Point at 5 a.m. to catch some of the golden hour before the sunrise at half past.

When Katie didn’t respond, I turned to face her and was alarmed to see tears streaming down her cheeks.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, grabbing her hand.

She sniffed and wiped her cheeks with the back of the other hand. ‘I’m fine. Damn pregnancy hormones again.’

Katie and her long-term boyfriend Trey had married in early September and welcomed their first baby – Lucas – a month before Christmas. She was now fifteen weeks pregnant with a sibling for him, due at the end of October.

‘I should have known I’d fall apart looking at a beautiful sunrise on the morning of my best friend’s wedding. Trust me not to bring any tissues.’

She took the tissue I passed her and blew her nose. ‘I might not look it, but I’m so happy for you, Hollie.’

‘I know you are. And I’m happy for me too.’

I linked my arm through hers and rested my head on her shoulder as we both watched the ever-changing glorious

canvas of lemon, gold, peach and orange beneath a deep blue sky. I pictured Jake further up the North Yorkshire coast in Whitsborough Bay's North Bay, watching the sunrise with Artie after staying overnight at Artie's house which overlooked Hearnshaw Park. He'd been a bundle of nerves yesterday, but if there was anyone capable of calming him, it was Artie – Jake's best man today.

Katie had been the obvious choice for my chief bridesmaid. We'd been best friends since we were fourteen and I'd been her chief bridesmaid last year, but Jake didn't have an old friend to ask to be his best man. It had been an emotional moment when he decided to ask Artie to do the honours. He'd been a good friend to Jake, taking him under his wing when Jake enquired about joining the RNLI three years ago. He'd been amazingly supportive towards me too, allowing me to train with the RNLI to help overcome my fears of Jake being on crew and losing him like I'd lost my dad and brother.

'Are you nervous?' Katie asked.

'I've got butterflies, but it's more excitement than nerves. I can't wait to become Jake's wife. I still can't believe it's finally happening. I really was expecting to stay single and never have this day.'

Pickle scrambled onto my knee and I stroked his brown fur.

'And I have you to thank for changing that,' I said to him. Jake had found him abandoned on this very beach on Bonfire Night eighteen months ago and I'd helped him look after Pickle when his owner didn't want him back. We both fell in love with Pickle – and with each other.

Katie rummaged in her bag and lifted out a glass bottle and two plastic champagne flutes.

'Sparkling rosé grape juice,' she said, passing me the flutes. 'Obviously I can't drink, and I think it's a bit early for you to start.'

'Just a tad.'

She poured the drinks and shuffled on the boulder to face me as she raised her flute.

‘Congratulations on your wedding day and here’s to a long and happy life for you and Jake.’

We tapped our glasses together and took a sip of the cold drink. The bubbles danced on my tongue.

‘Almost as good as the real thing,’ I said, smiling at her. ‘Thanks for this – not just the drink, but the coming down here so early. Pickle and I appreciate the company.’

‘I wanted to be here. It feels right.’ She stifled a yawn. ‘I can’t guarantee I’ll make it to the end of your evening do, but I’ll try my best.’

Pickle adjusted position, draping himself over Katie’s knee as well as mine, and the three of us huddled together, watching the sun ascend.

As the sky lightened, I could make out more grey and common seals on the beach. There was a 200-strong colony who’d made the beach and the curved rock formation of Starfish Arc their home. Some of the more recognisable seals had been given names by the locals and I always looked for them when I went down to the beach. Tank had been easy to spot this morning, his enormous bulk unmistakable even in silhouette, and it felt special to see him on my wedding day.

‘How are you feeling?’ Katie asked gently, squeezing my hand.

‘I’m okay, but I’m sure I’ll have a few moments today.’

If I’d lost one of my parents or only my brother, it would have been difficult, but having all three missing on my wedding day was emotional. There’d been several key moments already such as choosing my wedding dress without Mum and pulling together the seating plan with no parents to join me on the top table, but the most emotional moment had been asking Angie – Mum’s lifelong best friend, the assistant manager at The Starfish Café, and my absolute rock – if she’d walk me down the aisle. It absolutely felt like the right thing to

do and Angie was honoured but, my goodness, the pair of us had been blubbering messes that day.

With Pickle asleep and Katie yawning, it was time to head home. We paused by a bench halfway up the cliff path so Katie could catch her breath, but she wouldn't sit down, insisting she only needed a minute.

'Right, I can breathe again. Best get you home and ready for your wedding.'

We continued up the steps. My wedding. What wonderful words! I couldn't wait to start the next part of our life together by becoming Jake's wife, but it was possible that we were about to move onto another stage too. When I'd transitioned to shore crew, I'd come off the pill ready to try for a baby again. I'd been prepared for months of patience after our experience last year, but my period was already overdue in our first month. I could have taken a test, but I wanted to focus on the wedding for now and not have the disappointment of a negative test placing any sort of dampener on this special day.

Tomorrow was another matter...

* * *

When we returned to Sandy Croft, Katie went back to bed and I settled in the snug in the kitchen with a large mug of tea, Pickle curled up on one of the two-seater sofas beside me. It was only 6.30 a.m., so I had three hours to relax before Angie, Bex and Tori arrived to be pampered by two hairdressers, a nail technician and a make-up artist. Bex's young daughter, Mia, was also a bridesmaid but she was only four years old, so Kyle was dropping her off later to have her hair curled last.

'I'm glad we caught that sunrise,' I said, stroking Pickle's soft ears. 'It was definitely the right way to start the day.'

I picked up my wedding planner and flicked through to my 'to do' list for today. At the top, and by far the most important task, was attaching my 'something old' to my bridal bouquet. When I first started creating with wood, I'd carved a wooden starfish for Dad and Isaac to hang in their work van to remind

them of Mum and me when they were out and about. I made them each a smaller version when Isaac started his RNLI training, which they'd kept in their kit for luck. I'd attached both starfish to a ribbon along with Mum's wedding and engagement rings so that I could have a small piece of my loved ones with me on my special day.

Slotted into the back of the planner were the two cards which Mum had left for Angie to give to me – one when she died and the second when Angie felt I needed a lift. The illustrations of a little girl in a pink tutu and red wellies always made me smile.

I opened them one at a time, reading through Mum's final words of advice to me and the two-part phrase which had given me strength: *Keep dancing in the rain. If you stumble, make it part of your dance.*

My eyes clouded with tears as I closed the cards, my thoughts turning to what Mum would have said to me if she'd been here today.

'I wish you were here,' I whispered, tears trickling down my cheeks. 'I miss you all so much.'

Now that the tears had started, it felt like they'd never stop. I picked up the cushion beside me and cuddled it to my chest, trying to soothe the pain, but it wasn't working. I didn't hear Katie coming down the stairs.

'Hollie! Oh, my God!' She rushed over to me and gathered me in her arms.

'They should be here today,' I wailed, letting the cushion slip to the floor as I clung onto her. 'It's not fair.'

'I know. I wish they were too. I'm so sorry.'

Her voice cracked and we held onto each other, united in our grief. I'd suspected it would hit me at some point today and now was probably the best possible timing – at home with only Katie around. Just as well I'd thought to buy a cucumber, as I was definitely going to need some cooling slices on my swollen eyes.



I twisted and turned in front of the full-length mirror on my bedroom wall and sighed at my wedding outfit. Did I look all right? I had no idea. The lack of social life which Mum nagged me about meant I pretty much lived in jeans or leggings and couldn't remember the last time I'd worn a dress.

Lifting the cream fascinator off my dressing table, I placed it over my choppy blonde bob and serious doubts set in. Was it too much? Or not enough? Should I have gone for a hat instead? Or was it the dress that was wrong?

Freya danced into my bedroom, wearing a rainbow-coloured tutu and waving a fairy wand, a tiara resting on the top of her long chestnut waves. She stopped when she saw me, her eyes wide.

'Ooh, Mummy, you look pretty.'

'Do you think so, sweetie? I'm not sure. I don't usually wear dresses.'

She stroked her hand down the fabric – grey with large cream and pale pink flowers on it.

'You should wear dresses all the time. You look like a princess.'

Freya tended to say what she thought, so her words reassured me.

'Thank you. That's very kind of you.'

I crouched down to cuddle her, breathing in the sweet, delicious scent of strawberries and chocolate milkshake.

‘I like your hat,’ she said, dabbing at the feathers with her wand.

‘It’s called a fascinator. I’m not sure whether to wear it or not.’

‘Wear it,’ she said, nodding vigorously.

‘Okay, I will. Where’s your brother?’

‘Playing with Lego.’

Jayden was as obsessed with Lego as Freya was with fairies, so I should have guessed that’s what he’d be doing, especially with the house so quiet. Howard had taken Noah to his swimming gala this morning while Mum watched Maisie’s football match to save me from rushing.

Hollie had invited the children to the full day, but it would be a long one and the novelty of their first wedding would soon wear off, so they were going to join me for the first couple of hours of the evening do instead, along with Mum and Howard. Guilt set in that I was looking forward to an afternoon without them and I reprimanded myself. I *never* had time to myself and I shouldn’t feel guilty about it. The Starfish Café was closed for the day so all the staff could attend. Some were bringing partners but several were single and we’d all be sitting together for the wedding breakfast, so I’d have plenty of friends to talk to.

‘Can I watch *Tinker Bell*?’ Freya asked.

‘Again? Which one?’

‘*The Pirate Fairy*.’

‘Okay. Give me five minutes to get changed.’

She pirouetted out of the room and I carefully removed my fascinator before pulling my dress over my head and hanging it on the outside of the wardrobe.

Feeling much more me in jeans and a T-shirt, I went downstairs to the family room. Freya had changed into her

Tinker Bell fairy costume and settled herself on the corner sofa with a soft blanket and several Tinker Bell dolls, all ready to watch the film. Once I'd set it away, I went back upstairs to check on Jayden, who was cross-legged on the floor of the playroom, building something from the *Star Wars* range. It amused me how different he and Freya were in their approach to Lego. Jayden followed the instructions to the letter, carefully arranging all the pieces he needed for each stage around him, whereas Freya would tip everything onto the floor, toss the instructions aside, and try to copy the picture instead.

I could never get any conversation out of Jayden when he was concentrating so, on hearing the rattle of the post through the letterbox, I went downstairs to fetch it. Taking the pile through to the kitchen, I placed a coffee pod in the drinks machine and set it away while I flicked through the post. There were a couple of official-looking envelopes for Mum, a circular, and my stomach lurched at the fourth envelope, addressed to me. I'd recognise that messy scrawl anywhere.

Heart thumping, I slit open the envelope and unfolded a single sheet of A4 paper.

Hi Kerry

I assume you're still living at the B&B and, if you're not, your mum will pass this on.

I've got the summer off before I start a new job. My fiancée's parents have a holiday home in central Whitby, so Tess and I are spending the summer there. As we're in the area, I thought it would be convenient to spend time with the kids.

As a start, we've got next weekend free – 1 & 2 July. The plan would be for them to stay on Saturday night and Sunday day. If you can bring them up to Whitby for early evening, I'll bring them back after lunch.

Tried your email but it bounced back and your phone number doesn't work, so I've put my contact details at the top and the address of the cottage.

I trust you'll agree to this plan and we can be adult and sort this without involving solicitors.

Cam

I sank onto one of the dining room chairs, scrunching the letter in my hands, hardly able to believe what I'd just read. The cheek! What right did he have to stay silent for almost seven years then suddenly drop me a letter outlining his 'plan' to see my kids over the summer? What sort of a mother did he think I was? Did he seriously think I'd instantly agree to letting them spend time with him after what he'd done? And for that time to include an overnight stay? Did he really think he could ditch us like that and then demand to see them now that it was 'convenient' for him? Whoopee-doo to him for finding another mug to marry, but this Tess was a stranger to my kids, as was he. And as for that final line – or should I say threat – how dare he?

My jaw was so tense, it ached as my thumbs twitched over my mobile phone. The only thing that stopped me calling and tearing a strip off him right now was that I didn't want to give him my phone number and risk being bombarded with texts throughout the wedding.

I started an email on my phone but it wasn't easy to angry type, and I really felt the need to pound the keyboard, so I stomped across the entrance hall to Mum's office where I switched on her desktop.

After unleashing my frustration on an angry expletive-filled rant, I felt so much calmer, but I knew I couldn't send it like that. Taking several relaxing breaths, I edited into something appropriate to send – still strong, honest and fair, but a little more controlled.

To: Cameron Fullerton

From: Kerry Marsden

Subject: Your letter

I've just received your surprise letter and have to say you've got a nerve after all this time. You can't possibly expect to see the kids at such short notice and a sleepover is completely out of the question. I've always promised myself that I would never refuse you access to the children, but there are ways to do these things and this is not the way.

Congratulations on your engagement, but your fiancée is a stranger to my children. And so are you.

I don't appreciate the threat but, if you want to continue to make ridiculous demands, then I'm happy to do this via a solicitor. Before going down that road, I will just remind you that I have never put barriers up and I have never kept you out of the loop. I've sent you school photos and reports, newspaper clippings, and regular updates on their clubs and interests. What have you sent in return? Nothing. Not even a birthday or Christmas card. So you don't get to write to me out of the blue and demand to see them next weekend just because it's now 'convenient' for you. That's not how fatherhood works.

If you GENUINELY want to spend some time with them, then the starting point is for you and me to meet to talk without the kids. I need you to explain to me why you walked out on us, why you've ignored us for nearly seven years, what you hope to achieve by seeing them, and what happens when the summer's over. Can I suggest you think long and hard about those last two points because you cannot drop into their lives for five minutes over the summer just because you happen to be holidaying in the area, then disappear again when your new job starts. They're your children, Cameron. They're not old school friends who it's okay to meet up with once a decade.

If you're able to convince me that you have longer-term intentions and that seeing you will benefit the children, we can talk about a supervised visit. I emphasise supervised because, as I say, you are a stranger to them and no mother in her right mind would leave her children in the care of a stranger.

But you need to give me answers first.

I read the email several times but wasn't willing to soften the tone any further, so I pressed send and slumped back in the chair, feeling sick. I'd hoped never to hear from that man again. Please let the reality of what he was asking sink in and make him crawl back under the stone he'd emerged from. We were managing just fine without him.

KERRY



Nearly seven years ago

To an outsider looking in, Cameron and I probably had the strangest marriage. It wasn't an open relationship – infidelity was a dealbreaker for both of us – but our arrangement was far from conventional. During Cam's second year, he started applying for placements for his sandwich year. There were some great opportunities in Manchester – a reasonable commute from Huddersfield – but Cam had his heart set on London. It was, after all, part of his plan. I thought about Mum challenging me on what I wanted while Cam was busy mapping out his career and I offered him a compromise. I'd support him working in London if he agreed to expanding our family. I loved being a mum and couldn't wait to have a sibling for Maisie.

This time, it didn't happen quickly. Cam had finished his year out in London, was in his final term of his final year at university, and had already secured his dream graduate job as a project manager with a multinational tech company by the time I discovered I was pregnant with our second child.

Although his employer preferred to base their graduate in London, they made an exception for Cameron because of us and he started in their Manchester office. We were both twenty-two at this point, had been together for over five years and married for more than three, but this was the first

opportunity for us to be a ‘proper’ family, all living in the same place at the same time.

Space was tight at Mum’s, so it was time for us to rent a place of our own, my only stipulation being that we didn’t move far. Having Mum’s support when Maisie was a baby had been invaluable and, even with Cameron around this time, I was sure I’d need her help with our new arrival. At the start of December, just after Maisie’s third birthday, we moved into a three-bedroom terraced house a few streets away from Mum.

Nothing had prepared me for how much of a struggle it would be having Cam around permanently. Mum had said there were big differences between Cam and me before we got married, but the chasm between us now felt enormous. I still loved him so much, but I wasn’t convinced my feelings were reciprocated. I didn’t feel like I was part of his world and he looked lost in mine, often gazing at Maisie with a bewildered expression on his face as though wondering who she was and where she’d come from.

On New Year’s Day, Cam had been home for six months and the distance between us felt greater than it had when he’d been in Bath or London. While he was still in bed recovering from a New Year’s Eve work event, I dropped Maisie off at Mum’s so we could talk without interruption. I believed we could make it work, but he needed to put some effort in because he was the one with the demanding career, the business trips to London, and the hectic social life.

‘Where’s Maisie?’ he asked when he sauntered downstairs late that morning.

‘She’s at Mum’s. We need to talk.’

He plonked himself down in an armchair. ‘Is this because I went out without you last night?’

I shook my head as I ran my hand over my baby bump. At eight months pregnant, I couldn’t think of anything worse than going out for New Year’s Eve.

‘I meant it when I said I was happy for you to go without me.’

‘Then what is it? You don’t like the house?’

‘The house is fine. It’s us. It’s you. You’re here, Cam, but you’re not really here and I get why. While Maisie and I fit our lives around your original plan, it worked, but it’s felt different since you started your graduate job. You must feel it too. You want to be in London, don’t you?’

‘No, I... it’s... Manchester’s all right.’

All right? And spoken in a tone which suggested the opposite. I swallowed down the lump in my throat, determined not to cry.

‘I think you’ve settled for Manchester when you really want London. And it feels like you’ve settled for us too.’

‘Why would you say that? I secured Manchester to be with you both.’

‘I know, and I love you for that, but your head and heart are in London and we both know it. I’ve already had four years of a distance relationship and I want more than that for me and our children. We deserve more.’

‘So what are you saying? You want us to split up?’

‘No! But I can’t help thinking that it would hurt less than this half-life we seem to have.’

Cameron had his head bent and I couldn’t see his face, so I had no idea what he was thinking. I knew it was risky to open up this conversation in case he did take the *get out of jail free* card, but the New Year was the time for a new start and, if that was what Cam wanted, there was no point dragging it out.

‘Say something,’ I said, gently.

He looked up, his face pale, his eyebrows knitted. ‘Like what?’

‘Like how you’re feeling.’

‘I don’t know! You’ve just dropped this on me.’

I didn’t appreciate the glare that accompanied his snappy response, but I persisted calmly. ‘You must have some thoughts, some sort of gut reaction about being in or out.’

When the only response was a scowl, I stood up. ‘I’ll go to Mum’s for a couple of hours – give you some time to think.’

As I pulled on my coat and scarf, I struggled to keep it together. If he really loved me and wanted to stay together, surely he’d have said it.

I’d been at Mum’s about ninety minutes when he knocked on the door and asked if we could go to our roundabout to talk. I left Maisie with Mum and felt nauseous as we walked in silence to the playground. Was it going to be the new beginning I hoped for or the ending I feared?

The playground was heaving with children, so we had to continue walking until we found a bench.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t say anything before you left,’ he said eventually. ‘You surprised me. Thanks for giving me time to think. I needed it.’

‘And...?’ I asked when he didn’t expand.

‘I’ve let us both down. When we got married, I promised I’d be a good husband and dad and I’ve been neither. You’ve let me have everything I wanted without whining about it, and all I’ve done in return is want more.’

It was a huge relief to hear him acknowledge he’d messed up, but what did he want to do about it?

‘You’re right about me wanting to be in London,’ he continued. ‘I’ve held that against you, which isn’t fair on you and it’s stupid anyway because I’ve realised that the job I’m doing in Manchester is way better for my career than what I’d be doing in London. So I’m here to stay.’ He took my hand in his and fixed his gaze on mine. ‘If that’s what you want.’

‘What I want is for you to be part of our family. I know you sometimes need to work late or travel, and I want you to have a social life too, but we can’t keep coming last place behind all those things. It was really hard living apart, but we had Mum to help out and, when you came home, we had you too. Now we don’t have Mum on hand all the time, but it feels like we don’t have you either and I need you to be honest with me about what you want. You’re either fully in or you’re out.’

My heart pounded as I waited for a response. He was still holding my hand and he glanced down, running his thumb lightly over my wedding band and engagement ring.

He raised his eyes to mine. ‘I’m in. One hundred per cent. I’ll be the best husband and dad ever.’

He spoke with the same conviction I’d often heard when he talked about his job and my heart soared. Finally! This really could work.

After that long overdue heart-to-heart, I couldn’t fault him for trying. He was there when Noah was born at the end of January and added some annual leave to his standard paternity leave. When he returned to work, he started going to the gym before work instead of after, had a weekly date night with me, and a family day out every weekend. We had our first family holiday that summer – an amazing week in a caravan by the coast - and I finally felt like we’d found our way.

In the April of the following year, we received confirmation that Maisie – four at the time – had been offered a place at our first-choice primary school.

‘I’m going to miss her so much,’ I said to Cameron when I showed him the confirmation letter. ‘Before we know it, Noah will be starting pre-school and I’ll be heading back to work.’

‘You don’t want to go back to work?’

‘I loved my job, but I love being a mum more.’

‘Then why don’t we have another baby? You’ve supported me with what I wanted and, if this is what you want, it’s my turn to support you.’

I thought he’d change his mind, but he didn’t and, six months later in October, he drove me to the hospital for our dating scan.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked as we stopped at a set of traffic lights. ‘You’re very quiet.’

‘Just concentrating on the road. It’s busier than usual.’

I’d just been thinking how clear it was.

‘Are you still worried about the job offer not coming through yet?’ He’d come to the end of his two-year graduate programme and his employer had promised him a management role, but they couldn’t make a formal offer until they’d finished a restructure.

‘A bit. They said it would be early October.’

‘I know, but it’s only the eleventh. Some would still class that as early October.’

‘I suppose so.’

The lights changed to green, so he pulled away. I left him to his thoughts and turned mine to how excited Maisie would be about having another brother or sister when we told her after school this evening. She was such a great big sister to Noah.

Half an hour later, the sonographer smiled at Cameron and me as she ran the probe over my stomach.

‘This is your third baby?’ she asked me, as a fuzzy shape appeared on the screen.

‘Yes. We already have a boy and a girl and we decided to have one more.’

‘You’d better make that two more. You’re expecting twins!’

My heart leapt. ‘Twins? You’re serious?’

I glanced up at Cameron but he was staring straight past me at the screen, his expression unreadable.

‘Let me show you.’ The sonographer pointed out two different shapes and ran the probe from one to the other so we could hear each heartbeat.

Excitement bubbled over me and I hung on to her every word.

‘You look a bit shell-shocked, Dad,’ she said, laughter in her voice. ‘We often get that reaction with multiple births.’

Cameron looked more than shell-shocked. That tight jaw, narrowed eyes, and bottom lip tucked in only meant one thing

– he was livid and I could guess why. He'd adjusted his plan to include one more child, not two, and the news which elated me infuriated him. I'd never even considered the possibility of twins.

The tension between us as we waited for the scan photo was almost unbearable. I wanted them to hurry up so we could get out of there, although a longer wait meant more time for Cam to calm down.

'Did you know?' he asked as soon as we exited the hospital, the words coming out like a snarl.

'How would I? This is my first scan.'

He quickened his pace and I had to run to keep up with him.

'I know it's another mouth to feed, but we'll manage. You'll get a pay rise when your job's confirmed.'

He stopped and turned to me, a vein in his forehead throbbing. 'Another mouth to feed? It's *way* more than that. We'll need a double buggy, another cot, another highchair, another... whatever the hell it is we need. And where are we going to put another two kids? They're not all going to fit in the car and we'll have to get a bigger house now too.'

'But wasn't that the plan anyway? I thought you were going to use Granny's inheritance on a house deposit when your job was confirmed.'

'Yeah, well, I'm not sure there'll be enough money for a five-bed house.'

'We don't need a five-bed house. They don't have to have a bedroom each.'

'We need bigger than what we've got now.'

'Maybe, but we've got time to work something out. I know twins is a shock, but do you have to be so angry about it?'

'I'm not angry.'

'Yeah, the stomping and shouting really back that up.'

He lowered his voice but there was still frustration in his words. 'How are you so calm about this?'

'Because I'm happy about it.'

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head and strode off towards the car. I wrapped my coat across my body, seeking warmth and comfort. Time. He needed time. We had six months for him to get his head around it, although hopefully he'd accept it much sooner than that.

The traffic light gods weren't on our side driving home. Every set caught us on red and Cameron sat there at every stop, arms rigid, jaw tight, breathing heavy. I kept quiet and prayed he'd have talked himself round by the time we got home because, if he hadn't, I suspected we might be about to have the biggest row ever.

As soon as he unlocked the door at home, he marched upstairs. I assumed he needed a moment on his own, so I went into the kitchen and put the kettle on. Mum had taken the afternoon off to look after Maisie and Noah and we had half an hour before they were expected back.

I looked up at the ceiling, frowning at the banging and crashing upstairs. What was he doing up there?

I'd just finished making us both a mug of tea when I heard him thundering down the stairs. He paused by the kitchen door. His hair was dishevelled and there were beads of sweat on his forehead.

'I can't do this anymore.'

The words were barely audible but they still packed a punch.

'Can't do what anymore?'

'This. Any of it.'

He picked up a couple of suitcases I hadn't even noticed and left, slamming the door behind him.

I wanted to chase after him and demand an explanation, but my legs wouldn't move. Instead, I slowly slid down the units and onto the floor, gasping for breath.

That was the last time I saw him.

HOLLIE



Present day

‘I can’t get over how beautiful this dress is,’ Katie said, fluffing the layers of blue ombre tulle. ‘I always imagined you going for traditional white, but this is so stunning and completely perfect.’

I’d surprised myself by choosing blue, but the moment I spotted it on a mannequin in The Wedding Emporium on Castle Street, I fell in love. With a seaside-themed wedding and our vows being made with the sea as a backdrop, it felt so right. A white lace off-the-shoulder bodice kept that distinctive bridal look.

My long dark-blond hair had been partially braided and pulled into a low bun. Ginny, who ran The Wedding Emporium, sold bespoke tiaras from a local jewellery-maker, so I’d requested one with a starfish on it. The pearls and diamante jewels surrounding it were so pretty that I’d decided against a veil.

‘Are you ready for Angie to come in?’ Katie asked.

I slipped my feet into my embroidered shoes and reached for a tissue. She was bound to cry and it would set me off again.

‘Oh, my goodness!’ Angie cried, her eyes immediately welling up. She wafted her hand, clearly unable to say anything else as she carefully hugged me.

She stepped back and took a few breaths to compose herself.

‘I promised Martin I wouldn’t cry, but you look more like your mum today than ever before.’

She didn’t need to express any of the other things I was sure she’d be thinking – that she wished Mum was there and that she’d have been so proud of me. They were a given. It was also a given that Mum would not want me to spend my wedding day in tears, lamenting those who weren’t with us, although I’m sure she’d have forgiven me for this morning’s episode.

I blinked back my tears and checked my eye make-up in the mirror, but no damage had been done.

‘You look amazing, Angie,’ I said. Her ‘surrogate mother-of-the-bride’ outfit was a petrol-blue chiffon wrap dress with flutter sleeves and a matching hat with white flowers on it.

‘The photographer’s back,’ Bex said, joining us. Katie, Bex and Tori all wore the same style of bridesmaid dress – off-the-shoulder fitted bodice, waist sash and tulle skirt – but each in a different shade of blue.

‘Oh, Hollie. You look stunning!’ She blinked back tears and I gave her a gentle hug. She’d been Isaac’s partner, so today would be emotional for her too.

Her four-year-old daughter Mia ran into the room and announced, ‘I’m a flower girl,’ before treating us to a twirl in her pale blue dress overlaid with white net. She looked adorable and I had to pull my thoughts back from where they were straying. I hadn’t even done a test yet, so I definitely couldn’t drift off into a fantasy world about my own family.

I lifted up my skirts and the others followed me downstairs to see our wedding photographer, Nia. She was married to Michael Heslington – the son in the father-and-son professional photographer team whose talk at Whitsborough Bay Library a decade ago had inspired Jake to try photography again after abandoning it aged eight following cruel comments from Larissa.

Nia had already been to the house this morning to get some candid shots of us getting our hair, nails and make-up done, then had nipped home while we'd broken for lunch.

'Ah, you look right grand, Hollie,' she said in her soft Irish accent. 'I love the blue. I thought we might need a bit of crowd control in Cascade Gardens, so I brought reinforcements.'

Michael emerged from the kitchen and smiled at me. 'You look amazing, Hollie. Congratulations.'

I thanked them both and bent down to clip Pickle's lead onto his special new collar – light blue with navy anchors on it and a matching bow tie – breathing in the fresh aroma from his visit to the groomer this morning.

'Don't you look and smell fabulous,' I said, stroking his ears before straightening up and lifting my skirts. 'Everyone ready? Let's head to the gardens.'

* * *

Although the back garden at Sandy Croft would have been fine as a backdrop for photos of the bridal party, there were no flowers, making Cascade Gardens a prettier choice. Mum had loved the gardens so much that we'd scattered her ashes there, so having some photos taken there carried special meaning.

As soon as we stepped into Cascade Gardens, I felt Mum's presence strongly and suspected that Angie felt her too, as her eyes were glistening once more.

'We've got this,' I whispered, squeezing her hand.

Nia took several photos of me on my own, with Angie, and with the bridesmaids.

'Any nerves?' Angie asked me as we sat on a wooden bench with Pickle between us, out of shot while Nia took photos of the bridesmaids individually and together.

'A few butterflies when I put my dress on, but I feel really calm now. You?'

‘I was a nervous wreck when I woke up. Martin dropped by to ask if I needed anything and I burst into tears on him. Ridiculous behaviour.’

‘Not at all. And did Martin hug you better?’

She gave me a playful nudge. ‘He might have done.’

‘Seriously, Angie, when are you going to admit to each other that you want to try again? You promised me last year that you’d tell him and we’re already halfway through this year.’

‘I know! I’m a hopeless case. I just keep hoping he’ll say something first.’

‘What would Mum say if she was here?’ I asked.

‘She’d tell me life’s far too short and I should go for it.’

As she spoke, a stunning blue butterfly flitted past Angie and rested on my lap. We watched it, mesmerised as it slowly lowered and raised its wings several times before fluttering away.

‘And she’s just confirmed that,’ I whispered.

Martin was a funeral director and his tales of symbolism had always fascinated me. Some people believed that butterflies were messengers after death, different coloured butterflies symbolising different messages. I knew Angie believed in butterflies, so a blue one – a symbol of life and acceptance – arriving on my wedding day in the place where Mum’s ashes were scattered would have extra special meaning for her. Could the romance of my wedding finally be the push for her and Martin to admit their feelings to each other? I hoped so and I knew that, if Mum had been here, she’d have been wishing it too.

KERRY



‘They’ve got a gorgeous day for their wedding,’ Mum observed as she drove me down to The Bay Pavilion that afternoon, leaving the children at Park Lodge in Howard’s care.

‘Thanks again for having the kids today,’ I said when she pulled into a parking space outside the venue twenty minutes before the wedding was due to start.

‘You enjoy some adult company for once. Will there be any nice single men there?’

‘Mum! I have no idea and I wouldn’t be interested even if there were.’

‘You say that, but once you’ve got a few drinks inside you and you’re swept away by the romance of the day...’

I pushed open the door, laughing as I shook my head. ‘We’re not having this conversation.’

‘Spoilsport!’

‘Bye, Mum!’ I closed the door and waved her off.

I found several of my colleagues from The Starfish Café in the bar and chatting to them confirmed I’d made the right decision about attending the day part on my own. If the kids had been here, I’d have been getting them drinks, searching for toilets, and answering the gazillion questions Freya would no doubt fire at me. Maybe Mum was right and I should try to get out more. She wasn’t right about the dating thing, though.

Cameron's letter this morning had been a stark reminder of how badly wrong that could go.

Our group moved outside into Pavilion Court.

'Oh, wow! It's beautiful,' I said to Avril.

Rows of white wooden foldable chairs were laid out for the ceremony. Each had teal-coloured organza tied round it, fastened at the back with a small white starfish. The side of the chair nearest the aisle on every other row had a larger starfish with white roses and forget-me-nots. Hollie had told me that she loved the little blue flowers and wanted them featured in her bouquet and floral displays, but they also doubled up as a reminder of her family and Jake's.

'Hollie's so creative,' I said to Avril as we admired the starfish that Hollie had made herself. 'I'd never have thought of all of this.'

'You will when it's your turn.'

She gave me a mischievous wink and I rolled my eyes at her. 'Never again.'

'Never say never, especially not when you're at a wedding. Magic can happen. Who's single? Ooh, Artie is. And so's—'

'Argh! Stop it! You're as bad as my mum.' I said it jokingly, placing my hands over my ears and pulling a face at her, but I hoped she would leave it. I couldn't bear the thought of her or anyone else spending the day trying to matchmake for me.

Noticing several guests looking past us and pointing, I turned towards the glass wall. Two classic VW campervans were passing slowly, each with white ribbons across the front and a garland of white flowers above the front bumper. The first was teal and cream and I recognised it as Tori's campervan. She was driving and Hollie and Angie were waving from one of the side windows. The second one was orange and carried the other bridesmaids.

Once the campervans had passed, we went to secure our seats for the ceremony. As Avril and her husband Antony settled into theirs, Avril laughed at something he whispered to

her and they exchanged smiles of such adoration that tears unexpectedly sprung to my eyes. I'd never had that with Cameron. I gave myself a little shake. I did *not* want that man in my head today. This was a day for love and friendship, not lamenting the past.

We hadn't been seated long when Jake entered the courtyard with a large ginger bearded man who I presumed was Artie, his best man. I'd never met him before, but I'd heard loads about him from Hollie, who thought the world of him.

Despite smiling and nodding at the guests as they strolled past, I could see they were both nervous. Jake made a dashing groom in a bluish-grey three-piece suit with a dark blue patterned tie and pocket square. The best man and ushers were all in matching suits but in a lighter grey, making Jake stand out.

Jake was tall at six foot two – same height as Cameron – but Artie looked about four inches taller than him. He made me think of a lumberjack or a Viking with his height, broad shoulders, unruly ginger hair and bushy beard. I knew from Hollie that he was the coxswain at the lifeboat station and that he'd been part of the crew on the night of the rescue gone wrong which cost her dad and brother their lives. That must have been a horrendous experience for everyone involved.

The guests hushed as music started playing and heads turned towards the building behind us, anticipating Hollie's grand entrance. The music was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it until the first line and, suddenly, I felt quite emotional, gulping down the lump in my throat as I recognised Snow Patrol's 'Just Say Yes'.

A pretty little flower girl walked down the aisle, scattering petals from a turquoise bucket with a starfish on the front of it. Tori and Bex followed her, then Katie with Pickle trotting along beside her. As the chorus kicked in, Hollie stepped out of the building on Angie's arm, both of them looking incredible and beaming from ear to ear. I rummaged in my bag, hoping I'd find a packet of tissues in there. I wasn't one for crying at weddings so I had no idea why this one was

affecting me so much. Thankfully Avril came to my rescue, pressing a tissue into my hand and giving me a reassuring smile as she dabbed her own eyes.

Hollie reached the bandstand, handed her bouquet to Katie and kissed Angie's cheek. The chorus kicked in once more just as Hollie turned to Jake. They both said 'yes' to each other in time with the lyrics and laughed, which completely broke me. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I struggled to catch my breath. Beside me, Avril took my hand in hers. It was a touching and comforting gesture, but the kindness did nothing to stop the tears. What was wrong with me today? I seriously needed to get a grip.

HOLLIE



When we both said ‘yes’ in time to the lyrics and burst out laughing – completely unrehearsed – it made my heart soar. I didn’t think it was possible to love Jake more than I already did but standing opposite him on our wedding day, I fell even more deeply. I loved how he was looking at me as though I was the only person there as he made his vows.

‘On Bonfire Night two years ago, I came to The Starfish Café with my camera, looking for fireworks. I found them, but not in the place I expected. They were in here.’ He placed his hand over his heart. ‘That night, a lost dog brought two lost souls together and made a new family for us all. Hollie Gabrielle Brooks, you inspire me with your strength, compassion and love. The RNLI say, “With courage, nothing is impossible,” and you repeatedly show me that. You’ve made me believe in myself, you’re the missing piece in my Rubik’s cube, and I’m so excited to face the future with you by my side. I promise to make you laugh every day...’

He paused, as though knowing I’d need a moment to take those words in – what Mum had told me was the key to her happy marriage to Dad.

‘...to support and champion you and your two incredible business ventures, and to love you deeply and completely, no matter what challenges life throws our way. And if you like the sound of that, just say yes.’

I so badly wanted to hug and kiss him, showing how much I loved and appreciated everything he’d said, but I’d have to

resist temptation until we were alone later. The celebrant invited me to make my vows.

‘Bonfire Night used to be a big night for my family, but the celebrations stopped and it became an evening I dreaded. Now it’s cause for celebration again because it’s the date a lost dog brought love and happiness back into my life. Jake Robert MacLeod, you’ve helped me find myself again and, together, we’ve faced the past and embraced the future. I’m in awe of your talent as a photographer, your compassion as a nurse, and your dedication as RNLI crew. You have the biggest heart and I’m honoured that you chose to open it up to me...’

I broke off, struggling to get the words out as the emotions overcame me. Jake whispered, ‘You’ve got this!’ which gave me the strength I needed to finish.

‘I promise to always be here for you with a listening ear, reassuring words and a comforting hug, just like you always are for me. My wonderful mum’s final words to me were, “Keep dancing in the rain. If you stumble, make it part of your dance.” Jake, thank you for always dancing in the rain with me. I promise to be your dance partner and lift you any time you stumble. And my answer is yes. Always.’

Mia stepped forward with a teal and white ombre-sprayed starfish with the two platinum wedding rings tied to it. Jake and I unfastened the ribbons and took turns to place the rings on each other’s fingers. The celebrant pronounced us married and we shared our first kiss as husband and wife to cheers from the guests.

As we turned to face everyone, a blue butterfly flew past, landed on Pickle’s back, then fluttered off again, over the glass wall and out towards the sea.

The next thirty minutes or so passed in a blur of hugs, compliments and photographs. Pavilion Court was the perfect stunning backdrop for photos, the black and white checked tiles looking particularly striking against the wall of glass but, with the beach meaning so much to us, we wanted a shoot down by the rock pools too.

Leaving the guests to enjoy a drinks reception and canapes, Jake and I led the bridal party and Angie through the covered walkway, pausing for some photos there, then down onto the beach.

Nia took the group photos first so that Artie, Finley and Kyle could walk along the promenade to our final stop – the lifeboat station – while Angie, Katie, Bex and little Mia returned to The Bay Pavilion. Nia took several photos of Jake and me, then Tori did her chauffeur bit in her campervan again.

‘I hope there isn’t a shout,’ I said to Jake as we travelled along the seafront, and we both crossed our fingers. As they were part of the wedding party, Artie, Finley, Kyle and Tori had all marked themselves on the lifeboat station’s app as unavailable today, but the rest of the crew could be paged, leading to a mass exodus of guests.

The ALB had been launched this morning and moored in the harbour ready for our photos onboard but, as Tori pulled up at the top of the slipway, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. The crew were lined up in uniform either side of the slipway in a Guard of Honour with RNLI flags for us to walk through.

‘Did you know about this?’ I asked Jake.

‘No. Not a clue.’

Jake took my hand and we walked through the Guard of Honour towards the sea and back again so that Nia could take photos of us from the front and behind with the harbour as a backdrop each time. My heart soared as we made each journey. How amazing were our RNLI family to do this today?

‘We thought you might like a photo wearing these,’ Tori said, holding up a pair of bright yellow wellies.

I laughed as I removed my shoes and slipped my feet into the boots, posing for a photo as I hitched up my dress.

Artie handed a pair of wellies to Jake. ‘Health and safety,’ he said, laughing as he nodded towards the lifeboat.

We boarded the ALB, posing for photos in our wellies, with lifejackets on too, with Artie, and with the rest of the crew. The final surprise was when the RNLI's giant mascot, Stormy Stan, appeared. It was worn today by Spaniel, with whom I'd started my training. It was particularly fitting to have Stormy Stan join us on our wedding day as I'd worn the costume myself to seek Jake's forgiveness after I'd ended our relationship early on, panicking when I discovered he was in the RNLI, fearing a repeat of what had happened to Dad and Isaac.

We posed with Stormy Stan on the lifeboat and in front of it before a final photo was taken of him carrying me, like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold.

Photo shoot complete, Nia was packing her camera away when the pagers sounded. The timing couldn't have been more perfect.

'Likely to be one of the quickest launches in history seeing as they're all here,' Artie said as guidance came through that only the ILB was needed and a few of the crew and shore staff ran off to the lifeboat station to launch it. It was weird not running after them and I could tell that Jake, Artie, Kyle, Finley and Tori were itching to get involved too, but we had a wedding to return to.

'Thanks for organising this,' I said to Artie, walking alongside him in my wellies as he carried the Stormy Stan suit back to the lifeboat station.

'What makes you think I did it?'

'It has your name written all over it.'

'If Sparky and Silver had been here...' he said, using Dad and Isaac's nicknames, '...they'd have sorted it. I wanted to make it extra special.'

'You did. That meant the world to me.'

'And me,' Jake said. 'Thank you so much.'

KERRY



I stood by the glass wall with a flute of prosecco in my hand, looking out towards the sea. I'd managed to push Cameron far from my thoughts while I'd been getting ready at home, helped by Freya sitting on my bed with her Tinker Bell doll, chattering endlessly. I'd pushed him aside when he popped into my mind just before the ceremony but, now that we had some downtime, he'd reappeared and was stomping around my head in his size twelves.

'You look sad, Kerry.'

I looked up at my colleague Javier and smiled. 'It's nothing. Well, not nothing, but I'm fine.'

It was kind of Javier to check on me, but nobody at work knew the full story and today was meant to be a happy day – not the one where I revealed my sorry tale. They knew I was divorced and my ex wasn't local, but I'd never shared that he wasn't in the children's lives at all. If I told them he'd abandoned us before the twins were born, I'm sure they'd have expressed surprise and very likely disgust that a father could do that. Rightly so. But despite his many shortfalls, I had four beautiful children thanks to him. For that reason, I'd never regret our relationship or invite negative comments about Cameron.

'A few of us are going up to the roof terrace for a drink,' Javier said. 'Do you want to join us?'

'That would be lovely. Thank you.' Anything to distract me.

While we were on the roof terrace, we spotted Tori's campervan returning to The Bay Pavilion, so they must have finished their photo shoot at the lifeboat station.

'I bet the photos at the lifeboat station look amazing,' I said to Avril as we leaned on the railings, watching Jake help Hollie step down from the camper. 'Must be lovely having something like that on your wedding day.'

A little later, I wandered back downstairs to take a look at the seating plan. Hollie had said she'd keep the staff together but there were too many of us for one table, so I wondered who was on mine.

Next to the seating plan was a driftwood sign with a trio of flameless candles in front of it. I scanned down the words.

*There's an extra table you can't see
The guests won't make a sound
It's set between the sky and sea
For those who aren't around
We really wish they could be here
To share this day together
So we'll think of them as we raise a cheer
In our hearts and minds forever*

xxx

I pressed my fingers to my lips as the tears started again at the poignant words. I rummaged in my bag, hoping I'd find the tissue Avril had given me earlier, and sighed as I recalled flushing it down the toilet.

'Would you like one of these?' a man said.

A packet of tissues was pressed into my hand and I looked up into a pair of warm hazel eyes.

'Thank you,' I said, gratefully removing a tissue and wiping my cheeks before returning the packet to him.

'I read it earlier and it broke me too,' he said. 'I'm Artie, by the way. It's Kerry, isn't it? You work with Hollie?'

‘Yes, and yes. Hi, Artie. Good to meet you and thanks again for this. You’re a lifesaver.’ I scrunched up the tissue, shaking my head at my words. ‘Can’t believe I just said that to someone who does quite literally save lives.’

He laughed – a low, deep sound.

‘You laugh like Father Christmas,’ I said, which made him laugh even more, filling me with warmth.

‘Don’t tell that to any of the crew or I’ll never hear the end of it, although I do like the comparison, so thank you for that.’

He nodded towards the seating plan. ‘Have you found where you’re sitting?’

‘Yes, I’m with my colleagues. I’d ask you the same but I’m guessing...’

‘Top table,’ we said together.

‘Are you making a speech?’

‘Yes, and I’m dreading it. I’m used to giving talks at the lifeboat station in front of big crowds so I thought I’d be okay, but I soon realised there’s a massive difference. I could prattle on about the work we do till the cows come home – day job stuff – but this is personal and emotional. Hollie and Jake mean the world to me. I’m hoping I don’t let them down.’

The vulnerability was touching and I itched to give him a hug, but we’d only just met so it didn’t seem appropriate. I could give him some words of reassurance, though.

‘I’m sure they’ll love it and it’ll probably make me cry. I’m not a crier, especially at weddings, but everything today has had me blubbing.’

‘You’d best hang onto these, then.’ Artie returned the packet of tissues to me with a smile.

Someone behind me shouted his name. He nodded and put his thumb up to whoever it was then turned his attention back to me.

‘There was a callout while we were at the station earlier and they’ve just got back so I’m needed for a moment. Sorry to

abandon you.’

‘It’s fine. Thanks again for the tissues. Good luck with the speech and hopefully catch up with you afterwards.’

His smile widened, lighting his face. ‘I’d like that. See you later.’

I watched him cross the room and talk to a few of his crew. What a lovely man, really warm and friendly. No wonder Hollie, Jake and Tori held him in such high esteem. From our brief interlude, I could imagine him being a really supportive leader and also a good friend. Hopefully we would get to talk later.

HOLLIE



Since returning from the lifeboat station, I'd been working my way round as many guests as I could and posing for photos with them, basking in the compliments about my dress and the gorgeous flowers from Seaside Blooms. I must have repeated the story behind the wooden starfish on my bouquet at least a dozen times but I was on such a high that the tears didn't resurface.

'Do you think we can grab Jake?' Katie's husband Trey asked after taking several photos of Katie and me on the bandstand.

I looked over to where Jake was talking to his former neighbour Irene and old family friends Uncle Adrian and Auntie Maggs. He must have felt me staring as he glanced up and smiled, but his smile slipped, he said something to the group, and dashed inside.

I stared after him, frowning.

'What was that all about?' Katie asked.

'I've no idea.'

Irene, Adrian and Maggs all looked bewildered too, shrugging before they resumed their conversation.

Confused, I looked behind me and was stunned to see Jake on the other side of the glass wall, looking north then south.

'What's he doing?' I muttered to Katie.

We wandered over to the wall and I knocked on the glass. Jake turned, his face pale. There was no point trying to speak to him as the glass was thick and I'd have to shout for the sound to travel over the top, so I shrugged and mouthed, 'What's up?'

He shrugged too and indicated that he was coming back inside. A couple of minutes later, he reappeared.

'You're going to think I'm mad,' he said, 'but I could have sworn I saw Larissa looking through the glass. She was there one moment and gone the next.'

We all looked over to the glass wall.

'There've been loads of people looking,' I said. 'I wasn't paying that much attention to them.'

'Did you notice anyone?' Katie asked Trey.

'Too busy focusing on you two and I wouldn't know what she looked like anyway.'

Jake ran his hands through his hair and released a long exhale. 'I hope I was wrong because, if it was her, I'd say it's pretty likely she's moved back to Whitsborough Bay.'

I'd have loved to dismiss seeing Larissa as a figment of his imagination or a trick of the light, but Jake had brilliant observation skills, noticing elements for a photograph I'd never have seen, and was often the first to spot a casualty during a rescue. If he thought he'd seen Larissa, he very likely had.

'You look like you could use a drink,' Katie said. 'I'll be back shortly.'

I slipped my arms round Jake's waist when Katie left with Trey, and pressed my head against his chest. 'Try to forget about her for now. If it was her, she was probably as shocked to see you as you were to see her, which was why she vanished. I don't think she's about to crash the wedding and, if she does, we can set Pickle on her.'

Jake laughed lightly. 'Where is he, by the way?'

‘Last time I saw him, he was having a photo shoot with Nia and Michael. That little dog is living his best life with stacks of attention today. Anyone would think it was his wedding. When we get the photos back, there could well be more of him than us.’

I tilted my head upwards and Jake pressed his lips against mine.

‘He’s not the only one living his best life today,’ he whispered. ‘It’s been amazing.’

‘It certainly has, and it’s not over yet.’

I kissed him once more but, when Katie and Trey returned with drinks, I stole another glance through the glass. Could Larissa be out there? Could she be living in Whitsborough Bay? I really hoped not and, if she was, please make her stay away from Jake. He deserved happiness and she sucked it from him.

KERRY



The wedding breakfast was held in a function room which opened out onto Pavilion Court. The chairs were decorated in the same way as the ones for the wedding ceremony and in the centre of each round table were blue glass jars and storm lanterns filled with shells, starfish and LED lights. The room looked so beautiful and I felt a moment's guilt that I'd said no to the children accompanying me for the day. Maisie and Freya would have loved this.

I was seated between Avril and Javier with a clear view of the top table. With the bride and groom having both lost their parents, it wasn't possible to have a traditional layout. Hollie and Jake were in the middle, with Angie and Martin on one side and Katie, Trey, and Artie on the other. The rest of the wedding party were on one of four RNLI tables.

'He's got a great laugh, hasn't he?' Avril said, nodding towards Artie.

I smiled, thinking of my conversation with him earlier about Father Christmas. 'It's very infectious.'

'His older brother Colm was the same. I went to senior school with him.'

I was tempted to ask more questions about Artie but, despite Avril's promises not to play Cupid today, I knew it would set her off down that track, so I changed the subject.

After coffee was served, we had the speeches. Artie needn't have feared letting down Hollie and Jake because his was brilliant. His voice was strong and captivating and,

looking round the guests, I wasn't the only one hanging on every word. One minute he had us laughing at some hilarious RNLI-based anecdotes involving Hollie and Jake, and damp eyes all around the next as he talked about a shy, quiet Jake turning up and begging to be allowed on crew after overcoming a fear of water. He spoke of his devastation at the rescue which took Hollie's dad and brother, but with a focus on how proud he was at Hollie becoming the first woman in her family to join the crew and what a credit she'd been to the lifeboat family. The affection he had for Hollie and Jake had me dipping into the packet of tissues he'd given me.

'Great speeches,' Avril said to me as she reached for a leftover mint once the speeches and toasts were complete. 'Especially Artie's. No wonder all his crew adore him.'

I glanced across at Artie, laughing with Katie. He exuded warmth and I could imagine him being so calm and reassuring during rescues.

Avril shuffled a little closer. 'Did I mention earlier that he's single?' she whispered.

I raised my eyebrows at her. 'Yes, you did, and I said—'

She did a zipping motion across her mouth, so I didn't need to finish that sentence, but she winked and I knew he'd be mentioned once we were back at work. If he did catch up with me later this evening – which I hoped he would – she'd definitely read something into it. Couldn't a single man and a single woman have a conversation and a laugh together without assumptions being made?

An announcement was made to clear the room while the staff turned it around for the evening do. I'd had a lovely time so far but had hit the point where I needed some time out on my own to recharge. I had an hour until Mum and Howard arrived with the children. If I went up to the roof terrace, I'd probably be joined by some of my colleagues, so I decided to wander down to the beach.

Hollie was on the steps into The Bay Pavilion having her photo taken with a couple of guests and I smiled at her as I passed.

‘You’re not leaving, are you?’ she asked, catching up with me at the bottom of the steps.

‘No. Just grabbing a quiet moment before the kids arrive.’

‘Aw, I’m so glad they’re coming tonight.’

‘The girls can’t wait to see you. How’s your day been?’

‘An absolute dream. Even better than I imagined. My cheeks hurt from smiling so much. Are you enjoying yourself?’

‘Having a great time. It’s been lovely having proper conversations with the others instead of a couple of sentences here and there between customers. Thanks so much for inviting me.’

‘I couldn’t have considered getting married without you all here. You’re my family.’

Her family. She’d said that before but I hadn’t felt the full significance of it until now. Thinking about the sign by the seating plan, the vows, the speeches, and an earlier conversation with Angie about the starfish and rings attached to Hollie’s bouquet, tears rushed to my eyes yet again.

‘I’m so sorry,’ I said, catching the tears with my fingers. ‘I’ve been an emotional wreck all day.’

Hollie pulled me into a hug and I gratefully held her as I composed myself.

‘Weddings can do that to people,’ she said when she released me. ‘I never go to one without at least two packets of tissues.’

‘I don’t normally cry at weddings,’ I said, removing another tissue from Artie’s packet. ‘I didn’t think to bring any, but Artie came to the rescue with these.’

‘Bless him. He’s an absolute superstar. Love that man.’

‘Avril seems determined to fix us up.’ I bit my lip. Damn wine making me a little too honest.

‘What’s she like? Before I met Jake, she was always pointing out customers she thought would be suitable for me

who were, of course, completely unsuitable. Although she may be onto something this time. You and Artie, eh?’

‘Oh, don’t you start! We’ve only just met and I’m not looking for a relationship.’

‘Neither was I, but then I met Jake, so I don’t buy that.’ She laughed. ‘I’m only teasing, but if you were looking, I’d highly recommend Artie. Mind you, I have no idea whether he’d be up for another relationship. There’s been nobody since —’

‘Hollie! There you are!’ Angie ran down the steps towards us. ‘You’re needed inside. There’s some debate about your first song. The wedding co-ordinator thinks the DJ has the wrong one, but she can’t remember what you chose.’

Hollie rolled her eyes at me. ‘Sorry, Kerry, I’d best go. Enjoy your peace and quiet and I’ll see you later.’

It was only when I was walking barefoot along the shoreline a little later, my eyes fixed on the lifeboat station in the distance, that I realised Hollie hadn’t finished that sentence about Artie. There’d been nobody in his life since what? Since his divorce? Since his cheating ex? Since he and his girlfriend decided to call it a day? Since... I shook my head. It could be anything, so there was no point speculating, especially as I wasn’t interested in Artie anyway. Although I did really like him. If I did attempt to build some sort of social life, it would be a good idea to expand my circle of friends outside of The Starfish Café family. Artie and I could be friends. Perhaps.

* * *

I’d been back at The Bay Pavilion for about fifteen minutes when Mum rang to say they’d just arrived. Seeing the girls in their party dresses and the boys smartly dressed, the tears pricked my eyes and I forced them back as I bent down to give hugs.

Mum missed nothing, though. ‘Are you all right, love?’ she whispered as she hugged me.

‘Just a bit tired. You know how exhausting weddings can be with all the standing around.’ I smiled brightly, my bubbly *nothing to see here* voice perfected a long time ago.

I turned my attention back to the kids. ‘Are you looking forward to seeing Hollie’s dress? Shall we go and find her?’

Mum and Howard went to the bar while the children followed me into Pavilion Court to find Hollie. Artie was on his way inside, carrying an empty pint glass. He stepped aside to let us out first.

‘You might regret waiting,’ I said, smiling at him. ‘There are five of us.’

They each thanked him as they passed and his smile widened.

‘So polite! It’s a pleasure to wait. These are your children?’

‘Yes. This is Millie, Noah, Freya and Jayden. My mum and her partner have just brought them down for the evening do.’ My heart pounded as I waited for his reaction, suddenly feeling as though it was important that he liked them and they liked him.

‘It’s great to meet you all.’ He crouched down in front of them. ‘My name’s Artie and I work on the lifeboats with Jake.’

‘I’ve got a Lego lifeboat,’ Jayden said.

‘That’s fantastic! I loved Lego when I was little. Do your Lego lifeboat crew go on lots of rescues?’

Jayden nodded. ‘Sometimes the ambulance goes too.’

‘Just like in real life. Some of the crew had to go to a rescue today and they needed the ambulance.’

‘Was someone hurt?’ Maisie asked, eyes wide.

‘A surfer was poorly and he needed to go to hospital, but it was nothing too serious, so I’m sure he’ll be fine now.’

‘Do you have to be a good swimmer when you work on the lifeboats?’ Freya asked.

‘Actually, no, but all our current lifeboat crew can swim. I think it makes them feel more confident in the job. Can you swim?’

‘We can all swim. Mummy said it was really important to learn, especially when we live by the sea.’

Artie looked up at me and smiled warmly. ‘Your mummy’s right. It’s a brilliant skill to have.’

‘Noah’s the best swimmer,’ Freya told him.

‘I go to swimming club and I got six medals this morning,’ Noah said in an unusual display of pride.

‘Wow! That’s impressive.’ Artie held his fist up and my heart melted as Noah bumped it. ‘What do you do with all your medals?’

‘Mum put some hooks up in my bedroom so I can see them but there are too many now so I have some in a special box.’

‘Maisie scored two goals this morning,’ Freya said. ‘She was player of the match.’ I loved the way she was always the first to praise her siblings – as proud of them as I was – before sharing her own achievements.

Artie asked them all questions about their hobbies and seemed genuinely interested in their answers, showing no sign of wanting to rush off to refill his pint. Mum and Howard joined us, so I introduced them to Artie, but they didn’t get to say much as Freya suddenly tugged on my dress.

‘There’s Hollie!’

‘Sorry, Artie, they’re dying to say hello to Hollie,’ I said as Freya grabbed my hand. ‘You can escape to the bar now.’

He straightened up, still smiling, and my stomach unexpectedly fizzed as his eyes caught mine.

‘I enjoyed the chat. Hopefully catch you later?’

It was definitely a question rather than a throwaway statement, so I smiled and nodded before Freya yanked me away.

As the girls and Mum cooed over Hollie's dress and tiara and the boys plonked themselves down on the tiles to fuss over Pickle, I glanced back at the doorway through which Artie had disappeared, my heart still pounding. That made no sense. Why him? Why now? I hadn't felt even the tiniest molecule of attraction towards another man since Cameron left. And then it struck me. Wine. Wedding. Dangerous combination. It would be gone by the morning.

HOLLIE



‘Welcome home, Mrs Brooks-MacLeod,’ Jake said as he unlocked the door and drew me into a soft kiss. We’d decided to return to Sandy Croft rather than stay overnight in a hotel so we could be with Pickle before heading to Italy on our honeymoon tomorrow. He’d be staying with Kerry and her family while we were away.

Jake pushed open the door to let Pickle in then scooped me up into his arms.

‘I can’t be upstaged by Stormy Stan.’

‘I hate to say it, but I think Stormy Stan scores higher for finesse,’ I said, laughing at Jake’s struggle to go through the door sideways so I didn’t hit my head.

‘Does this mean it’s over already?’ he said, gently placing me down. ‘You’re going to run off with Stan?’

‘Well, you know what they say about men with big hands.’

He closed the door behind us and drew me into another long, passionate kiss, leaving me breathless.

‘I’ve been dying to do that all day,’ he said, running his hand gently down my cheek. ‘You always look amazing, but when I saw you coming down the aisle in that dress, you completely blew me away.’

He glanced down the kitchen to the snug area where Pickle was already curled up in his bed.

‘Pickle’s fed and fast asleep, so I think it’s time I took my bride to bed.’

‘Lead on, Mr Brooks-MacLeod.’

With a wink, he took my hand and led me up the stairs. Mr and Mrs Brooks-MacLeod. I’d assumed I’d take Jake’s name, but he’d mooted the idea of going double-barrelled as a way of keeping both our family names alive. I loved it and had been so touched by the suggestion.

A little later, I went to the bathroom to remove my make-up and brush my teeth. I paused with the door to the cabinet open, looking at the triple pack of pregnancy tests. I’d planned to wait until tomorrow, but a negative result couldn’t possibly spoil the incredible day we’d just had. Besides, it was past 1 a.m. and already officially ‘tomorrow’. What the heck!

I rested the completed test on the top of the cistern and busied myself brushing my teeth, my heart thudding. When I’d finished, I closed my eyes for a moment and focused on the joy I’d felt all day. If the test was negative, that was fine. Jake and I had been pragmatic about the whole thing, accepting that it might not happen quickly or might not even happen at all and we’d be all right with that – after all, neither of us ever expected to meet someone special and fall in love.

Opening my eyes, I stepped up to the cistern.

‘Jake!’ I shouted, picking up the test.

He ran along the landing. ‘Are you okay?’

I thrust the test at him. ‘Better than okay.’

He looked at the result and his eyes lit up. ‘You’ve just taken this?’

I nodded. ‘Happy wedding day.’

His eyes sparkled with tears. ‘I can’t believe it! We’re going to be parents.’

He grabbed me and showered me with kisses. What a perfect end to a perfect day.

KERRY



I'd promised the kids I'd spend Sunday with them and had asked what they fancied doing. As they'd been to the beach yesterday while I was at the wedding, they chose Fendale Fun Farm. Situated inland between Whitsborough Bay and Fellingthorpe, there were farm animals – some of which visitors could feed – alongside an enormous outdoor playground, inside soft play, a barn full of hay bales for clambering over, and a host of games and activities. We hadn't been since last summer so were overdue a visit.

I got dressed after breakfast then returned to the kitchen to prepare a picnic. Mum was in there, buttering a pile of bread.

'I thought you were meeting Gayle at ten,' I said, surprised to see her. She should have already left the house to meet her friend.

'She's had to cancel – stomach bug – so I thought I'd keep you company, if that's okay.'

'You're welcome any time but are you sure you don't want to take advantage of the peace and quiet?'

'Overrated. I'd enjoy it for about twenty minutes then be bored and wish I'd joined you.'

I grated cheese and we chatted about the wedding while we prepared the picnic, but I felt on edge. When I returned last night, I'd checked my emails and there'd been one from Cameron.

To: Kerry Marsden

From: Cameron Fullerton

RE: Your email

Lots to think about. I'll be in touch later.

That was it. Nine words. I'd tossed and turned all night, trying to find some meaning in them. What was he going to think about? Had he heard my question about whether he genuinely wanted to be involved in the kids' lives and he was going to think about whether he was ready and willing to make that commitment? Had he taken on board the comment about him and his fiancée being strangers and he was going to think about how to build a relationship steadily? And what did 'later' mean? Today? Tomorrow? Next week? A month's time? Perhaps he'd engage a solicitor and the contact would be through them instead. I'd have preferred a lengthy rant because at least then I'd have known what was really going on in his head, but that wasn't Cameron's style. He kept it all in.

Later that morning, after we'd fed the goats and the kids had stroked some guinea pigs, Mum and I settled on a picnic bench near the adventure playground. I checked my phone for emails from Cameron. Nothing.

'Are you expecting an important message?' Mum asked.

'No. Why?'

'Because that must be about the tenth time you've checked your phone since we got here.'

I'd taken a photo of the letter he sent me, so I opened it up and passed my phone to her. 'This arrived yesterday.'

Her eyes widened as she read down the letter. 'The cheeky...' She bit her lip. 'I can't believe the nerve of him after all this time. Did you reply?'

I took the phone, clicked onto my email response, and passed it back to her.

'Good for you,' she said, returning my phone after reading it. 'What the hell was he thinking?'

‘You don’t think what I put was unreasonable?’

‘I think you were very restrained.’

I smiled. ‘I wasn’t in the first version, but I thought I’d better tone it down in case he does go down a solicitor route.’

‘Do you think he will?’

‘I don’t know. If he does, he must know he’s done himself no favours. He’s the one who walked out and never saw the twins, he’s the one who moved and severed contact way before we moved here, and he’s the one who’s ignored all my updates on the kids. No solicitor could accuse me of making things difficult for him.’

‘I take it he hasn’t replied and that’s what you’re watching out for?’

‘He has, but only to say there’s lots to think about and he’ll be in touch, so I’m in limbo again.’

I followed Mum’s eyeline to where Maisie and Noah were racing each other on side-by-side slides.

‘What sort of father walks out on his kids like that?’ she asked.

‘A complicated one with a messed-up childhood.’

She turned back to me, eyebrows raised. ‘Don’t tell me you feel sorry for him.’

‘Yes... no... I don’t know. His parents weren’t exactly role models for the perfect family.’

‘No, but neither was your dad and you didn’t walk out on your spouse and kids. You’re a fantastic mum and Cameron could have been a fantastic dad, but he chose not to be. People are too quick to pass the blame onto something from their past as though that justifies everything, but it doesn’t. They make their own choices. They’re responsible for their own behaviour. Having parents like his doesn’t give him the right to walk out on his responsibilities, cut you all off, then suddenly reappear nearly seven years later, acting as though he only saw them last week and a sleepover is a normal, everyday request.’

Her voice had gradually increased in volume and we were attracting curious glances. Mum had obviously noticed, as she placed her hand over mine and lowered her voice. 'I'm not having a go at you, love. I know he's got issues and there's likely a complicated explanation for why he did what he did the way he did it, but to go from nothing to everything like this worries me.'

'It worries me too.'

I looked back towards the playground. Maisie was pushing Jayden on a tyre swing while Freya chased Noah across a rope bridge. We had a lovely life together in Whitsborough Bay and moving here had been the best decision ever. After Cameron walked out, the thought of raising four children aged five and under on my own terrified me and I fell to pieces, but my wonderful mum was there. She threw me the first of two lifelines by renting out her house and moving in with us, fulfilling the promise she'd made when I first discovered I was pregnant with Maisie – that I wouldn't be on my own.

The second lifeline had been the move to the coast. Eight months after the twins were born, Mum's parents passed away within a couple of weeks of each other and she inherited Park Lodge and enough savings to refurbish it as a family home and take early retirement. I loved it in Whitsborough Bay, the kids did too, and I'd never seen Mum happier.

But that could all be in jeopardy now. If Cameron did decide he wanted them in his life, what impact would it have on the four of them? And what about me? What would I do with myself if they started having days out, weekends, holidays with their dad? What a scary thought! They were my life. Everything I did revolved around them. I had no idea who I was without them, and I didn't want to find out. Selfishly, I hoped Cameron decided it was too much effort and disappeared as suddenly as he'd reappeared. Then I felt guilty. It wasn't for me to hope that. What did Maisie, Noah, Freya and Jayden want? I thought about Noah's distraught face when he asked if his dad didn't love him. This was Cameron's chance to show that he did. If it wasn't too late.

Mum picked up my phone and read the letter again, tutting repeatedly.

‘This only talks about the summer. What happens when his holiday in Whitby is over and he starts this new job? You know what I think this is? I think Mr City Slicker realises how bored he’s going to be in a small seaside town for three months and he’s found a way to alleviate his boredom.’

I was about to protest that Cameron loved Whitby when we’d had our honeymoon there and wouldn’t do anything so horrendous, but how was treating them as a holiday distraction any worse than walking out on me after discovering I was expecting twins? Truth was, I didn’t know Cameron at all. I don’t think I ever had.

HOLLIE



The following Monday, Jake and I flew back to the UK after our week-long honeymoon. Italy had been everything I'd hoped for – beautiful scenery, fabulous food and amazing company – plus the added bonus of excitement at our baby news.

As Jake drove us back from the airport, I used my local surgery's app to book myself in to see the midwife, kickstarting the process.

'All booked for Thursday,' I said.

'That's good. I thought you might have to wait until next week. How are you feeling?'

'Still tired, although I'm not sure how much of that is the excitement of the wedding and honeymoon catching up with me and how much is the baby.'

My only other symptom so far was feeling a little nauseous first thing and as mealtimes approached. I hoped it would stay mild and not develop into actual sickness.

'You definitely just want to tell Angie and Artie at this point?' Jake asked.

'Yes. Just them, and everyone else after the twelve-week scan.'

It would be hard not saying anything to Katie, especially when chatting about her pregnancy, but I felt weirdly superstitious about not broadcasting it widely at this early stage. She hadn't told me about either of her pregnancies until

after her scans, so it wasn't like she'd be hurt by me staying quiet.

As Tuesdays were Angie's day off, I wouldn't see her when I returned to the café tomorrow, but I'd see if she was free in the evening and Jake would invite Artie out for a drink.

'I can't wait to see Pickle,' I said as we reached the outskirts of Whitsborough Bay. Kerry had sent stacks of photos of Pickle's exploits this week via WhatsApp, and it had been a relief to see him being so adored.

Angie would have loved to have Pickle but her cats, Felix and Pixie, weren't good around dogs. As soon as I'd mentioned to Kerry that I wasn't sure what to do with him while we were away, she'd volunteered her home. She idolised him, her children were always great with him when they visited the café, and he adored them all in return, so I knew he'd be in safe hands.

'He might not want to come home,' Jake joked.

'I think he'll be ready for some peace and quiet. I can imagine it gets pretty noisy at Kerry's.'

As soon as Kerry opened the door at Park Lodge, Pickle ran down the hall and leapt into Jake's arms, licking his face, then clambered across to me to do the same.

'Anyone would think you'd hated living here, Pickle,' Kerry said, laughing as she planted her hands on her hips and pretended to be disgusted with Pickle's reaction. 'Two minutes ago, you were sprawled across my lap getting your tummy tickled. I'll remember that in future, young pup.'

'How's he been?' I asked as she welcomed us inside.

'An absolute treasure. Please consider us your more-than-willing Pickle-minders any time you go away again. We've had so much fun with him, although the glum faces in the lounge might suggest otherwise.'

She wasn't kidding about the glum faces. Freya, dressed in her Rainbows uniform, was curled up on Nadia's knee in tears and the other three looked like they'd either been crying or

were about to start. I felt terrible for taking their plaything away.

‘Thank you all for looking after Pickle,’ I said.

‘We don’t want him to go,’ Maisie responded, looking up at Pickle in my arms with mournful big brown eyes.

‘We’ve talked about this,’ Kerry said, ‘and you all know that we were only borrowing Pickle for a week and he needs to go home now. I’ve said we’ll have Pickle again next time Hollie goes on holiday but if this is how the goodbye is going to be, I’ll change my mind about that.’

‘We want Pickle to stay again,’ Freya wailed.

‘Then you need to dry your eyes and put your trainers on ready for Rainbows.’

Freya pouted, but she slid off her grandma’s knee, sat on the floor and started pulling on her footwear.

I felt I needed to say something to lighten the mood. ‘If it’s okay with your mummy, Pickle might like to spend a couple of days with you over the summer holidays. I’m sure he’d love to have some playmates rather than coming to the café with me every day.’

Four pairs of eyes lit up and I even saw some smiles.

‘That would be amazing,’ Kerry said. ‘Thank you. Do you hear that, you four? But only if we don’t have any silliness when it comes to handing him back. Do you all promise?’

There were nods and utterances of promises.

‘And you’re welcome to visit him at the café during the summer holidays too,’ I added, securing smiles from them all.

Nadia and Freya gave Pickle a stroke and kiss goodbye then left for Rainbows.

‘I’ll be picking her up later,’ Kerry said, ‘and taking her and Jayden swimming.’

‘Sounds busy.’

‘Monday is one of our quieter nights. Your head would explode if you heard about the rest of the week. Listen to this...’

My head reeled as Kerry ran through how the rest of the week looked, although it sounded like she and her mum worked brilliantly as a team to get the right kids in the right place at the right time.

She asked about our honeymoon, so we gave her the edited highlights, keen to get back home.

‘Thanks again for having Pickle,’ I said when Kerry walked us to the door.

‘It’s been a pleasure – goodbye meltdown aside – and we’re definitely up for more. I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘I like Kerry’s kids,’ Jake said after we’d set off home, ‘but my head hurts just thinking about getting them to all their clubs.’

‘Mine too. I don’t know how she does it and how she still has so much energy. I’m not sure she could fit in dating Artie even if she wanted to.’

Jake whipped his head round. ‘Dating Artie? What have I missed?’

‘Eyes on the road!’ I said, laughing at him. ‘Nothing. She’s single, he’s single and she told me at the wedding that Avril wanted to try and fix them up.’

‘Is she interested in him?’

‘I don’t know. When I spoke to her, she said she wasn’t interested in a relationship with anyone, but I saw them chatting a lot during the evening do, so you never know.’

‘Interesting,’ Jake said. ‘On paper, I’d never have put them together because of the age gap, but I could imagine them being a good match.’

I did a swift calculation. ‘It’s only fifteen years and that doesn’t seem that big at their ages.’

‘True. He’s brilliant with kids any time clubs or schools come to the lifeboat station, and he always wanted his own. I could see that match working.’

‘Me too, but is Artie ready? It’ll be eleven years and that’s a long time to be single. Could you imagine going from eleven years in your own company to being a family of six – seven if you include Nadia?’

Jake shrugged. ‘I couldn’t imagine doing it, but if anyone could make it work, it’s Artie.’

‘I’m tempted to rub my hands together and say *let the meddling commence* but I don’t actually know the deal with Kerry and her ex. I know he abandoned her while she was pregnant with the twins, but I don’t know what went on before or after that. She could have some pretty serious baggage.’

‘Do you know anyone who hasn’t? Look at me! Look at you! Look at Artie!’

‘Fair point, but I think I’ll tread carefully with this one, just in case. I don’t want to lose one of my best members of staff because I tried to play Cupid.’

The more I thought about it, the more I loved the match. Avril had come up with some abysmal suggestions for me over the years, but she might have hit the jackpot here. But would Artie and Kerry be willing to give it a try?

KERRY



Over breakfast on Tuesday morning, I'd never known the kids to be so quiet. Nobody said anything – presumably taking on board my warning from yesterday that they couldn't look after Pickle again if we had all the drama afterwards – but there were longing glances to the corner of the kitchen where his food and water bowls had been, and frequent heavy sighs. I understood exactly how they were feeling because, without Pickle, my heart felt heavy too.

I wished I could cheer them up by saying we'd get a family dog, but it wasn't right to introduce one into our chaos. The poor thing would spend most of its evenings in the back of a car while we did the clubs and I wasn't going to tie Mum to the house during the day by having a dog. I knew what she was like – she'd feel guilty about leaving it alone and then I'd feel even guiltier that I had completely taken over her life.

'What's on your mind, love?' Mum asked when the kids had finished breakfast and left the kitchen.

'I was just thinking how strange it is without Pickle here. Thanks for letting him stay here.'

Mum gave me a stern look. 'You don't need to thank me. It's your home as much as it is mine and I have you to thank for us being here. If it hadn't been for you embracing the move, I'd have sold up and we'd still be in Huddersfield, I'd probably still be working my backside off, and I'd never have met Howard.'

As I drove the kids to school a little later, I reflected on what Mum had said. She'd attributed the move and all the positive things in her life to me, but it was actually Cameron who'd made them happen. If he hadn't walked out, moving to Whitsborough Bay would never have been on the cards. The move had brought – and continued to bring – so many positives for all of us which we'd never have had if Cameron and I had stayed together. Maybe he deserved gratitude instead of my contempt. Although he still hadn't been back in touch. No, he definitely deserved my contempt.

* * *

As soon as I arrived at The Starfish Café later that morning, Pickle came running over to greet me.

'Looks like I have competition,' Hollie said, laughing as I picked up Pickle for a hug.

'Switched allegiances again, have you?' I teased, rubbing his belly.

I put Pickle down and went into the kitchen to hang up my bag. I was fifteen minutes early and would normally have washed my hands, pulled on my apron and started work, but I decided to have one last check of my emails. Cameron's definition of *I'll be in touch later* and mine were not aligned and I hated that I'd turned into the type of person who obsessively checked their phone.

My stomach lurched as I saw his name in my inbox with three terrifying words in the subject line: *Can we meet?* 'Later' had finally arrived.

To: Kerry Marsden

From: Cameron Fullerton

Subject: Can we meet?

I'm sorry it's taken a while to respond. As I said, your email gave me lots to think about. I'm not the best at expressing myself – nothing's changed there – and I know how easily something in an email can be misinterpreted so can we meet to talk – just the two of us? I'm free any evening this week or Sunday.

The only reason he could possibly want to talk was because he'd decided he still wanted to see the kids, which meant letting him into their lives and back into mine. I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes for a moment, trying to conjure up positive images of him with Maisie and Noah when they were little and he was trying to make up for 'the selfish years' – proof that he could be a great dad – but all I could picture was his shocked face when the sonographer announced that we were expecting twins and that final disgusted expression when he picked up his suitcases and walked out.

Meeting him tonight was out of the question as it was Trippy Tuesday. The rest of the week was difficult, with 'Mum's Taxi Service' needed. Mum and Howard already did so much to help that I didn't want to rope them into even more, but could I wait until Sunday? I'd been on tenterhooks since the wedding, wondering if he'd reply, and I hated it.

I couldn't bring myself to reply immediately so I switched the phone to silent and buried it in the bottom of my bag then closed my eyes and took a couple of deep, calming breaths.

'Bad news?'

I looked up at Hollie, startled. I hadn't even heard the kitchen door opening. I wouldn't normally bring my personal issues into work, but this was Hollie. She was so approachable and easy to talk to and, right now, it didn't feel like something I could keep to myself. If nothing else, I wanted someone I trusted to reassure me that I wasn't the unreasonable one in this situation.

‘My ex-husband, Cameron, wrote to me. First time I’ve heard from him since he walked out.’

Hollie’s eyes widened. ‘Oh! What does he want?’

I sighed. ‘To see the kids. He’s staying in Whitby until the end of the summer and seems to think I’d let them go for a sleepover.’

‘After he hasn’t seen them for... how long is it?’

‘It’ll be seven years in October, so he hasn’t even met the twins. Obviously I said no to the sleepover and sent him a strongly worded email. He’s taken a week and a half to think about it and now he wants to meet me to talk. That’ll be fun.’

‘Aw, Kerry, I’m so sorry. Do you need some time off to meet him?’

‘No. Thanks, but I’m not letting him cause any further disruption. I’ll meet him one evening. For now, I just want to focus on work and push him right to the back of my mind.’

‘If you do need some time off, or if you want to talk about it, just shout. You’re not alone.’

‘Thanks, Hollie. That means a lot to me.’ With another sigh, I hung my bag up and pulled on my apron. ‘I really don’t want to meet him, but I suppose I’ll finally get some answers about why he left.’

‘He never told you?’

‘Nope.’ I hesitated about whether to tell her anything else, but the subject was out there now. Might as well tell her the rest. ‘He was the one who suggested a third baby, we went for the scan, discovered it was twins, he went white as a sheet, packed his cases when we got home, and that was that. Puff! Gone!’

‘Aw, Kerry. That’s awful.’

‘Nobody does something like that on a whim and especially not when they’re a meticulous planner like Cameron. It had to have been building up for a while and that scan was his breaking point. I’ve got theories, but I’d like to hear it from the horse’s mouth.’

‘I hope he has a damn good explanation.’

‘Me too. Only one way to find out, but he’s kept me waiting for years, so he can wait until tonight or tomorrow before I reply.’

HOLLIE



I really felt for Kerry. What was her ex thinking of, jumping from zero contact with the children to a sleepover? Who in their right mind would think that was a reasonable request?

She threw herself into her shift with her usual gusto, laughing with the customers and talking them into extra treats, but I could imagine her mind working overtime, worried about how Cameron's reappearance was going to affect the children.

I walked to her car with her when her shift finished and reiterated what I'd said earlier about taking time off or needing a good listener.

'Thank you. I appreciate that. I could really do without this, but I suppose the past catches up with you sometimes, whether you want it to or not. See you tomorrow.'

As I waved her off, her words stuck in my mind and I had a flash of Jake on our wedding day outside The Bay Pavilion, searching for his sister. Larissa definitely was part of a past we didn't want catching up with us. Let's hope that was the end of it.

* * *

I was itching to share my baby news with Angie. I'd arranged to visit her at seven but, as I left work, I knew I couldn't wait that long. I dropped Pickle at home and drove straight round to her house.

Martin's car was on the double drive beside Angie's. They'd looked very close at the wedding and had been the first couple to join Jake and me on the dance floor after our first dance, so I was desperately hoping that the romance of the day had finally made them get their acts together. If I went inside and discovered that it still hadn't happened, I might call them out on it. They'd forgiven each other long ago, they were the best of friends again, and the attraction was obvious.

I rang the doorbell and waited, but nobody answered. Felix, a predominantly black cat with a white chest and socks, ran across the front garden and weaved round my legs.

'Hello, gorgeous,' I said, bending down and scratching behind his ears. 'Where's your sister?'

There was no sign of Pixie outside, but I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and spotted her in the lounge, draped over the back of the chair, looking out the window. Also black and white, she was long-haired and possibly one of the most beautiful cats I'd ever seen.

I tried the doorbell again and was about to give up when I heard footsteps on the stairs.

'I'm coming!' Angie called.

The door opened and I took one look at her in her dressing gown with pink cheeks and dishevelled hair and started laughing.

'You weren't meant to be here till seven!' she cried.

'Should I come back then?'

'No! Come in. I was just getting changed.'

'With a little help from Martin?' I whispered as he came down the stairs, tucking his shirt into his trousers.

Angie's cheeks turned from pink to red.

'Hi, Hollie,' Martin said. 'How was the honeymoon?'

'Amazing, thanks. Sorry for dropping round earlier than planned.'

‘It’s fine,’ Angie said, stepping back to let me in. ‘Martin’ll pop the kettle on while I finish getting changed. I’ll be down in a minute.’

Felix had scooted inside and was lying on the chair below his sister. I gave them both some attention, feeling mortified that I’d interrupted Angie and Martin but thrilled that they were back together. Or at least I hoped they were.

By the time Martin had made a round of teas, Angie was back down in cropped trousers and a T-shirt with her hair brushed.

‘So tell us about your honeymoon,’ she said, sitting beside Martin on the sofa.

‘Not until you both give me your news.’

‘What news is that?’

‘You know *exactly* what news I mean. Are you two back together and, if not, why not?’

They looked at each other and smiled.

‘We are together,’ Martin said. ‘But we’re not rushing into any major commitment. Just taking things cautiously a day at a time.’

I shook my head. ‘Seriously, you two. You need your heads banging together. It’s been eighteen months! It’s obvious how deeply you still love each other. How much more time do you need, bearing in mind that sometimes time runs out way before it should?’

My voice cracked and I blinked back the unexpected tears.

‘Sorry, I don’t know where that came from. It’s just that you look so happy every time I see you together and we all know life’s too short not to take chances, but I appreciate I’m on the outside looking in and that perspective’s always simpler.’

‘I’d better head off,’ Martin said, rising to his feet. ‘I’ll leave you two to talk.’

‘No! Don’t go because of me and my big mouth.’

Angie stood up too. 'It's not you, honey. He's got a business dinner. I'll be back in a minute.'

I swore under my breath when they left the room and closed the lounge door.

'I'm really glad you interfered in our personal business,' I muttered, 'said nobody ever.' What had I been thinking? It was one thing asking questions and giving a gentle push when it was just Angie and me, but to do that in front of them both was unacceptable.

'I'm so sorry, Angie,' I said when she returned to the lounge.

'Don't be. You might actually have done me a favour.'

'You're just saying that to be nice.'

She sat down and picked up her drink. 'I'm not. I've had a similar conversation with Martin already. At your wedding, he told me he still loved me and I said I felt the same so, in my mind, that meant we were a couple again, he'd move back in, we'd renew our vows and live happily ever after.'

I braced myself for the 'but' that had to be coming.

'But that's not how Martin saw it. Nothing happened between us at the wedding and he didn't come back here afterwards, but we went out for dinner the following night and it was lovely. He apologised for telling me he loved me after several drinks but reassured me he meant it and asked how I felt about us trying again. I said yes and made a joke about him asking Felix and Pixie if it was okay with them to move back in and that's when his face fell. Out it all came – too much too soon and we needed time to see if it still worked as more than friends second time around.'

'Oh, Angie. I'm sorry.'

'What he said made sense but, in my mind, the time we'd already spent together rebuilding our friendship had proved we were still as compatible as before, so what more evidence did he want?'

'You told him this?'

‘Yes. To me, if we’d both admitted we still loved each other, we were there, but he was adamant that, as soon as the relationship went from friends to something more intimate, it would change and he was so determined to make it work that he didn’t want to jeopardise things by rushing it.’

Pixie jumped down from her position by the window and up onto my lap, purring as I stroked her back.

‘I can see both perspectives,’ I conceded, not wishing to point out the obvious that they’d already stepped into ‘intimate’ given what I’d clearly interrupted earlier. ‘But I stand by what I said. Life’s too short and you sometimes have to grab it with both hands. You think he’ll take what I said onboard?’

‘I think he will. You can hear something from one person but it’s often hearing it from a second that helps it sink in. Anyway, enough about me. Tell me about Italy.’

‘With pleasure but, before I do, I have some other news.’ I paused dramatically, my eyes sparkling with excitement. ‘I’m pregnant.’

Angie’s eyes widened and she clapped her hand to her chest. ‘Oh, wow! Oh, my gosh, Hollie! Congratulations!’

She rushed across the room and hugged me, sending Pixie leaping for freedom.

‘That’s amazing news. When’s it due?’

‘Mid-February.’

‘I’m so thrilled for you both. You’ll be amazing parents.’

‘Thank you. We’re only telling you and Artie for now, although you can tell Martin. Can’t have you keeping secrets from him now that you’re finally back together.’

‘He’ll be thrilled too. How are you feeling? Any symptoms?’

‘I’m tired, but I think I would have been anyway after such a busy couple of weeks, and some mild nausea, but that’s it so far.’

‘And how’s Jake doing?’

‘Ridiculously excited. We came across the most adorable baby clothes shop while we were in Italy and, if he’d had his way, we’d have spent a small fortune in there. I had to remind him that we were already at our baggage allowance on the plane and limit him to a sleepsuit and a bib.’

‘I’d have thought you’d have been the one wanting to buy everything and Jake would be Mr Practical.’

‘Me too, but it seems it’s the other way round. When we’re ready to do the big baby purchases, he’s going to be like a kid in a sweet shop.’

We spent the next hour or so talking about the honeymoon. I wanted to bring the conversation back round to the situation with Angie and Martin, but I wasn’t sure there was anything I could add to what I’d already said. I hoped Angie was right about my words having an impact on him because I couldn’t bear the thought of him dragging his heels and causing unnecessary friction between them. Jake and I had our happy ever after and I so desperately wanted Angie and Martin to have theirs. And if I could be really greedy and throw an extra wish into the well, I’d like Artie and Kerry to find theirs too, ideally with each other. Unfortunately, that wasn’t looking very likely just now with Kerry’s ex-husband back on the scene. Talk about bad timing! Although would an ex-husband turning up after a nearly seven-year absence ever be good timing?

KERRY



When I got home from the school run yesterday and told Mum about Cameron wanting to meet me, she agreed it was best to see him sooner rather than later to get some clarity on what he wanted instead of speculating and getting worked up about it. I'd arranged to see him at 8 p.m. tonight, giving me time to do my usual running around before handing over to Mum for the bath and bedtime routine.

What did you wear to meet your ex-husband for the first time in years which looked good, conveying *I'm doing just great without you* but didn't look so good that they might think you were trying to win them back? I settled on my favourite lived-in jeans, a plain white T-shirt, a cornflower-blue thin cardigan and minimal make-up.

'You look really pretty, Mummy,' Freya said when I said goodnight to her.

Pretty? Was it still too much? But there was no time to change. The kids thought I was meeting some of my work colleagues and I hated lying, but telling them I was meeting their dad at this point was way too complicated. I had no idea where the conversation with Cameron would go and I wasn't going to get any hopes up or instigate any distress until I knew where his head was.

My hands were sweating so much, I had to tightly grip onto the steering wheel as I drove up to a pub called The Kestrel's Wing, halfway between Whitsborough Bay and Whitby. Physically, I didn't think I'd changed much during our

time apart. Would Cameron have? Would he have made it to CEO, as per his plan?

I felt sick as I pulled into the car park in front of The Kestrel's Wing. Walking to the entrance, I couldn't help speculating which vehicle might be Cameron's. Would he go for a flashy sports car or a high-end luxury one? Neither type would be big enough for him, his fiancée and four children.

I took a deep breath, wishing my churning stomach would settle, and pulled open the door. And there he was, side on from me, sitting on a bar stool, staring at his phone. From a distance, he looked exactly how I remembered – effortlessly attractive with a mass of dark hair, thick eyebrows and broad shoulders.

He looked up and our eyes met. I didn't know what to do – give him a half-smile, a wave, or stare him out. He saved me the decision, breaking into a smile as he slipped down from his stool and crossed the bar.

'Kezza! It's good to see you,' he said, extending his hand towards me.

A handshake? For his ex-wife? We weren't meeting to discuss a business deal!

He dropped his hand to his side when I didn't take it, stepped back and studied me. 'You look great.'

Now that he was close, I could see that his sideburns were a little longer and there were crinkles round his eyes. The obvious response would be to offer a compliment in return, or to say it was good to see him too, but the first didn't feel appropriate and the second would be a lie.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asked.

I finally found my voice. 'Fresh orange and lemonade, please.'

'Coming right up.' He indicated an empty table for two. 'Do you want to grab that? More comfortable than the bar stools.'

‘We’ve got so much to catch up on,’ he said placing the drinks on the table a few minutes later and sitting down opposite me. ‘How’s Whitsborough Bay?’

‘It’s amazing,’ I said, my voice flat.

‘Do the kids like it?’

‘They love it.’

‘Erm... do you work?’

‘Yes, part-time in a café.’

‘Oh, and, erm... how’s your mum?’

I’d forgotten about his inability to make effective small talk – firing out questions but not really listening to the responses. Not that I’d come here for small talk. I was here to get answers and the sooner I had them, the sooner I could leave and be with people I wanted to be with.

‘Look, Cameron, let’s not pretend this is something it isn’t. We’re not two old friends catching up on each other’s news over a cosy drink. You walked out on me and your children, not even sticking around to see the last two born, and then you’ve written to me out of the blue telling me you’re in Whitby for the summer, you’re getting married and you want to start hosting sleepovers. We’ve got a long way to go before that can happen. You do understand that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I do. Sorry. I know I’ve jumped way ahead of myself and you’re right to refuse me access—’

‘It’s not about refusing access,’ I snapped, annoyed with him for suggesting I was being difficult. ‘It’s about you being a stranger to them. I hate to use that term, but it’s true. Let me give you a reality check. You’ve never even met Freya and Jayden. Noah was only twenty-one months when you walked out, so he has no memory of you. Maisie was a couple of months off her fifth birthday, so she does remember you, but only vaguely. *You* chose not to be in their lives – not me – so, right now, *I’m* choosing not to confuse and damage them by letting you waltz back in, stir things up, and bugger off again when the going gets tough, just like you did before.’

We stared each other out and eventually he looked away. My heart was pounding and I still felt sick, but I also felt much lighter for having got that off my chest. He deserved to hear it and I hoped he realised that my reality check had been pretty tame compared to what I could have unleashed on him.

He took a sip of his drink then turned back to me, his voice low but strong. ‘That’s *not* what happened, Kezza.’

‘Don’t call me that. Kezza’s long gone.’ I folded my arms. ‘Explain it to me then. What *did* happen?’

He looked down into his drink and his shoulders drooped. ‘The sonographer said twins and I panicked.’

That was it? Seven years and that was the best he could come up with?

‘So did I,’ I said, my voice sharp, ‘but you didn’t see me packing my suitcases and doing a runner.’

He caught my eye once more. ‘You *know* I never wanted a big family. You’re the one who wanted stacks of kids.’

‘And I’m the one who was willing to stop at two – yet another compromise from me to make our marriage work – but you were the one who suggested a third. You never said or did anything without putting in hours, days, even weeks of deliberation, so you can hardly blame me for assuming you’d put that level of thought into having a third child. And you absolutely cannot blame me for twins. That was completely out of my control.’

I hated how defensive I sounded but I wasn’t going to take the blame when I’d done nothing wrong.

‘I never said it was your fault,’ he snapped, his eyes flashing.

‘The implication was there.’

He sighed and his voice softened. ‘You’re right to be angry with me. I did a really shitty thing and I’m not proud of myself. It wasn’t just about having twins. It was everything.’

‘Such as?’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘Life’s complicated. You do realise that I can’t even begin to think of a future where you see my kids until I understand what the hell went on with you in the past? That’s why I’m here tonight. Explain yourself.’

He stared at me for a while before nodding. ‘Okay. But hear me out. No interruptions.’

‘Fine. The stage is yours.’ I had no idea where this harsh tone full of sarcasm had sprung from, but I couldn’t seem to shake it. Now that he was in front of me, I felt angrier with him than ever before and it was taking every ounce of control I had not to tip my drink over his head, hurl a few expletives at him, and storm out.

‘This might hurt,’ he said.

‘You walked out on me while I was pregnant with twins. I can’t imagine there’s anything you could say to me that could hurt more than that.’

He grimaced. ‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’

‘Whatever it is, I’d rather hear it.’

‘That New Year’s Day before Noah was born, I told you that you were right about me wanting to be in London. You were right about everything, especially when you said I was there, but not really there. You probably meant because I was always going out and because my mind was in London, but there was more to it than that.’

He paused to take a sip of his drink while nervous butterflies chased each other round my stomach. This was it! I was finally going to hear the truth.

‘Granny loved you, you know,’ he said, throwing me with what seemed like a change of subject. ‘She said you had a beautiful soul.’

It was such a lovely thing to say that I wondered why he hadn’t shared it with me before.

‘From the moment she met you, she was convinced you and I were meant to be together. She loved imagining our

wedding day and the children we'd have. When she collapsed the day the ambulance came, I made her some promises...'

He averted his eyes and I had a sickening feeling I now knew where this was heading.

'What sort of promises?' I murmured.

Silence.

'Cameron?' I raised my voice. 'What sort of promises?'

He ran his hands down his face and steeped them against his chin as he looked up at the ceiling. 'To be good to you. To be the best boyfriend, fiancé and husband I could be and to be a great father to our children, proving to my parents that it *was* possible to have a great career and a family.'

'But we weren't even seeing each other when Granny died.'

'I know, but I think she needed reassurance that I'd have someone when she was gone. And it wasn't like she'd picked someone random.'

My head was thumping now and I massaged my temples as I tried to unpick what he'd said.

'Am I understanding this right? You only asked me out because you'd made a promise to your dying grandmother?'

'No! Before you met her, she knew I really liked you – had done from the moment you told us off for destroying that noticeboard – and I liked you even more after you started joining us on our walks. I was always going to ask you out at some point.'

My hands dropped to my lap as a horrible thought struck me. 'So you only proposed to me because Granny wanted you to?'

'I thought it was what I wanted too. I really, really liked you—'

'But you didn't love me?' I interrupted.

'We were young. I didn't know what love was. Did you?'

‘Yes! And I was in love with you, which is why I married you, why I had a family with you, why I bent over backwards to give you what you wanted with your degree and your career because you make sacrifices like that for the people you love.’

‘I’m sorry. I told you it might hurt.’ He winced as though realising that *I told you so* wasn’t appropriate after the bombshell he’d just dropped.

It had been my worst fear right from the start when he was so adamant that he wanted to study his degree in Bath. I’d told myself that he’d have stayed closer to home if he’d really loved me, but had countered with me supporting him to study where he wanted if I really loved him. At every stage in our relationship, I’d convinced myself his feelings had to run deep because I’d given him several opportunities to walk away and he hadn’t taken any of them. He’d chosen me and our family every time. But now what I was hearing was that it was because of the vivid imagination and match-making of a dying woman and a sense of duty for the promises he’d made her.

I was already feeling crushed, so I might as well bring the full pack of cards toppling down on me.

‘I thought you might have stuck with me because your parents told you it wouldn’t last and you were determined to prove them wrong. Did that feature too?’

‘Yes.’

‘If you did something, you were always determined to do it well. When we talked that New Year, you said you were 100 per cent in and would be the best husband and dad ever. Were they just tasks to you? One hundred per cent effort but no real meaning?’

He hung his head.

‘Thought so. What’s that we’ve got?’ I counted off on my fingers. ‘Never loved me, married me out of duty, stayed with me to prove your parents wrong, and treated marriage and fatherhood as a task. Wow! I struck gold with you, didn’t I?’

I didn’t recognise my own voice – the sharpness to it, the bitterness in every word – but I couldn’t help myself. I was

disgusted with what he'd just revealed but even more disgusted that he'd played with my life like that. Why had I let him? Why hadn't I listened to Mum when she'd said he wasn't right for me? All that pain and heartache I could have avoided if I'd listened to my heart when the first doubts about his feelings for me crept in.

But if I'd listened to my heart and walked away, I wouldn't have those four children. They were my everything and even knowing what I knew now, I'd make the same decisions all over again to have them in my life, without a shadow of a doubt.

'I've already said I'm sorry,' Cameron said, bringing my attention back to his face, which suddenly didn't seem quite so handsome now that I knew what was really going on in his head. 'I never set out to hurt you.'

'But you did anyway. I still don't get why you left when you did. From what you've shared tonight, I presume you only suggested a third baby because you were trying to be the good husband you'd promised Granny you'd be, giving me what you knew I really wanted. So why was one okay but twins wasn't? I know it wasn't financial because I know *exactly* how much money Granny left you and I don't appreciate that you lied to me about it. Three hundred grand, my arse. Triple it and add a bit!'

His face paled. 'How do you know that? Did you go through my stuff?'

'No. I found it by accident. When you went out that New Year's Eve, I wanted to work out whether I could afford to bring up the kids on my own. I went to your office to scribble it down but your desk pad had a lump under it which was driving me mad, so I looked under it.'

'And you found my bank statement,' he said.

'Yep. Bit of a shocker, that.'

'But you've never tried to get any of that money off me.'

'Don't you get it? It was *never* about the money for me. It was about love. I didn't care that you'd inherited a million

pounds, although I cared about why you hadn't been honest with me about it. And if you hadn't been honest about your inheritance, what else had you lied about? So I gave you an out, figuring that if the money meant more to you than we did, you'd ride off into the sunset and life happily ever after with your hefty bank balance. But you chose us. Or at least I thought you had.'

The amount of his inheritance had been his fourth big lie. I now knew his fifth – telling me that he loved me. Our life together had consisted of five whopping great lies cemented together by hundreds of little ones.

'I don't know why I lied about the amount. I suppose I wanted to be sure you were with me because of me instead of the money.'

'That's rich for someone who was with me for all the wrong reasons.' I shook my head, sighing. 'You were right about it being complicated. And we've digressed with the money thing, so I still don't know why having twins prompted you to walk out.'

'It was a hard dose of reality. You were right to give me that ultimatum before Noah was born. It wasn't working. When you went to your mum's, I walked round and round the block, running through the pros and cons of staying or going and I kept hearing Granny's voice telling me we were made for each other and my parents' voices telling me what a failure I was. You know how they talk about head versus heart decisions? I let my head win. I looked at our relationship like a project I needed to manage and, even though I know that probably sounds cold, you can't say it didn't work. The eighteen months or so after Noah was born were really good, weren't they?'

A project? We'd been a project to him? My fists clenched and I fought hard not to shout. 'Do you seriously expect me to validate that? To say congratulations, Mr Project Manager, you ticked those boxes, achieved those deliverables, satisfied the customer? Screw you, Cameron.'

I grabbed my bag and stood up, shaking with anger.

‘I’m a person, not a project. They’re your kids, not entries on a sodding Gantt chart.’

‘Kezza!’ he hissed, his eyes darting round us. ‘People are looking at us.’

With a loud tut, I stormed out of the pub.

I hadn’t got far when he called my name. Ignoring him, I widened my strides but he quickly caught up with me and grabbed my arm.

‘What?’ I snapped, snatching it away.

‘We haven’t talked about me seeing the kids.’

‘I wonder why that might be.’

‘That’s not fair. You wanted me to be honest with you, so I was. You can’t punish me because you can’t handle the truth.’

‘Can’t handle the truth? This isn’t a Jack Nicholson film. This is real life. But, okay, let’s have some more honesty. Why do you want to see the kids?’

‘Because they’re my kids.’

‘And?’

‘And I want to see them. I’m entitled to see them.’

‘You walked out on them. After nearly seven years of silence, why are you entitled to see them? What have you ever done to give you that right?’

‘I send you money every month.’

I stared at him, mouth open. Wow! Just when I thought he couldn’t sink any lower in my estimation, he’d found a level below rock bottom.

‘You’re their father and, by law, you’re required to pay maintenance. I know you pay more than the required amount and I do appreciate that, but you did inherit a million and I’m pretty sure you earn a significant six-figure salary, so what you send for the kids is actually small change to you.’

‘You want me to send you more?’

‘For goodness’ sake, Cameron, did you ever know me at all? If it had ever been about the money, don’t you think I’d have fleeced you when we got divorced? Money doesn’t buy love. Money doesn’t make up for a seven-year absence. It’s no substitute for all the missed birthdays and Christmases, the school plays, sporting achievements, scuffed knees, bedtime stories, hugs, kisses and all the millions of special moments that are part of being a parent.’

My voice cracked as tears rushed to my eyes, imagining a life without all of that. I blinked them away and forced strength into my voice.

‘I’ll ask you this one more time. Why do you want to see the kids? Why now? What’s in it for you and, more importantly, what’s in it for them?’

‘Do I really need a reason to want to see my kids?’

‘After seven years, yes, you do. And a bloody good one.’

‘I...’ Cameron ran his hands through his hair. ‘I can’t think straight. You’ve thrown me by being so hostile.’

‘You shouldn’t need to think of an answer. You should already know. And if the answer isn’t there in your heart, I’d suggest you’re doing this for the wrong reasons. Although that’s clearly your MO.’

That so familiar deer-in-the-headlights look was back. As I’d pointed out to him, this wasn’t a project, it was life, and clearly he had no idea how to deal with it. He’d very likely set this summer up as another project – rent cottage, get in touch with ex, see kids, tick, tick, tick. What else was on his project plan? Show off amazing parenting skills to fiancée? Appease guilt?

‘I think it’s best if we call it a night,’ I said, my voice gentler than before. ‘I’m going to go home and try not to think about our sham marriage, and I suggest you go back to your holiday cottage and think long and hard about whether you really want to do this because, as I said in my email, you can’t just breeze in and out again. They *cannot* be your summer

project. If you want to be in their lives, you need to fully commit to being in their lives. Think about what that means.'

I gave him time to respond but he didn't take it. He just stood there, looking down at his feet.

I fished my car keys out of my bag. 'You've got my email. They don't know I'm meeting you today so if you do decide you don't want to do this, there's no harm done, although I would appreciate you doing the courtesy of letting me know that's your decision. Can you do that?'

He nodded slowly. 'I really am sorry.'

'Then prove it. Or don't. But don't create more things to be sorry about.'

I'd opened my car door when he called my name. Sighing, I closed it again. 'What now?'

'There's something else. A reason why I left.'

He looked as drained as I felt, but I wasn't going to go easy on him. I folded my arms and started at him, waiting for his grand revelation.

'It's going to make you hate me more than you already do.'

He paused, as though wanting me to say *I don't hate you*, but I couldn't in all honesty say those words at that moment. Hate was a strong word, so maybe I didn't feel that towards him, but I was angry with him, I resented him and I hated the situation. So I continued to stare, my eyebrows raised.

'Okay, so, erm... do you remember when we drove to the scan, you thought I was worried that my job offer hadn't come through? It *had* come through. It was a brilliant offer for my dream job, but it was in London and, after six months, it'd require significant travel. Worldwide travel.'

I sank back against the car, my mind whirring. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Because I'd made a commitment to staying in Manchester. I was in 100 per cent, remember? I meant it. But this was London with travel and we're not just talking the

occasional day in Europe – we were talking months at a time in the Middle East and the Americas. The morning of the scan, I'd picked up an email from my manager pushing me for a decision within twenty-four hours.'

He took a step closer to me, his palms face up as though imploring me to forgive him for what he was about to say. 'It was everything I'd been working towards, everything I'd ever dreamed of, and it was unheard of for someone fresh off the graduate programme to be offered an opportunity like that. I'd have been making history.'

'So you decided it was family or job and you took the job.'

'I didn't know what I was going to do but, when I saw that scan and heard it was twins, I kept thinking about the two paths ahead of me. I could stay with a woman I cared for deeply but didn't love, acting like we were a happy family, while dying inside knowing I was failing at being a dad, or I could...'

He tailed off. There really wasn't any need for him to finish that sentence. I got the full meaning. Or I could have everything I dreamed of, start over, and forget about the biggest mistake of my life, marrying a woman I didn't love because my granny thought we were good together.

'You should have told me about the offer,' I said through gritted teeth.

'Why? You wouldn't have wanted me to take it.'

'No, I wouldn't have *wanted* you to take it, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't have supported you. You took that choice away from me and did what *you* wanted as usual.'

'There's no way you'd have supported me!' he cried, his eyebrows knitted.

'You're sure about that? I knew how much your career meant to you, Cameron, and I wasn't so clueless that I wouldn't have appreciated that this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. And, on top of that, you're forgetting one big thing. I was in love with you and I'd do pretty much anything to make you happy, especially after things had been so good

between us since Noah was born. Or at least I thought they were until you put me right on that just now.'

He ran his hands through his hair, shaking his head. 'You wouldn't have supported me. You just... it would have been too much to ask.'

'We'll never know now because you never gave me that chance.'

I yanked open the car door and paused as something else he'd said struck me. 'What's this about failing at being a dad?'

'I was rubbish at the baby thing. It was all right for you. You were a natural, but I didn't find being a parent easy. When they were babies, you could change a nappy just like that.' He snapped his fingers. 'It would take you no time to change their clothes either and you could carry them both at the same time. I was terrified of dropping them or hurting them. You could make them laugh, but all I seemed to do was make them cry. They always wanted you, never me.'

'Because I was their mum. I was with them 24/7, so of course they were going to come to me. Most babies and young children want their mum when they're hurt or sick. It's just the way it is. When I think of you with Maisie and Noah, it's never about you being a rubbish dad. It's about you giving them cuddles, pushing them on the swing, carrying Maisie on your shoulders, reading them bedtime stories. You can't have forgotten all of that.'

He lowered his eyes and my stomach churned as something else he'd said hit me. *Acting like a happy family.*

'Oh, my God! You were just doing what you thought a good dad was supposed to do but your heart wasn't in it. After New Year, nothing had really changed. You were there but not really there. In your mind, you were failing at being a dad, but it was nothing to do with fumbling over nappies or making them cry. It was about you not giving it your all. You never do anything you're not good at. You always have to excel.'

He kicked at a pebble on the ground and I knew I'd nailed it.

‘Bloody hell, Cameron! More than ever, I don’t understand why you’ve made contact. Nothing you’ve said tonight backs up you wanting to see the kids. Answer me honestly, do you still really want to see them?’

He finally looked up. ‘Yes!’

‘Then you’re going to have to produce a miracle to convince me. But not tonight. I’m going home.’

Before he could say anything else, I got in the car, slammed the door, turned the key in the ignition and pulled out of the space, refusing to look at him as I drove past.

As I pulled out of the car park, I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw him getting into one of the luxury cars I’d spotted earlier. I wondered if his fiancée knew about his inheritance. I shook my head. It was nothing to do with me and I didn’t want to start making any judgements about a woman I’d never met and knew nothing about. Right now, I didn’t want to think about either of them. I felt drained and the only thing I wanted was a hug from my mum, to plant a kiss on the forehead of each of my sleeping children, and to crawl under the duvet and cry.

HOLLIE



My first midwife appointment was late on Thursday morning. I took Pickle for a walk first thing then had some time in my workshop before walking to the doctor's surgery. She confirmed a due date of 21 February and, before I left, I made another appointment for a fortnight later to gather more information and have some routine tests.

My plan had been to return to Sandy Croft after the appointment to spend the afternoon in my workshop, but I found myself drawn into town. Although my midwife had been lovely and had explained things well, I'd quickly realised how clueless I was about what lay ahead and felt the need to buy a book.

I made my way to Castle Street and to Bay Books on the other side of the street to Charlee's Chocolates. It was double-fronted but not particularly wide, although there were four storeys, so it was hopefully well-stocked.

As a child, I was a big reader but, as an adult, it wasn't often that I had a chance to sit down with a book. There was still something magical about walking into a bookshop and breathing in that distinctive smell. Stepping inside Bay Books this morning, it seemed stronger than ever. Katie had mentioned that her sense of smell became stronger when she was pregnant and it could be both a blessing and a curse, depending on what the smell was.

'Good afternoon,' said the man behind the counter. 'Anything special you're looking for, or are you just

browsing?’

‘I’m looking for a book on pregnancy.’

‘Up the stairs to level five, to the right of the window.’

I thanked him and took the stairs, pausing to look at the various levels – each one devoted to different genres of fiction or to non-fiction subjects – and feeling a little ashamed that I’d never actually been in Bay Books before. It was a beautiful shop with quotes from books and stunning illustrations up the staircase.

Locating the pregnancy section, I ran my fingers along the various books. I didn’t want a tome or anything complicated, as there was no way I’d read it all. I finally selected a hardback full of pictures, diagrams and bullet points. I held it against my chest and closed my eyes for a moment. This was it. This was the beginning of a journey into parenthood, to building a family. A ripple of delight ran through me.

I’d just handed over the book at the till downstairs when the door opened and I glanced up to see who’d entered.

‘Hollie! What a surprise!’

‘Katie! Hi!’

She joined me at the counter. Her eyes flicked to the book being scanned and her mouth gaped open as she looked back at me. There was no point in trying to deny it.

‘We weren’t going to say anything until after the scan.’

She squealed as she launched herself at me for a hug. ‘How long?’

‘Just over seven weeks,’ I said, releasing her and pressing my card to pay. ‘Due 21 February.’

‘That’s amazing news! Do you need to rush off?’

‘No.’

‘I need a couple more books for Lucas so let me grab those, then we can have a wander.’

I followed her into the children's section at the back of the ground floor, smiling at the thought of picking out books to read to my son or daughter. There were so many and the mixture of bright and pastel colours, bold drawings, and delicate illustrations looked so enticing.

We were soon wandering towards Castle Park with our purchases.

'Our kids are going to be in the same year at school,' Katie said. 'And Lucas will only be the year above. They're all going to be the best of friends.'

'Of course they will! Just like us.'

'I did have an inkling at your wedding,' she said. 'You barely touched the prosecco when we were getting ready.'

'It was so difficult. I hadn't even taken the test at that point, but I suspected, and I didn't want to let on to anyone.'

'I won't say a word but, I tell you what, it's such a relief after that first scan when you can stop being secretive.'

We'd reached Castle Park and sat together on one of the benches, gazing out at the sea, twinkling in the summer sunshine.

'When I was expecting Lucas, I didn't know anyone else who was pregnant. It's going to be lovely going through part of my second pregnancy with you.'

'Exactly what I was thinking.'

I imagined us shopping together for baby clothes, cooing over the cute designs. When we were in our teens, we got lost in a fantasy world where we had kids at the same time and holidayed together. Now it was coming true. Every aspect of my life had finally come together and, right at that moment, I couldn't be happier.

KERRY



Maisie and Noah went to Whitsborough Bay Junior Athletics for two hours on a Friday evening and I usually did something with the twins during that time. In the winter months, that often involved playing board games, constructing Lego or watching a film with them at home. When the nights were light, we usually went for a walk, although I tried to make it a little more interesting for them by incorporating an activity or something specific to see.

Tonight, we were heading down to the beach at Starfish Point to see the seal pups. There were only two cars when I parked outside The Starfish Café, meaning we'd have the beach pretty much to ourselves.

The two types of seal in the colony – common seals and grey seals – had pups at different times of the year, with June and July being the season for the common seals.

‘How many pups are there now, Mummy?’ Freya asked as the three of us descended the steps down to the beach.

‘I don't know, sweetie. It's not easy to count because they spend a lot of time in the water and some of the seals stay on Starfish Arc rather than coming up to the beach. Maybe thirty or so?’

‘Are there any twins like us?’ Jayden asked.

‘Probably not. It's not impossible, but it's rare for a seal to have twins.’

‘Remember to stay nice and quiet,’ I said when we reached the pebbles at the bottom of the steps. ‘If you spot one, let us know, but not by shouting.’

‘And we can’t touch them,’ Jayden said.

‘That’s right. No touching and no running up to them. The mummy seals might look cute but they’ll bite, especially if they think their pup’s in danger.’

The pebbles turned to shingle then sand as we approached the shore. There were several seals spread out across the beach and on the rocks and I could see heads bobbing in the water too. It took my breath away and I counted my blessings again that we’d moved to this beautiful place with sights like this on our doorstep.

‘I see one,’ Freya whispered, bouncing up and down beside me.

I looked to where she was pointing and spotted a small grey pup snuggled up against its mum.

We slowly moved closer and Jayden borrowed my phone to take a photo to show the others. I hadn’t known anything about seals before moving here. I hadn’t even realised there were so many different types but I’d picked up the basics from an information board at the top of the steps and Hollie had given me snippets too. She claimed she wasn’t an expert, but she definitely knew her stuff and had been involved in several seal rescues over the years.

‘Let’s go further round and see if we can find any more,’ I suggested.

Freya took my hand and skipped along beside me while Jayden wandered ahead taking photos. After a while, he stopped, his head cocked to one side, then he ran back to us.

‘The mummy seal behind that rock has twins.’

We followed him and, sure enough, nestled against a large pale grey seal with several darker spots all over her back were two pups.

‘They might be twins,’ I said, keeping my voice low so as not to disturb them, ‘but sometimes a mum can abandon her pup and another mum ends up looking after it.’

‘What does abandon mean?’ Freya asked.

‘It means they stop looking after the pup and leave them behind.’

‘Why?’

‘Lots of reasons. The pup might be poorly, the mum might have been hurt or poorly, or the pup gets lost and they can’t find it.’ There were probably others but that was the extent of my knowledge.

‘Were we poorly when we were born?’ Jayden asked.

‘No, why?’

‘Because Daddy abandoned us.’

Tears rushed to my eyes and I gathered them both into a hug.

‘It wasn’t because of you two.’ I thought about Cameron’s revelations on Wednesday night. I finally knew why he’d left, but was there any part of that I could share with them? *Daddy left because he didn’t love me... because he was only pretending to be a good dad... because he chose a job offer over us.* How could I even begin to explain any of that to a couple of six-year-olds?

‘There were lots of complicated reasons – adult stuff.’

‘Will we ever see Daddy?’ Freya asked when I released them.

‘Would you want to?’

Freya nodded and looked at her brother, but Jayden shrugged. This was one of those parenting moments where I was out of my depth, with no idea what to say for the best, so I said nothing. To them, this was a hypothetical scenario about someone who was less real to them than Father Christmas. They had no idea that it was currently under consideration.

Cameron had emailed me late on Wednesday evening. It was short and curt, telling me he still wanted to see the children, he was their dad so surely that was justification enough, and could we meet again tonight? I'd let him stew overnight before responding and told him tonight wasn't an option but I could do Sunday.

Playing the *I'm their dad so I have rights* card hadn't surprised me, but him still wanting to see the children had. After everything that had been said on Wednesday, I'd expected he'd take himself out of the game, just like last time.

'Who'd like a hot chocolate?' I asked Freya and Jayden. 'Hollie gave me the spare keys and said we can go into the café and make one if we want.'

They both loved hot chocolate and were soon racing each other back to the steps. A little later, we sat on the terrace at The Starfish Café with our marshmallow-topped drinks. It didn't matter that it was a warm summer night rather than winter. As they counted their mini marshmallows to make sure they both had the same number, the conversation about abandoned twins was forgotten. For now.

HOLLIE



Jake and I were stretched out on the sofa watching a film on Saturday evening when Pickle pricked his ears up and toddled out of the room. Moments later, there was a rap on the side door.

‘I’ll get it,’ I said, rolling off the sofa.

I was surprised to see Artie on the doorstep. Jake had seen him on Tuesday night while I was at Angie’s and we’d both be seeing him at training on Monday.

‘Sorry to disturb your evening,’ he said, a frown creasing his brow. ‘Is Jake in?’

‘Yeah, come in.’

‘Hi, Artie,’ Jake said, joining us in the kitchen as I put the kettle on. ‘Everything all right?’

‘I was going to wait until Monday’s training, but I’d rather tell you face to face without everyone else around. We’ve received a complaint.’

‘About me?’

‘Yeah. About a rescue before your wedding.’

Jake ran his hands down his cheeks, shaking his head. ‘Oh, my God! That woman! Is she ever going to stop? I presume we’re talking about my sister here.’

Artie nodded and I clenched and unclenched my fists, incensed for Jake that Larissa was still intent on causing havoc for him.

‘She claimed that you were verbally abusive and physically aggressive, blah, blah, blah. Obviously we all saw what happened and I’ve given a full report back that she was the aggressive one, you barely spoke to her, and you were nowhere near her at any point so there was no physical contact. I’ll need Simba, Jaffa and Belle to give me written statements on Monday and I’ll need one from you too.’

‘And then what?’ Jake asked, his voice weary.

‘And then it’ll all go away. In my report, I’ve been clear that she’s your estranged sister with a vendetta against you which previously led to a physical assault. They’re going to know this complaint is fabricated, but you do understand we have to follow the formal channels by taking the statements?’

‘Yeah, I get it. I’m not going to be suspended or anything like that?’

‘Over my dead body.’

Jake nodded. ‘Thanks for letting me know and I appreciate you doing it outside the station.’

‘I wish I hadn’t had to do it at all.’

‘Me too, but that’s my sister for you. I don’t suppose her address was on the complaint?’

‘No. We don’t get any personal details. Were you wanting to pay her a visit?’

‘Yeah, right! She’d complain to the police if I did. I just wondered if she’d moved back to Whitsborough Bay.’

‘Jake thought he saw her outside The Bay Pavilion on our wedding day,’ I explained. ‘With that and the rescue...’

Artie grimaced. ‘I hope for your sake that she hasn’t. Right, I’d better head off and leave you to your evening.’

Jake said goodbye and I walked Artie to the door.

‘You really think that’ll be the end of it?’ I asked in hushed tones.

‘There’s nothing she can do. She could dispute it and say we’ve closed rank but the truth’s on our side and I can’t

imagine her husband and son lying for her about something so serious. They were both really grateful for our help. It'll blow over.'

'I hope so.'

'Congratulations, by the way,' Artie said, his tone softening. 'I'm so chuffed for you both. We'll have to complete some paperwork, organise a risk assessment, and there are a couple of people up the chain I need to tell, but I obviously won't tell anyone else.'

He hugged me goodbye and I waved him off.

Back in the kitchen, Jake was sitting on one of the bar stools by the island, his head in his hands.

'I'm so sorry,' I said, hugging him from behind and resting my head on his back.

'Wasn't it enough that she yelled at me and humiliated me in front of my friends? Why have another pop at me with a pack of lies?'

'I know it's easier said than done, but please try not to worry about it. Artie says the complaint won't go anywhere and it's likely you'll never see her again.'

He twisted round on his stool and I sat down beside him.

'Unless that really was her outside The Bay Pavilion and they've moved back here,' he said, 'in which case there's every chance of me bumping into her again.'

'I'm really hoping that was your imagination.'

'Me too.' He sighed. 'I still can't believe I have a nephew I knew nothing about and I bet she's never told him he has an uncle. Reuben and our baby will be cousins, but they'll never get to meet. How sad is that?'

I couldn't think of any more comforting words, so I slipped off the stool and hugged him once more. Jake was made of strong stuff. Hopefully, as we prepared for the arrival of our first child, he'd focus on our little family unit and not feel so sad about the nephew whose life he'd never be part of.

KERRY



Sunday was forecast to be the hottest day of the year so far, so there was only one place the kids wanted to be – the beach. I preferred North Bay – the beach closest to Park Lodge – as it was quieter and prettier with the colourful beach huts, a few places to eat and a couple of gift shops rather than the stack of arcades and pubs found in South Bay. Most of the time, the kids were happy to do North Bay as it was the sand, sea and an ice cream that interested them, but they were all dead set on South Bay today. Maisie had mentioned that it was a long time since they'd been on the trampolines and that had got them all begging for a go.

After breakfast, the boys dressed in swimming shorts and T-shirts and the girls put swimming costumes on under their clothes. Maisie wore denim shorts with a sky-blue vest-top but Freya opted for a bright yellow summer dress, ignoring my suggestion that trampolining would be easier and more comfortable in shorts. They lined up in the kitchen while Mum sprayed them with coloured sunscreen and I breathed in that delicious aroma of summer. Maisie rubbed hers in and helped Noah with a few missed patches while Mum and I took a twin each.

‘Okay, let’s do a backpack check,’ I said. ‘Hat, sunglasses, picnic, drink? And, boys only, a spare pair of shorts? Looks like we’re good to go, then. Say goodbye to Nanna.’

Mum was going to York for the day with Howard, so the kids gave her hugs and kisses before bundling out the front door, chatting excitedly about the day ahead.

We'd decided to be proper tourists and walk down to North Bay to catch the open top bus round The Headland to South Bay. We were the first in the queue, so they raced up the stairs to bag the front seats while I paid. The wind whipped our hair as we travelled round the most exposed point of The Headland below Whitsborough Bay Castle, making us all laugh. I was determined to hang onto that happy feeling today and not let thoughts of Cameron bring me down.

Mum's absence meant I had carrying and herding responsibilities all to myself. I was used to it but, as I stepped off the bus with a backpack and a beach bag laden with towels, buckets and spades, I wondered what it might be like to have a partner with whom to share the load. The kids did their bit with their own backpacks, but I'd need to hold those too while they were on the trampolines and I always returned from a day out with aching shoulders and sore hands.

'Can we go on the trampolines first?' Maisie asked when we alighted from the bus at South Bay.

We were near the lifeboat station and could see the trampolines just past that.

'Yeah, that's fine. Why don't you all run ahead and join the queue?'

They ran off and I looked across at the lifeboat station. The shutter was open, giving a glimpse of the large lifeboat behind an enormous tractor. An A-board propped up outside advertised an open day today. Maisie and Noah had been on tours with Junior Sea Cadets and Cub Scouts respectively, but the rest of us hadn't.

'Are you thinking of having a tour?'

I turned at the sound of Hollie's voice and smiled at her. 'I've never looked round it, so I'd love to, but it depends whether my four are up for it. They'd enjoy it, but would they enjoy it more than the beach?'

'Ooh! Tough competition.'

Maisie shouted for me to hurry up and I saw they were at the front of the queue, so I said goodbye and hurried along to

pay for the trampolines.

As I leaned against the fence a few minutes later, surrounded by bags, watching them all bouncing steadily higher in their harnesses, a text arrived.

FROM CAMERON

I'm bringing Tess with me tonight. See you later

I didn't actually mind her coming, but it would have been nice if he'd asked me if that was okay rather than just telling me. Typical Cameron.

Another text came through which made me smile.

FROM CAMERON

Assuming that's OK with you. Is it?

That wasn't typical Cameron, so I wondered whether Tess had seen his text and pulled him up on it. If she had, she and I might well get on. Unwilling to engage in further discussion and spoil my day with the kids, I sent a thumbs up back, flicked my phone to silent, and put it away.

'Can we get a giant unicorn?' Freya asked, sitting on the pavement and pulling on her trainers after their time was up on the trampolines.

Buckets, spades and inflatables dangled from the roof of a nearby ice cream kiosk.

'What do you think my answer's going to be?' I asked her.

'No, because they're not safe at the seaside,' she muttered.

'That's right.' It wasn't something I'd considered before moving to the coast, but I'd seen an article in the *Bay News* about the combination of wind and tides putting children at risk of being swept out to sea in untethered dinghies or on giant inflatables.

'Can we paddle?' Jayden asked.

‘Of course you can. The sea’s calm and there’s a lifeguard on duty. Just stay between the flags.’

We found a spot and dropped the bags down. I hadn’t even opened out the first towel before a pile of clothes were dumped beside me and they were off, holding hands in a line and running towards the gently lapping waves. Freya squealed and ran straight out again. Noah, my water baby, dived in without hesitation and began swimming while Maisie and Jayden jumped the small waves, giggling. I sat down on a towel and watched. It wasn’t exactly peace and quiet – the beach was packed and the air filled with the cries of children blended with the squawk of gulls – but it was a rare moment without questions being fired at me, so I’d take it.

I became aware of activity to my left and looked towards the lifeboat station. The smaller orange inshore lifeboat was being pushed down the ramp by a tractor. It wasn’t long before it was in the sea and three crew members were on board, heading out past the harbour. I wondered if one of them was Artie.

‘Did you see the lifeboat, Mummy?’ Jayden asked, running back to me when it disappeared from view.

‘I did.’

He plonked himself down on the edge of my towel. ‘Do you think everyone’s all right?’

‘I don’t know, sweetie, because I don’t know what’s happened, but I’m sure the lifeboat crew will do their best.’

‘How many people do you think Artie’s rescued?’

The wedding had been a fortnight ago, so I was surprised that Jayden could even remember Artie’s name.

‘Hundreds,’ I said, my mind blown at the thought of it. ‘Maybe even more than a thousand, as I think he’s been in the RNLI for a long time.’

‘I liked Artie. Will we see him again?’

I ruffled his hair. ‘I liked him too.’ I glanced towards the lifeboat station. ‘We might be able to see him today. There’s

an open day if you wanted to look around later.’

By early afternoon, Maisie and Jayden had built and destroyed a sandcastle, I’d jumped the waves with Freya, and Noah resembled a prune from so much swimming. The tide was coming in and I was feeling hemmed in as the beach became smaller.

I packed up our belongings and led the kids over to the forecourt outside the lifeboat station. There were several stalls laid out under gazebos – a tombola, raffle and children’s lucky dip as well as an information stand – and all had customers. The RNLI shop built into the right-hand side of the station looked busy too.

Hollie was on the lucky dip, so the kids made a beeline for her.

‘You decided to have a look around then?’ she asked when I joined them and handed over money for them all to have a go. ‘You can leave your bags with me, if you want.’

I didn’t need to be asked twice. My bag was extra heavy now that it was full of damp towels.

‘We’ll have the tour first and then you can have a go on the tombola,’ I told the kids, ushering them towards the station.

Finley and Tori were by the door.

‘Have you all come for a tour?’ Tori asked, smiling at them.

Freya nodded. ‘Are you showing us around?’

‘No, Finley and I are just the welcoming party for the next hour. Chief and Spaniel are the tour guides and...’ She glanced back into the building, ‘...you’ve timed it perfectly because here’s Chief now.’

My stomach did an unexpected somersault as Artie appeared with a couple of families who thanked him before leaving.

‘We have another family for you,’ Finley said.

Artie’s smile widened and he crouched down.

‘Hello there, I remember you four from Hollie and Jake’s wedding. Welcome to Whitsborough Bay Lifeboat Station.’ He straightened up and looked at me. ‘Lovely to see you again, Kerry.’

I smiled back at him, but that stomach flip had thrown me and rendered me speechless. Thankfully Freya spoke up.

‘Is your beard real, Artie?’

Artie laughed that deep warm laugh I remembered from the wedding.

‘It is. You can give it a tug to check if you want.’

He bent down and Freya obliged, giggling. ‘It’s very soft.’

‘Thank you. I put conditioner on it every day. Nobody wants a wiry beard. Urgh!’

I had the strangest compulsion to stroke his beard too and thrust my hands in my shorts pockets to stop me reaching out because that would be weird.

‘Let’s start the tour,’ he said, leading us inside.

The tour was fascinating, seeing the large and small lifeboats up close, the enormous tractors that were used to launch them, and the protective uniform and equipment in the locker rooms.

The kids were in their element, hanging onto every word as Artie reeled off facts and anecdotes. He had them trying on the jackets, which completely swamped them. I hung back taking photos and marvelling at how interesting he was and how good he was with my children.

‘Do you think your mum should try the kit on too?’ Artie asked them.

‘No, I’m fine.’

My protests were ignored and I was handed a pair of GORE-TEX weather-proof salopettes, which Artie told me were worn by the crew on the large all-weather lifeboat. I managed to pull those on without assistance but lost my balance as I tried to step into the first steel toe-capped

wellington boot. Artie took my arms to steady me. He held my gaze for a moment and I swallowed hard. I hadn't been this close to a man in a very long time. A flush swept through me from head to toe and I had to fan my face with my hand, making a comment about how warm the uniform was, which thankfully led to questions from the kids about why so many layers were needed, taking the attention away from me.

When our tour was over and we were heading out of the building, the kids pointed to the giant mascot who was posing for photos outside.

'He looks like you!' Freya cried, looking from the mascot to Artie.

'That's Stormy Stan,' he said, 'and we think he might be my twin brother.'

'Can we have our photo taken with him?' Jayden asked.

'Yes, but there's a queue, so no pushing in,' I said. 'And what do we do first?'

They all thanked Artie and Freya even hugged his legs before running off to join her siblings.

'You've made a friend for life there,' I told him.

'She's a lovely girl. They all are.'

'I don't think I've ever seen them so attentive for so long. You have a gift with kids.'

'Thank you. We get lots of school groups and clubs here, so I'm used to trying to keep a big group's attention.'

I glanced across at Stormy Stan and saw that there were only a couple of children ahead of mine in the queue.

'I'd best get ready to take a photo,' I said. 'Thanks again for the tour. It was fascinating.'

'My pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your day and I'll hopefully see you soon.'

'I'd like that.'

As I joined the kids, I watched Artie greet another family and take them indoors. He really was a lovely man and I genuinely would like to see him again as a friend, but how did you go from a casual 'see you soon' to actually making an arrangement without it sounding like a date? Not that it mattered at the moment anyway. My life was too messy with Cameron's reappearance and I needed to sort that out before I could even think about getting myself a social life.

KERRY



I arrived back at Park Lodge late that afternoon on a high after such a lovely day out with the kids. Mum returned from York just as we were finishing our tea and Howard joined us for half an hour to hear all about the beach and the tour of the lifeboat station. I loved how enthusiastic the kids were about the station tour and how many of the facts and anecdotes they'd retained. If I did see Artie again, I'd have to tell him how much they'd taken in.

As the evening drew closer, I felt my mood steadily dipping.

'You've gone quiet,' Mum observed when the kids had gone upstairs to get baths and showers and prepare their school bags for the morning. 'Anxious about seeing Cameron again?'

'Yes, and he's bringing Tess, which could go either way. I'm hoping she'll be the voice of reason rather than an aggressor.'

'I'm sure she'll understand that being off with you isn't going to help Cameron. It's him you need to worry about.'

Mum had been seething when I'd told her what he'd said on Wednesday. She'd called him pretty much every offensive name under the sun and I had to agree that he deserved most of them while reminding her that, like it or not, he was the children's father and, if he got his way and met them, we both needed to remain neutral and let them draw their own conclusions.

Driving towards The Kestrel's Wing once more, I found myself wondering what Tess would look like. I knew nothing about her or how they'd met. Would she be a high-powered business type like him? Had he met her through work? I'd soon find out.

Pulling into the car park, I recognised Cameron's car, and my stomach tensed. I really didn't want to do this.

Cameron was at the same table we'd occupied last time and he was on his own. He stood up as I approached but he didn't smile.

'Tess is at the bar. What do you want to drink?'

It was on the tip of my tongue to snap a sarcastic *Hi, Kerry, how are you?* at him, but we weren't exactly in the land of pleasantries with each other, so it was fair enough.

'Lime and soda, please.'

There was only one woman at the bar and I was struck by her hair colour – auburn so dark it was bordering on red. Whether it was natural or out of a bottle, it was gorgeous, hanging in shiny loose waves.

She turned round when Cameron joined her and gave me the warmest dimpled smile as she abandoned him and rushed across to me, arms outstretched.

'Oh, my gosh, I've been dying to meet you.' She kissed me on each cheek. 'I've heard so much about you.'

'All good, I hope,' I joked, not quite sure how to respond to that.

'All amazing.' She studied my face for a moment. 'Aw, I can see all your beautiful children in you. Those school photos you've sent Cam over the years are so adorable. It's been so good of you to keep him updated. It meant the world to him. You're a very special woman.'

I felt quite tearful at the unexpected compliment and was relieved that Cameron returning with the drinks took the focus away from me so I could take a moment to gather myself together.

Tess took her drink from Cameron. ‘I was just telling Kerry that you appreciated her keeping in contact over the years, especially sending the photos, and I’m guessing from her expression that you didn’t tell her that on Wednesday.’

‘I didn’t get the chance,’ he said, handing me my drink. ‘Things got a bit heated.’

‘So you said, which is why I’m here today.’ Tess smiled at me. ‘I hope you don’t mind me tagging along, Kerry. Cam struggles to dip out of business mode when it comes to emotional stuff – I’m sure you know that already – so I thought it might be easier if I came along to translate for him.’

‘That’s fine. I don’t mind you being here.’

‘Good. Glad that’s settled,’ she said. ‘So the first thing I need to translate is his original letter to you. Cam and I have been talking for months about the best way to approach him seeing the children again. We kept going round in circles on how and when but, when the opportunity to stay in Whitby for the summer presented itself, it seemed like that was the universe telling us the time was now.’

She laughed lightly as she glanced at Cameron. ‘He thinks that’s a load of old crap, but I believe that, if you put something out there, the universe provides the answer. Anyway, once we were settled into the cottage, we talked about what seeing the children would look like and I’ll admit that we did imagine them staying, but that was meant to be an end of summer thing if everyone was in agreement with it. It transpires that was the conversation in Cam’s head when he wrote to you, which meant he jumped ahead twenty steps.’ She affectionately nudged him. ‘What are you like?’

A look of adoration passed between them and it gave me a jolt. He’d never looked at me like that, not even when he’d held Noah in his arms at the hospital, told me he loved me and thanked me for giving him a son. Of course, I now knew he’d been lying about how he felt and, even if he hadn’t come clean about that, it would have been obvious to me seeing him with Tess now. How had I not realised?

‘We know it’s going to take time to build your trust and the key consideration at every step has to be the children,’ Tess continued. ‘We know they might agree to see Cam then change their mind because they’re not quite ready, or they might want to meet him but not me. We’ll take it at their pace and yours.’

I looked from Tess to Cameron and he nodded.

‘Did you tell Tess what we discussed on Wednesday?’ I asked Cameron.

‘Yes.’

‘Absolutely everything?’

‘Everything. Tess and I have no secrets.’

I nearly blurted out *so it’s just the person you’re married to who you keep secrets from?* but I managed to stop myself. It wouldn’t get us anywhere.

‘In that case, Tess, you’ll know that Cameron wasn’t exaggerating when he said it was “heated”. We didn’t get a chance to discuss the kids, so that’s my focus for tonight. I need to understand why he wants to see them, why he thinks they’d want to see him, and what happens when summer ends. I have massive objections and that’s not me being awkward – that’s me protecting my kids. They’ve always been and always will be my number one priority.’

‘That’s all very reasonable,’ Tess said. She took Cameron’s hand in hers and fixed her eyes on his. ‘You need to tell her what happened.’

He shook his head vigorously.

‘Cameron!’

‘You know I don’t like talking about it.’

‘Neither do I, but she needs to know.’

They stared at each other and my stomach started to churn. Was he about to tell me he was ill? Dying? Eventually he sighed and nodded.

‘I’ll tell you, but I don’t want to go into any details. You’re going to need to accept the basics. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I said, my mind still racing with thoughts of a terminal illness diagnosis.

‘The management job I was offered came with international travel, like I told you. Once I went overseas, I stayed there. I spent a few years in Bahrain and Dubai and, a couple of years ago, I moved to South America.’

‘That’s where we met,’ Tess said. ‘I’m a project manager too – or I was – working for the same company. I’d been based in Venezuela for a year when Cam was transferred there.’

They exchanged looks and she nodded at him, as though encouraging him to continue.

‘Last year, we were both sent to Guatemala for a week and...’ He gulped and tightened his hold on Tess’s hand. ‘Our minibus was hijacked and we were taken at gunpoint and I honestly thought that was the end.’

Tess rested her head against his shoulder. ‘Me too.’

My mouth dropped open. I certainly hadn’t expected to hear that. ‘You must have been terrified.’

‘Completely,’ Tess said. ‘Imagine the scariest thing that’s ever happened to you and multiply it by a hundred.’

‘They held us for two nights,’ Cameron continued. ‘It was the longest, scariest...’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t... Anyway, someone made a deal and we were released. Ordeal over, back to Venezuela, back to normality, except neither of us felt settled, so we asked to return to the UK.’

‘An experience like that doesn’t get forgotten about overnight,’ Tess said. ‘Cam and I were just friends at this point, but we met up every so often to talk about it. We shared what had been going through our minds while we were held and it seemed we’d both reflected on things we regretted and things we’d love to change if we made it out alive. I regretted my career choice. I might have been good at it but the high-powered, suit-wearing, company politics thing was never me. I wanted to help people and make a difference so, with Cam’s

encouragement, I resigned at the start of the year and I'll be re-training as a counsellor from September. I'm sure you can guess what Cam's regrets were.'

'The children,' I said, my voice catching in my throat, stunned at what they'd been through.

Cam nodded. 'At the camp, I thought it was game over and I got all morbid, imaging my obituary. Tess calls it my Ebenezer Scrooge moment because I couldn't think of a single positive thing it would say about me outside of my work achievements. I knew it might already be too late but, if I made it out alive, I vowed to see my children and attempt to build some sort of relationship with them – for them as well as for me.'

'He had work regrets too,' Tess said.

'Yeah, that's why I'm changing job. I vowed that my next role would involve giving something back. I'm going to be the CEO for a mental health charity.'

'Wow! I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry you've both been through that.'

'It was life-affirming and life-changing,' Tess said. 'We both needed a kick up the backside to re-evaluate our lives and that process – and the ordeal itself – brought us together. It was horrific, but it happened for so many good reasons.'

That look of adoration passed between them once more and, for the first time, I felt some empathy towards Cameron and was pleased for him that something good had come out of something so traumatic.

'Why didn't you tell me this on Wednesday?' I asked Cameron.

'Would you have listened?' He held my gaze, his eyes challenging mine, but he looked away when Tess nudged him. 'Okay, you probably would have but, like I said, I don't like talking about it. I didn't think you needed to know.'

'And I thought you did,' Tess said. 'It was a defining moment for Cam and it's the reason he wants to reconnect.'

It sounded like a truly scary experience and I could see why something like that would be a huge wake-up call, making him face up to his regrets. But it didn't mean we needed to be any less cautious about how this would affect the kids.

'Let's say the kids do agree to meet you and you see them a handful of times over the summer. What happens when the summer ends and you go back to London?' I looked directly at Cameron. 'Is that dealing with your regrets ticked off and you return to normality?'

'That's a fair comment after our last talk,' Cameron said, resignation in his voice. 'We're trying not to go into this with a specific outcome in mind—'

'Which is killing him,' Tess teased, 'but I'm finding it very refreshing.'

'It *is* killing me,' he admitted, 'but I know that anything could happen across the summer and we'll probably take some steps forward and several back again.'

'I'm glad you realise that,' I said, 'but I have to ask again about you going back to London. Be honest with me, are you thinking of some sort of joint custody arrangement down the line? Because that's absolutely not an option.'

'Crikey, no!' Cameron said. 'Is that what you thought I wanted?'

'Cameron Fullerton, do you realise how bad that sounds?' Tess rolled her eyes at me. 'What Cam means to say is that he'd love to see the children regularly, but he appreciates that living in London makes that impossible. It's too far, they're too young and it's completely impractical around school, clubs, and friendships as well as unfair on the kids and you.'

'That *is* what I mean,' Cam said, smiling gratefully at Tess. 'However, a possibility down the line is that we move closer to you. Tess is doing her counselling degree online and I can be predominantly home-based with my new job. We're not tied to London. But that's the distant, distant future and only if it's okay with everyone. In the meantime, we'd suggest regular

contact through video calls and we can come up here for weekends and school holidays.’

‘I promise you we have thought about this a lot,’ Tess said. ‘Cam was all for getting straight in touch but I put a pause on it. This isn’t something that can be rushed. He needed to be sure it was what he wanted and the impact this would have on us, you, and the children before he made contact.’

‘I appreciate that.’ I took a sip of my drink. ‘I understand where this has all come from now and I am willing to arrange something, but I can’t just agree a date and make it happen. This is a huge thing for the kids and, being honest, I didn’t think it was something that would ever happen, so I’m not prepared for it. I need at least a week to think about how best to approach it with them and, when I do, I’ll be taking it at their pace. I’ll keep you posted, but I don’t want to be pestered for news. You’re going to need to be really patient.’

I stared pointedly at Cameron and he nodded.

‘I’ll keep him off his phone,’ Tess said.

‘Thank you. I hope you know it’s going to be a bumpy ride. All four of them have very different personalities, but the one thing they have in common is that they’re all strong-willed.’

‘We’re prepared,’ Cameron said. ‘Can you tell us more about them?’

‘I can do better than that.’ I opened my bag and removed an envelope with their latest school photos which I hadn’t got round to sending to his solicitor.

I handed Cameron the first one. ‘Maisie’s final primary school photo.’

He ran his hand across his stubble, shaking his head. ‘She looks so grown up.’

There was nothing to say to that. She did and he’d missed it.

‘She’s a gifted footballer...’

As I handed each photo over, I gave them an overview of everything I could think of – hobbies, friends, favourite colour, best and worst subjects, personality – but I kept it brief, mindful that Cameron had missed out on so much and this was likely to be pretty overwhelming.

He kept Jayden's photo in his hand and picked up Freya's with his other. 'They were early?'

'Four weeks. I was booked in for a C-section, but didn't need it as they arrived the day before.'

'And everything was...' I could see the guilt all over his face.

'It was a long labour with a couple of hairy moments, but Mum was with me and they eventually arrived safely, Freya first. And she does like to keep Jayden in check as the older sister, but he doesn't mind. He's really placid.'

'I can see you both in all of them,' Tess said, smiling at the four photos. 'They sound like lovely children, Kerry. You must be so proud of them.'

'They're my world.' My voice cracked and I caught Cameron's eyes. Was that tears sparkling in them? He gave me a weak smile and, at that moment, I felt as though he'd finally realised the enormous impact on me of what he was asking. We'd been fine. We'd built our lives together without him and he was capable of destroying it all. Being held at gunpoint was the most terrifying thing that had ever happened to him. Having him back in my kids' lives was the most terrifying thing that had ever happened to me. I prayed the outcome was as positive as his had been.

HOLLIE



Kerry and I stood behind the serving counter of The Starfish Café on Tuesday morning, watching the rain hammering against the windows.

‘Look at that!’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I can’t even see the end of the terrace.’

‘I can’t believe how quiet it is. Only six customers!’

‘I hate it when it’s like this. A bit of summer rain usually brings the walkers in, but when a massive downpour is forecast, they all stay away. Might as well have a cuppa.’

I made a fruit tea while Kerry poured herself a latte.

‘How did it go with Cameron on Sunday?’ I asked. She’d already filled me on her initial meeting with him and what sounded to me like poor excuses for leaving, but I hadn’t had a chance to get her on her own yesterday to ask her about her second one.

‘Unexpected. You won’t believe what really triggered him getting in touch...’

I listened, shocked, as she told me about Cameron being taken hostage and the life-changing decisions he’d made as a result. I could see that Kerry was torn between feeling empathy for that and anger for how much he’d messed her about.

‘I haven’t said anything to the kids yet. I need to find the right words because it’s not just about seeing him – it’s also explaining why he’s been absent for so long.’

‘How do you think they’ll react?’

‘Mum reckons they’ll take it well and agree to meet him because, at that point, it’s not their reality. They don’t know him, they don’t know what it’s like having a dad around. She thinks it’ll kick off after that first time. I can’t call it. I’ve imagined pretty much every scenario and my head’s scrambled now.’

‘I’m not surprised. It’s a lot to deal with.’

* * *

The rain had stopped by lunchtime, so trade picked up. Sylvia and Dorothy arrived, waving to me as they went to Sylvia’s favourite table by the window. I gave them a few minutes to look over the menu before going over to take their order. It was the first time I’d seen Dorothy since the wedding.

‘Thanks again for inviting me to your wedding,’ Dorothy said. ‘I had such a wonderful day.’

‘It was a pleasure. You looked very elegant in your hat.’

‘I love a hat. There aren’t enough occasions that warrant wearing one these days. I don’t think that many women bother at a wedding anymore. It’s all fascinations or nothing.’

Sylvia caught my eye and winked. We couldn’t embarrass Dorothy by telling her it was fascinators.

‘I have something for you,’ Dorothy continued, pulling an envelope out of her bag. ‘I know it’s all digital these days but I love a proper photograph.’

I removed the photos and began flicking through the large pile. ‘Aw, Dorothy, these are gorgeous. You have a good eye.’

‘I used to be hopeless, always cutting people’s heads off or taking blurred ones. After my Percy passed and I started travelling, I wanted to capture all the beautiful places I visited. There was a workshop on one of the cruises and the tutor was really patient with me. I have a small camera and usually have

it set to automatic, but it does the job. Can't be doing with any of these new-fangled phones.'

They were all candid shots capturing moments where Jake or I were talking, laughing or dancing. There were photos of Angie, Artie, the bridesmaids and ushers, and several of other guests too. Some were printed in colour and others in black and white. I felt myself welling up as I looked through them.

'These are for me to keep?' I asked.

'Oh, yes. A thank you for making me part of your wonderful day.'

I blinked back the tears and continued to flick, placing each one I'd seen at the bottom of the pile. Suddenly my stomach lurched as a fresh photo appeared on the top which wasn't from our wedding. My mouth felt dry as I took in the three people, two smiling, one with a face like thunder.

'How did that get in there?' Dorothy exclaimed, reaching for the photo. 'Sorry about that.'

She gazed at it, smiling. 'That's my son Andrew, his wife Larissa and my gorgeous grandson Reuben. Isn't he handsome? Going to be a right heartbreaker one day, that one.'

'Your son?' It was barely a whisper as I grabbed the back of the seat, feeling unsteady on my feet.

'Are you all right, Hollie?' Sylvia asked, looking at me with concern. 'You've gone white.'

I nodded numbly, but Dorothy was evidently oblivious to my distress as she continued.

'We only had the one child and they've only had the one too so the little lad doesn't have any siblings or cousins to play with, which is a shame, but there you go.'

She pointed to Larissa. 'She's a funny little thing, always got a bee in her bonnet about something or other. Hardly ever smiles, as you can see here, although poor lass has had it rough – lost her parents young and her brother turned their grandmother against her and ran off with her share of the inheritance when she died. How's that fair?'

My stomach lurched again. Was that the whopping great lie she was telling people? Larissa Kent was far from the victim in any of this.

‘Despite all that, she’s a good mum and my Andrew idolises her. Childhood sweethearts, the pair of them, and he’s been her rock. I’ve not seen that much of them over the years. I know Wakefield’s not that far away, but you know how it is when the months just fly past. I’m hoping to spend a lot more time with my grandson now that they’ve moved back to Whitsborough Bay.’

I gripped the seat back so tightly, my knuckles turned white.

‘They’re in Whitsborough Bay?’ I had to be sure I’d heard that right. Sylvia narrowed her eyes at me – hardly surprising as my voice had come out as a squeak – but Dorothy didn’t appear to notice.

‘Yes, my dear brother passed at the start of the year and he never had children of his own, so my Andrew inherited his house. Young Reuben was hating his senior school in Wakefield – several horrific bullying incidents – so they decided to make a fresh start back here, living in my brother’s place. Reuben started at Kayley School after half-term and is so much happier there and Andrew’s got a new job here.’

I needed to get away before Sylvia asked me if I was all right again, so I slipped the rest of the wedding photos back into the envelope.

‘Let me get your drinks and I’ll have a proper look through these later, but thank you, Dorothy. I’m really touched. You’re very talented.’

At the counter, I handed Kerry the drinks order and went into the kitchen to put the photos in my bag. I took a few deep composing breaths, determined not to let the news break me. So Jake’s fears had come to fruition. Larissa *had* moved to the area and it was almost definitely her he’d seen on our wedding day. Whitsborough Bay was a big town but it wasn’t that big. Their paths would cross again and I doubted it would be a pleasant experience.

Kerry joined me in the kitchen. ‘Are you okay? Did Dorothy say something to upset you?’

‘Not intentionally.’ I didn’t want to reveal Jake’s life history when he tried to keep it private, but I needed to say something to someone or I was going to burst. ‘Jake has an older sister, Larissa, and they’ve never got on. We’ve not talking petty sibling stuff. We’re talking *major* issues. He’s seen her a couple of times recently and was worried that she might have moved back to Whitsborough Bay. I’ve just had it confirmed that she has and that Dorothy’s her mother-in-law.’

‘Oh! You didn’t know?’

‘No idea. And Dorothy doesn’t know the connection either, so please don’t say anything, not that you would.’

‘I’m guessing it’s bad news having her back here?’

‘The worst. She’s unstable and she hates Jake so there’s going to be trouble.’

‘Why can’t the past stay in the past?’ she said, shaking her head. ‘Are you okay for me to head off?’

‘Yeah, of course. I’ll go out. Thanks for checking on me. I appreciate it.’

As Kerry left a couple of minutes later, Sylvia sent a questioning look in my direction, so I gave her a big smile. I didn’t want her worrying about me. I’d be fine but it was Jake I was worried about. It had taken him years to come to terms with Larissa’s behaviour.

* * *

‘Just when everything’s going brilliantly,’ Jake said, slumping back against the sofa in the snug and looking up at the ceiling later that evening. ‘So it was her I saw on our wedding day.’

‘I’m so sorry.’

He shrugged. ‘At least we know and can be vigilant. Or we can refuse to ever leave the house again.’ He rolled his eyes

and gave me a weak smile. ‘So Dorothy has no idea I’m the evil brother who allegedly stole Larissa’s inheritance?’

‘Not a clue and I was too shocked to say anything. Sylvia noticed something was up and I thought she might question me before she left, but she never said anything.’ I snuggled up against him. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m not sure. I can’t say I’m delighted she’s back, but I guess there’s nothing I can do about it. We can’t stop going places for fear we might bump into her, so we’re just going to have to get on with our lives and hope that, if and when our paths cross, she doesn’t make a scene.’

We both crossed our fingers and pressed them together. I knew Jake would be thinking exactly the same as me – the chance of her not making a scene was zero to none. The last three times he’d seen her – at the solicitor’s office for their nanna’s will reading, afterwards at Lighthouse View, and on the RNLI rescue – she’d shouted and sworn at him. Larissa was the queen of making a scene.

HOLLIE



‘Any movement forward with Martin?’ I asked Angie as I popped a couple of broccoli and stilton quiches into the oven on Friday afternoon.

We didn’t get much time to chat while the café was open, but Angie and I would be spending most of today in the kitchen preparing the food for Tori’s fortieth birthday party tonight so could have a proper catch-up.

‘He hasn’t said anything and I’ve decided not to rock the boat. If Martin doesn’t want to rush to move back in with me, then I should respect that and enjoy the moment instead of pushing for more.’

‘But you want more.’

‘I do, but I’d rather take things at his pace and keep him in my life than rush it and risk damaging what we’ve got. It’s better than it’s ever been. If things continue this way, I’m sure he’ll be back properly.’

‘Fair enough. I’ll stop nagging you.’

I took my phone out and checked my list. ‘Do you want to mix the potato salad and coleslaw or decorate the cakes?’

‘The savoury stuff,’ Angie said.

As I mixed the buttercream, a text came through from Jake with a third and final estate agent’s valuation on Lighthouse View and confirmation that Tori and Finley had agreed a price with him and instructed a solicitor to make the purchase.

‘How’s Jake feeling about selling up?’ Angie asked after I told her the news.

‘He’s really relaxed about it now. He was nearly there when we cleared out the last of his nanna’s stuff last year, and knowing how much Tori and Finley love that house has helped him fully let go.’

‘And how’s he holding up with the news that Larissa’s back?’

‘Not great. He’s trying to act all calm about it, but I can tell he’s on edge. He had a nightmare last night. Called out *don’t stab me!* Scared the life out of me.’

‘That’s not good.’

‘Tell me about it, but what can we do? Absolutely nothing.’

* * *

That evening, The Starfish Café was just how I liked it – full of people laughing, chatting and tucking into the food. The place looked amazing. Finley and Tori had arrived early with a birthday cake from Carly’s Cupcakes, some balloon bouquets and a giant four and zero. I’d switched on the white fairy lights which I kept up all year but only used for special occasions and winter evenings. It was dusk now, with the sun due to set in half an hour, and the lights made the café and terrace look so pretty.

There were about fifty guests made up of Tori’s family and friends, Finley’s immediate family, his ex-partner and her two children, and some of the RNLI crew.

The buffet had massively depleted and most of the guests had finished eating, so it seemed like a good time to light the candles on the cake.

I spotted Tori on the terrace with Charlee and Jodie.

‘Sorry to interrupt, but are you ready for the cake?’

‘Ooh, yes. Let me grab Finley. He wants to say a few words.’

Charlee and Jodie offered to usher the guests in from the terrace and Jake got his camera ready while I fetched the lighter from the kitchen.

Moments later, the lights were dimmed and there was a loud chorus of ‘Happy Birthday’. Tori held her long auburn hair back and blew them out to cries of ‘Make a wish!’

‘I don’t need to make a wish,’ she said, standing up. ‘I’ve already got everything I could ever want. I’m back in touch with my family after far too long apart, my business is thriving, I’m now part of the RNL family, and Finley and I have confirmed today that we’re buying Lighthouse View from our awesome friend, Jake.’

She paused for shouts of congratulations.

‘The good news doesn’t end there.’ She smiled up at Finley.

‘Buying Lighthouse View together wasn’t the only commitment we wanted to make to each other,’ he said. ‘Earlier today, I asked Tori if she’d marry me and she said yes.’

There were gasps and exclamations of delight as Tori slipped a ring onto her finger and held up her hand. ‘I’ve been hiding this all party. So now it’s a triple celebration – my birthday, our housewarming and our engagement.’

‘Are you crying?’ Jake whispered in my ear.

I wasn’t just crying. I was properly blubbing. Everything seemed to set me off at the moment. I’d even cried earlier at how pretty the butterfly cakes were. A thank you or compliment from a customer could set me off, a visit to the seal pups had me going through a whole packet of tissues, and I was sure somebody was going to notice soon. I grabbed a napkin and wiped my eyes, checking with Jake that I hadn’t streaked mascara across my face.

‘I’m so happy for you both,’ I said, hugging Tori and Finley once I’d composed myself. ‘You’ll have to tell me all

about the proposal later.’

I was dying to know now but there was still a crowd waiting to offer their congratulations, so I could wait.

Towards the end of the evening, the guests had thinned out – those with children taking them home to bed and a few others heading off, citing the need to be up early tomorrow morning. Tori had just said goodbye to her family, so I took her hand and led her out onto the terrace.

‘Tell me everything.’

‘We spent the day at Redamancy Castle with my family and then Finley and I went for a ride on the horses as we often do. We stopped at *L’eglise des arbres*.’

L’eglise des arbres was the derelict church in the grounds of her parents’ estate which Tori loved. The owners before her parents had never finished building it and, left abandoned, it had been taken over by nature, with vines wrapping round the columns and windows and trees blending with it.

‘Finley led me inside and it was at its finest with the sunlight filtering through the windows and dappled light everywhere. I stood for a moment looking up, taking it all in and, when I turned round, Finley was kneeling on the floor with an open ring box. It was the most romantic thing ever.’

‘Did you have any inkling he was going to ask?’

‘None whatsoever. I didn’t even think I wanted to get married again but, as soon as he asked, it was a huge yes from me. I guess it’s about having the right person.’

‘The ring’s stunning,’ I said, admiring the large pinky peach stone surrounded by diamonds and set on a rose gold band. ‘What sort of stone is it?’

‘A peach sapphire diamond. I had no idea such a thing existed.’

‘Do you have a venue or date in mind?’

‘Both are confirmed. We’re getting married in *L’eglise des arbres*. Finley has been in cahoots with my parents, planning this for ages. He was hoping to propose on my actual fortieth

but the licence hadn't come through. It was finally confirmed yesterday which was why he proposed today so he could give me my dream wedding venue too.'

Tears trickled down my cheeks again and I swiped at them, apologising for being so soppy. I'd been to Redamancy Castle a couple of times and had visited *L'église des arbres* and couldn't imagine a more beautiful venue for Tori and Finley's wedding.

'If we hadn't had permission, we'd have still had the ceremony there and done the legal thing at a registry office but it's nicer we can do it all properly there, which brings me onto the date. *L'église des arbres* looks so gorgeous in late September when the leaves start to change colour and the light is so delicious then too. We were thinking about September next year, but we've decided there's no point in waiting, so we're getting married on 30 September this year. That's eleven weeks tomorrow, so it's not long to prepare. Is that crazy?'

I'd be about halfway through my pregnancy then, which set the tears flowing again. Tori must think I was the crazy one, getting so emotional about this.

'It's romantic,' I said. 'I bet loads of couples would get married sooner if it wasn't for venues being booked up. We only managed this year because there was a cancellation.'

'Yeah, that's one of the benefits of getting married at the country pile, although the bigger bonus is my dad can be there.'

'Of course! I hadn't even considered that. It's so perfect.' Tori's dad was agoraphobic and hadn't left the estate grounds for decades.

'We're having a marquee on the lawn out the back of the house, Giles from The Country Tavern is doing the catering and my parents have put a hold on their next book release to help make my dress and the bridesmaid dresses, which brings me on to something very important. I can't do it without you by my side. Will you be one of my bridesmaids?'

And that was me crying for a third time as I nodded with delight.

‘We’ll be going for an autumn colour palette and I’ll need to take your measurements in the next few weeks, if that’s okay.’

‘Yeah, no problem.’ If she measured me before my scan, I was going to have to let her into my secret, as I’d need her to allow for a baby bump, but I’d wait until that moment to tell her. Tonight was Tori’s night and the spotlight needed to remain firmly on her triple celebration.

* * *

The RNLI crowd were the last to leave. They’d insisted on staying behind to help me clear everything away and get straightened up so I didn’t have to come in extra early in the morning. Artie was tying up a couple of bin bags in the kitchen when I brought some plates through for the dishwasher.

‘Have you enjoyed yourself?’ I asked.

‘Great party and brilliant news about the engagement. Finley’s a good lad. He deserves some happiness after Demi strung him along for years. I wasn’t expecting to see her here tonight. I thought the kids would have been here without her.’

‘Me too, but I was chatting to Finley about it earlier. He says they’re in a good place now and he’s so grateful that Demi’s let him stay in India and Roman’s lives that Tori and him sometimes include her in their plans. He’d even given her a heads up that he was going to propose to Tori today, not wanting her or the kids to hear the news tonight at the same time as everyone else.’

Artie disappeared to put the bin bags in the larger bin outside but was back moments later.

‘Can I ask you something?’ he said.

‘Sure. What’s up?’

He ran his fingers through his beard, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

‘Artie?’

‘Forget it. It doesn’t matter.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, it’s nothing. I’ll grab some more plates.’

‘Okay, but if it turns out to be something, you know where I am.’

‘Thanks, but it really is nothing.’

I shrugged as the door closed behind him. I couldn’t even begin to speculate as to what all that was about, but it wasn’t like him to look so uncomfortable. Maybe I’d get him to hang back with me after training on Monday.

KERRY



Across the past week, every minute spent waiting for the kids outside their clubs and a couple of hours at bedtime each night were spent online, searching for advice on how to introduce an absent parent back into a child's life. The common theme across all the websites was to take it slowly.

It was reassuring to discover that, even though I'd been making it up as I'd gone along, I'd taken the 'right' approach to Cameron's absence – being honest with them, reassuring them it wasn't their fault, and talking about their dad if that's what they wanted.

It was Saturday and, although there was still a week left at school before breaking up for the summer, Maisie had played in her final football match this morning and Noah had competed in his final gala. I'd have ideally waited until term ended before I told them that their dad was in Whitby and wanted to see them, but I was conscious that the taking it slowly part meant I couldn't delay another week in telling them in case they needed several weeks to build up to seeing him. It wasn't like he'd moved into the area and this could go at its own sweet pace. At the end of the summer, he'd be gone.

It was a beautiful day, so we'd decided to eat lunch on the large picnic bench on the patio outside – the sort with eight round seats like you'd find in a pub or park.

'I can't wait for the summer holidays,' Maisie said. 'Can we go to the Sea Rescue Sanctuary?'

'The beach,' Noah cried. 'Every day!'

‘I want Pickle to stay again,’ Freya said, to immediate support from the others.

The volume of chatter escalated as they all threw their ideas into the mix. I took in the smiles and laughter, my stomach clenching. Was I about to burst that bubble? I glanced at Mum and she gave me a reassuring smile.

‘Can we plan the first week?’ Maisie asked as I dished out pots of yoghurt.

‘Not just yet, sweetie. We will do lots of fabulous things and we will spend some time with Pickle, but I have some news for you. Your dad has been in touch with me and he’s spending the summer in Whitby. He’d like to see you all.’

The twins barely reacted but Maisie and Noah stopped eating and stared at me.

‘How would you feel about seeing him?’

Maisie dropped her spoon in her yoghurt with a splat and folded her arms. ‘When?’

‘We’ve not confirmed a date.’

‘Because he doesn’t really want to see us?’

‘No. He *definitely* wants to see you but he knows a lot of years have passed so things need to go slowly to make sure you’re all okay with it.’

‘Do I have to see him?’ Freya asked in a voice which suggested she really didn’t want to, which was a direct contradiction to what she’d said when the subject had arisen during our visit to the seal pups at Starfish Point.

‘What makes you ask that, Freya?’

‘I don’t know him and neither does Jayden.’

‘That’s a good point, sweetie, and it’s another reason why we’re not rushing into anything.’

‘I’m not going to London,’ Noah said.

‘Nobody’s asking you to. As I said, your dad’s staying in a holiday cottage in Whitby. He’s there with his fiancée for the

summer so he can be closer to you.’

‘He’s getting married again?’ Maisie cried. ‘That’s not fair. He’s your husband.’

‘Not anymore. Remember I told you we got divorced when the twins were little. I’ve met his fiancée and she’s very nice. Her name’s Tess.’

‘Why does he get to marry someone else and you don’t?’

‘Because he met someone new and fell in love and I haven’t done that. I’m not looking for another husband either, before any of you get any ideas. Anyway, this isn’t meant to be about me and getting married. It’s about you seeing your dad.’

‘I’m not spending half the holidays in Whitby,’ Noah said.

‘Your dad doesn’t expect that. He just wants to spend some time with you all.’

Jayden was the only one who hadn’t spoken.

‘What do you think?’ I asked him.

He shrugged and shoved another spoonful of yoghurt into his mouth.

‘So should I arrange for you to see him?’ I asked, looking round the table and feeling completely out of my depth at the lack of interest. ‘Or do you want some time to think about it?’

No response.

They finished their yoghurts in silence and I hung my head. I’d well and truly burst that excitable summer bubble. *Damn you, Cameron!*

As they raced each other back into the house, Mum patted my arm.

‘It could have been worse,’ she said.

‘Yeah, but not much worse.’

KERRY



As the week progressed, we spoke more about seeing Cameron, both as a family and individually.

Freya had declared on Monday morning that she did want to meet her dad and his fiancée and, in the next breath, asked if they'd let her be their bridesmaid. She'd been obsessed with weddings since Hollie and Jake's, presiding over several ceremonies for her dolls and stuffed animals, so I wasn't surprised by her logic.

Noah continually sought reassurance across the week that he wouldn't have to split his time between two homes. A couple of his friends at school had to do that and he was worried about the impact on his swimming. I told him we were only focusing on the summer for now and that, beyond that, it would be about Cameron visiting them here and not them going down to London.

Maisie blew hot and cold on seeing her dad and I spent quite a bit of one to one time with her looking at photos of her and Cameron together. She eventually decided she was willing to give it a try but couldn't promise she'd like him or his fiancée, even if the fiancée let her be a bridesmaid. That little dig at Freya made me laugh.

Jayden remained disinterested but, when the four of them started discussing what they might like to do when they saw their dad, it was clear he had fear of missing out and was content to go along with it.

It was now Saturday morning, a week after I'd told them their dad was in the area, and the start of the summer holidays. We were meeting Cameron and Tess in Hearnshaw Park at noon. I'd toyed with inviting them to the house to avoid distractions but a vision of us all sitting awkwardly in the lounge or around the dining table soon dismissed that idea. If we went to the park, Cameron might have to work harder for their attention but he could join in the activities with them like going on the dragon-shaped pedalos and doing the treasure hunt on the island in the lake – easier than trying to make steady conversation.

Mum was joining us. I wasn't going to invite her as I hadn't wanted to crowd Cameron, but when I'd spoken to him about final arrangements, Tess had come on the phone and suggested it. She said that, at any point, one or more of the children might find it all a bit overwhelming and need some time away. If I was on my own, I couldn't give them that without leaving the others on their own with their dad.

I'd spoken again to Cameron first thing this morning to make sure he was ready. He confessed to being extremely nervous but excited about it. I'd reassured him he wasn't on trial and not to beat himself up if it didn't go perfectly because, in all likelihood, it wouldn't. There'd be awkward moments, sulks and tantrums, but there'd also be positives and he needed to hold onto those, whatever happened.

I was nervous now and it seemed Maisie was too as she'd already changed her outfit three times and had just appeared in the lounge in a fourth choice.

'Come and sit down, sweetie,' I said, taking her hand and pulling her down onto the sofa beside me. 'Are you worried about today?'

'What if he doesn't like me?'

'Not possible. You're awesome and fabulous and super-duper talented. He loved you from the moment you were born – before you were born, even – and he still loves you now. And should I let you into a secret? I think your dad is just as worried that you won't like him either. It's not easy for you

and Noah, seeing him again after all this time, or for the twins, who've never met him, but it's not easy for him either.'

'I'll look after him,' she said solemnly.

'Good girl. I know you will.'

She gave me a hug then slipped off the sofa. 'I think I liked my first outfit best.'

'They were all lovely, but I think that one might have nudged it for me too.'

She beamed at me then ran upstairs to change once more. At least one of them was happy now. Three to go...

* * *

My heart was thumping so fast, I felt short of breath as we walked from Park Lodge to Hearnshaw Park. Freya refused to hold my hand, claiming it was too slippery, but Jayden didn't protest. He'd continued to give off blasé vibes but I was pretty sure he was the most bothered out of all four of them, especially given how tightly he was clinging to my hand and how close he was walking next to me, almost tripping over me.

There were several tiers of wooden benches curved round the boating lake and we'd arranged to meet them there. As soon as the benches came into view, I spotted Tess, her hair gleaming in the sunlight.

They hadn't noticed us, so I paused and gathered the kids round me.

'You see the woman over there with the red hair? That's Tess. The man with the dark hair next to her is your dad. Are you ready to say hello?'

The low murmurs conveyed their apprehension, but they resumed walking, which was a good sign.

Cameron had his back to us but Tess caught my eye and said something to him. He turned and slowly stood up,

pressing his hand to his mouth. I didn't underestimate how enormous and emotional this moment was for him.

He put his hand back down by his side and smiled at them all. Maisie, Noah and Freya took a few steps closer but Jayden clung to my leg.

'Hello,' Cameron said. 'Thank you for letting me come to the park with you today. I've been looking forward to seeing you for such a long time.'

His hands twitched by his side and I knew he'd be fighting the instinct to gather them all in a tight hug. We'd discussed this on the phone and had concluded that any physical contact had to be initiated by the kids. I hated reminding him that he was a stranger to them, and had been grateful for Tess's support in echoing that.

'Hello, Cameron,' Mum said. 'Long time no see.'

I smiled to myself. Her voice was warm – best behaviour in front of the kids – but the words were a definite dig and no wonder. She'd been the one who'd had to pick up the pieces and the slack when he left and she didn't feel much warmth towards him, but she knew this wasn't about her and was willing to give him a chance to redeem himself after his Scrooge moment. She'd said words were one thing but his actions over the next few months would speak much louder. So even though I'd told Cameron he wasn't on trial with the kids, he was actually on trial with my mum.

'Good to see you, Nadia. You look really well. This is Tess.'

Tess stepped forward and beamed at them. 'I'm so happy to meet you all.'

Cameron gave her the name and age of each child. She already knew who was who, but I imagined he'd done it to prove a point to the kids that he knew who they were.

'What would you like to do first?' Cameron asked them.

'Feed the ducks,' Freya said.

‘Sounds good. Here?’ Cameron pointed to the edge of the lake where there were several pieces of bread floating.

‘We go to the smaller lake over there,’ Maisie said. ‘It’s not as busy and the ducks are hungrier.’

‘And we don’t feed them bread,’ Freya said, falling into step beside Cameron.

I exchanged a smile with Mum as Freya filled him in on our homemade concoction of sweetcorn, peas, rice, shredded lettuce, kale, seeds and oats and why that was better for ducks than bread.

‘You can still feed ducks bread because it’s better than no food,’ Maisie added, ‘but it isn’t very good for them.’

Noah walked next to Tess, but didn’t say anything.

‘I hear you’re a brilliant swimmer,’ Tess said and I exchanged a smile with Mum again. Noah could talk for ages about swimming.

‘Are you all right, sweetie?’ I asked Jayden.

He nodded.

‘Are you going to help feed the ducks?’

He nodded again and I ruffled his hair. There was no rush. This could all be done at his pace. The hardest part was over. Or at least I hoped that had been the hardest part.

* * *

Cameron, Tess and I had agreed not to overdo it on the first meeting, aiming for between two and three hours together. We’d fed the ducks then spread across a couple of picnic benches for lunch. Freya clearly wasn’t fazed by any of it and maintained a steady chatter about our home, her friends, school and hobbies, with Noah and Maisie chipping in when she paused to eat. Cameron barely touched his food and, although there were a few moments where he looked like he couldn’t take in any more information, he was doing well, being attentive and curious. Tess was clearly at ease, asking

them questions if there was a moment's silence and telling them humorous tales about Cameron to help them get to know their dad.

We'd agreed that they'd go on the pedalos after lunch and I wondered if Jayden was going to sit it out, especially when I announced that Mum and I would be sitting on a bench on bag-watching duty. Tess suggested they do a race round the island, girls versus boys, which led to some joking banter, but Jayden remained quiet.

'I bet you're brilliant at pedalling,' Tess said, crouching down beside Jayden, evidently sensing his hesitation. 'Which colour do you want for the boys?'

The compliment brought a ghost of a smile to his lips and I was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to resist. He was always asking to go on the pedalos.

'Green,' he said eventually.

Cameron, Noah and Jayden piled onto a green dragon boat while Tess, Maisie and Freya settled into the red one, adults in the back and children in the front. With shouts and squeals from everyone, they set off across the lake.

Mum and I carried the bags over to the benches and watched.

'The laughter's a good sign,' Mum said.

'Yeah, even Jayden's laughing now, which is a relief. I was beginning to think we weren't going to get a peep out of him.'

We sat in silence for a few minutes, watching them. I never, ever thought I'd see this day. I'd honestly thought that Cameron was out of our lives forever and that there might be difficult conversations when they were teenagers and perhaps wanted to seek him out. It warmed my heart to see them looking happy, although I was realistic that it wasn't going to be smooth-going all the way.

'Tess seems nice,' Mum said. 'Not a patch on you, of course, but he's landed on his feet there.'

I smiled at the compliment. ‘I think she’s good for him. She stands up to him. I didn’t do that enough.’

‘She seems to know what she’s doing with the kids too, which is good, because I’m thinking Cameron’s out of his depth.’

She didn’t say it to be cruel – it was merely an observation – and I had to agree.

‘He’s going to need time, but I reckon he’ll get there with Tess’s help.’

‘What’s her story? I presume she doesn’t have children of her own.’

‘She hasn’t mentioned any and I’m guessing not with her working overseas.’

‘I wonder why she’s so keen to help Cameron reconnect with his kids instead of having her own.’

I’d been that focused on my kids, I hadn’t even thought of that. ‘It could be anything. Can’t have them, doesn’t want them, still planning to have them. I’m sure I’ll find out eventually.’

The pedalos had disappeared from view, so we changed subject and talked about Mum’s plans for a day out with Howard tomorrow. When we figured they’d had enough time to make it round the island and should be on the return stretch, we gathered up the bags and wandered over to the boathouse.

The green dragon carrying the boys was ahead of the red one but nobody was smiling. Maisie looked furious, Freya was in tears and Cameron looked as though he wanted to jump overboard. My stomach clenched. What was that I’d been thinking earlier about the hardest part being over with?

One of the attendants secured the green dragon to the mooring and the boys clambered out and waited on the pontoon while the red one was secured. I could hear Freya’s wails but I couldn’t get to her as there was a metal turnstile which could only be exited.

‘I hate you!’ Freya screamed, shoving at Jayden. If it hadn’t been for some speedy reactions from Noah in grabbing his younger brother, Jayden would have been in the lake.

‘Oh, gawd,’ Mum muttered.

Cameron had the deer-in-headlights expression again as Maisie and Noah began shouting at each other, and Tess looked helplessly in my direction. I was sure she was more than capable of taking control but could imagine her dilemma as to whether it was appropriate for her to step in at this delicate early stage.

Jayden stormed through the turnstile and hurled himself at my legs, immediately followed by Freya screaming, ‘Cheat!’

She was red-faced and the wet clothes and string of pondweed in her hair gave me a good idea of what might have kicked off.

‘What’s happened?’ I asked.

‘He threw seaweed at me!’ Freya yelled.

‘You don’t get seaweed in a lake,’ Jayden retaliated, unhelpfully.

‘And he splashed me!’ She pointed at Noah. ‘I hate them both.’

‘*He* splashed us too.’ If looks could kill, Cameron would have dropped down dead on the spot as Maisie fixed him with a hard stare.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Cameron said, his eyes wide, his cheeks pale. ‘It was a warm day. I thought it would be fun. Completely misjudged it.’

‘It *was* fun,’ Noah said, a rare edge to his tone. ‘And they’re only having a hissy fit ’cos they tried to splash us back and kept missing. Stupid girls.’

I fought hard to keep my voice steady, stunned at how one supposedly fun race around the lake could have descended into name-calling and violence. ‘This stops right now. All of you. We do not call each other names, we do not throw pondweed

at each other, and we do not push people. Do you all understand why behaving like that isn't good?

Four defiant pairs of eyes met mine.

'Do you all understand?' I repeated, my words slower, my voice louder.

'Yes, Mummy,' came the murmurs.

'And now for the apologies, please.'

I'm not convinced about the sincerity, but at least the apologies were forthcoming.

'What do you think we should do now?' I said. 'Do you think you should be allowed on the island for the treasure hunt or do you think I should be taking you home? Because I'm thinking the second option.'

'No!'

'Please, Mummy. We're sorry.'

'Treasure hunt!'

The pleas all came at once and I'm not sure who said what but the defiant eyes were now pleading with me.

'I need to see some smiles,' I said. 'Genuine ones. I also need to hear an apology to your dad and Tess for acting up and for being angry at your dad for splashing when it sounds as though you were all involved.'

Tess caught my eye and I could tell from the slight shake of her head that she didn't think it was necessary, but she was wrong. She might be a natural with children but she didn't know mine and, if they didn't get picked up on this, a precedent would have been set that they could behave how they wanted in front of Cameron and Tess, which would not do anyone any favours.

With more apologies uttered, a sombre group crossed the red wooden bridge over the lake and joined the winding path to the summit of the island. The children walked on ahead and Tess fell into step beside me.

‘It’s my fault,’ she said. ‘I shouldn’t have suggested a competition without knowing how competitive your kids are. That’s why the boys started splashing – to try to slow us down when we were winning.’

‘The race was fine and I don’t even have a problem with the splashing, but I won’t have shoving and name-calling. They all know better than that and I can’t let them get away with it today just because they’re in a strange situation and emotions are high.’

‘We’ve got a lot to learn,’ she said.

‘I do too, and I don’t always get it right.’ I gave her a reassuring smile. ‘We’ll see if the smiles and apologies hold for the treasure hunt. You might wish I’d called it a day and marched them home.’

At the top of the island, there were trees and bushes flanking winding pathways, several follies, and a series of interconnected ponds which fed a waterfall cascading into the lake. Every week during the school holidays, the Friends of Hearnshaw Park set up a new treasure hunt. For a charitable donation, children could collect a clue sheet, which would help them track down laminated letters to spell out a word. If they got the word right, they’d receive the ‘treasure’ of chocolate coins. We usually did all the treasure hunts across the summer and *Will the new treasure hunt be out yet?* was asked as often as *Can we go to the beach?*

They usually did the hunt as a four, the twins being too young in previous years to do it on their own, and my stomach knotted to see them splitting into pairs, Maisie putting a protective arm round Freya’s shoulder and shooting the boys a hard stare as she steered her sister away.

‘Should we go with them?’ Cameron asked.

‘I either leave them to it – it’s not like they can go far – or I trail behind taking photos. They don’t mind either way as long as I don’t try to help. They’re very strict about that.’

Cameron followed the girls while Tess trailed behind the boys. Mum and I sat down on a stone bench surrounded by

bags once more and both released heavy sighs.

‘That was fun,’ Mum said, patting my knee.

I nodded, my shoulders sagging. In all the scenarios I’d played out in my head about how this might go, the kids turning on each other hadn’t been one of them. Hopefully it was just the tension of the first meeting and having Cameron in our lives wouldn’t lead to a deterioration in the lovely relationship the siblings shared.

HOLLIE



The first week of the school summer holidays had been a busy one, as always. Angie's niece Grace was back working in Driftwood Dell and I had other students in the café, covering Kerry's shifts and providing more staff for the increase in customers.

The weather had been glorious all week and I'd added a new range of ice cream sundaes to the menu, which had proved extremely popular.

It was Friday and Jake was on an 8 a.m. till 4 p.m. shift at the hospital, so I had Pickle with me, but not for long. Kerry was bringing the kids in for sundaes then taking him back to Park Lodge for the rest of the day.

'How was the first meeting with their dad?' I asked her while the children went to look at the view with Pickle after I'd taken their sundae orders.

'A bit fraught. They were okay with him in the main, but they turned against each other and they've been squabbling all week. I'm shattered.'

'Ooh, that's not good. They look okay now, though.'

'Don't let them fool you. That's the promise of ice cream and a day with your dog. There'll be tears and tantrums before bedtime.'

'Have you got another date in to see him?'

'Tomorrow. Give me strength!'

‘Good luck! I’ll bring your order out shortly.’

As I prepared the five sundaes in the kitchen, my heart went out to Kerry for being in this situation. She’d said she was shattered and, although I’d never have dreamed of saying anything to her, she looked it. Her hair was dishevelled and there were bags under her eyes. If this was only the end of week one, how would she be at the end of the summer? I hoped that having Pickle at Park Lodge this afternoon wouldn’t cause any arguments between the siblings but, if they were at each other’s throats, one dog among four kids could be a recipe for disaster. I could just imagine them fighting over who got to stroke him, walk him, and who they thought he loved the most.

* * *

Jake was home when I returned to Sandy Croft after work. I did a double take at the sight of him slumped back on one of the snug sofas, nursing a bottle of lager. Jake rarely drank at home and never this early. There was no sign of Pickle and my stomach lurched.

‘Where’s Pickle?’ I asked after I’d given him a kiss.

‘Crashed out on our bed. Kerry’s kids had the paddling pool out, so he’s been splashing about in that.’

It sounded like great fun, but Jake’s words were flat. I sat down beside him and rested my hand on his thigh. ‘Bad day?’

He sighed. ‘I saw Larissa.’

‘Where?’

‘When I was leaving work. I was on my way back to the car, miles away, when someone shouted “Oi!” and suddenly there she was on the path in front of me.’

I gasped. ‘What did you do?’

‘I was too late to react, but she wasn’t. She shoved me into some metal railings.’

He pushed up the left sleeve of his T-shirt, revealing a couple of scrapes – thankfully not particularly deep – and several angry bruises down his arm.

‘I think she’d have done more, but a car came past and she ran off.’

‘That looks painful.’

‘It is, but not nearly as painful as this was.’ He lightly touched the faint scar on his cheek.

‘Are you going to call the police?’

‘I don’t know. Do you think I should?’

‘She assaulted you. Again. And, as you said, it could have been worse if that car hadn’t passed.’

I entwined my fingers with his and we sat there in silence for several minutes before Jake stood up.

‘I’m going to have to go out for a run. I feel all pent up. Do you mind?’

‘You do what’s best but, while you’re running, do think seriously about calling the police. Or maybe phoning your Uncle Adrian and seeing what he thinks.’

After Jake had changed and left the house, I went up to the bedroom and curled up beside Pickle. Was this the start of it? Was this Larissa’s new reign of terror on her brother? And, if it was, was Jake strong enough to get through it? Seeing that haunted look on this face now, I wasn’t convinced that he was.

KERRY



We were only a third of the way through the school holidays and I was running on empty. I usually loved the time off with the kids but, for the first time ever, I was counting down the weeks and days until they returned to school.

I'd refereed more squabbles – some of them turning physical – in the fortnight since the trip to the park with Cameron and Tess than I'd done in the whole of the preceding year. It could be an age thing. I'd noticed an increase in Freya's and Jayden's confidence over the last school year and especially after they'd turned six in March. Maisie, now three months from turning twelve and starting senior school next month, had suddenly grown up and developed an attitude and a lot of opinions which she was adamant were right. If this was what nearly twelve looked like, I feared the hormonal teenage years. However, I suspected that Cameron's presence had heightened their emotions and made them all a little less tolerant.

The long summer days were potentially ideal for them to spend a lot more time with their dad, but we'd agreed to take things slowly and it was important to stick to that. Once a week was enough for now and Saturdays had become the logical family day out, with me being part of those plans.

Last Saturday, we'd been for a trip on the local steam train, had lunch in a village pub at the end of the line, a play on the playground, and a trip back. There'd been some moments but nothing on the scale of the pedalos incident. Today, they'd asked to go to South Bay beach.

‘Will Daddy buy us ice creams?’ Freya asked as she sat in the middle of the kitchen floor, fastening the Velcro across her trainers.

‘Getting an ice cream is a treat for good behaviour,’ I said. ‘So it’ll depend on whether the four of you can play nicely together.’

I raised my eyebrows at her and the pout suggested she knew exactly to what I was referring.

‘I’m sorry I tipped Jayden’s Lego out. I didn’t know it would make him cry.’

‘Maybe not, but you know your brother likes everything organised, so it was never going to make him happy, was it?’

‘No, but...’ She paused and shrugged. ‘Sorry, Mummy.’

‘As long as Jayden knows you’re sorry and you know never to do it again.’

I still hadn’t quite got to the bottom of the *he said, she said* tale that had led to Freya stomping into their playroom and tipping out all her brother’s painstakingly organised crates and drawers of Lego a few days ago. I’d never seen Jayden so distraught. It had taken several hours to calm him down and several more into the early hours for Mum, Howard and me to put it all away. There’d been no point making Freya do it as all the pieces would have been muddled up in the wrong places and it would only have prolonged Jayden’s distress.

I hated seeing the twins at war. I hated seeing any of my kids fighting with each other, but the twins upset me the most. As toddlers, they’d babbled away and made each other laugh as though they had a language only they understood. Even though their personalities differed as they’d got older, they’d remained close and the widening rift between them troubled me.

Another thing that troubled me right now was Freya’s attempts to manipulate her dad into buying things for her. Last Saturday, I’d even heard her telling him about a ballet tutu she desperately wanted which I’d refused to buy because it was too expensive, it wasn’t her birthday or Christmas, and she

wouldn't be allowed to wear it to her ballet classes so it was an unnecessary purchase.

'You don't need to buy the others anything,' she'd said.

Fortunately, another of our ground rules had been no presents. Even though a splurge would have been about Cameron making up for all the lost birthdays and Christmases, it could look to the kids as though he was trying to buy their favour and it would also set a dangerous precedent, so the first presents purchased needed to be for Maisie's birthday in mid-November and then Christmas for them all and, even then, he wasn't to go overboard with seven years' worth of gifts. Fresh slate.

* * *

With leaving Park Lodge way more of a drama than usual – not helped by Mum being away for the weekend with Howard's family – my patience reserve was also empty by the time we made it to South Bay. Until now, I'd thought I had endless patience. I guess everyone has their limits.

'Daddy!' Freya squealed, running up to Cameron and hugging him.

It was a touching moment which gave me a lump in the throat so I imagined Cameron was struggling to hold it together. Freya had called him 'Daddy' by the end of the first meeting and the older two had started calling him 'Dad' last Saturday, but Jayden avoided any sort of name. It would be a big deal showing his absolute acceptance when he first said Daddy or Dad.

The kids were keen to start at Pleasureland, so we'd met outside. They wanted Cameron and Tess to take them on the Ferris wheel. I wasn't a fan of heights and, even though I'd forced myself to go on it in the past so they wouldn't miss out, I was relieved to let someone else do the honours.

They couldn't all fit into one carriage and, although I wasn't going to interfere, I hoped they wouldn't divide up as boys versus girls this time. Thankfully, Cameron took the

older two with him and Tess took the twins with her and nobody quibbled. They shouted at me and waved as the wheel turned and I hoped the positive start to the day would continue.

Next up was a walk along Lighthouse Point, which was a long stretch of rocks stretching across the middle of the harbour. A wide path on the top took visitors to a red and white striped lighthouse at the far end. There was a statue of a mermaid there which fascinated Freya. As we got nearer, she sprinted ahead and, despite my pleas to slow down, she disappeared round the lighthouse.

I sped up and, seconds later, I swear my heart stopped when I heard a scream.

‘Freya!’

I had no idea I was capable of running so fast. As I rounded the corner, she was being scooped up off the concrete beside the mermaid by a huge man.

‘I believe this one belongs to you,’ Artie said, carrying her over to the bench beside me.

She wasn’t actually crying as she looked up at him wide-eyed then sagged against his chest when she presumably recognised him. Artie went to sit her down but she clung onto him.

‘Is it okay if I...?’ he asked.

‘Yes, fine.’

He sat down with Freya on his knee and I winced at the blood trickling down both legs from gashes on her knees.

The others caught up with us and the comments about all the blood from the kids made her look down and release a howl.

‘It’s all right,’ Artie reassured her as she cuddled into his chest. ‘We’ll get you back to the lifeboat station and get you cleaned up.’

‘I’ve got some water and tissues,’ I said, not wanting to put him to any trouble.

‘There’s lots of grit,’ he mouthed.

I looked down and winced. Her cuts were going to need more of a clean-up than I could do here. Fortunately, Freya was already sold on another trip to the lifeboat station. Artie put Freya down and she took a couple of limped steps before looking at him with big doleful eyes.

‘Is it okay to give her a carry on my shoulders?’ Artie asked.

‘Yes, if you’re sure you can carry her that far.’

‘You should see some of the ropes I have to lug around the station. It’ll be like carrying a feather.’

He crouched down and I lifted Freya onto his shoulders and it was only when I caught Cameron staring at Artie, his face like thunder, that I realised I hadn’t done the introductions.

‘Artie, this is the children’s dad, Cameron, and his fiancée Tess. This is our friend Artie. He’s the coxswain at the lifeboat station.’

Cameron’s face darkened and I could just imagine the thoughts swimming round in his head about a real-life hero rescuing his daughter. I also realised he might not appreciate another man carrying Freya on his shoulders when it was something he could have done for her. I recalled something Tess had mentioned last weekend which might help keep the peace.

‘I’d have suggested you carry her, Cameron, but Tess said you’ve been struggling with a dodgy shoulder. Last thing you need is a wriggly six-year-old exacerbating it.’

Cameron rubbed at his shoulder, nodding. ‘Yeah, good call.’

Phew!

We made it to the lifeboat station and Artie hadn’t even broken into a sweat carrying Freya. She still looked forlorn, and I could imagine her knees were stinging like mad, but she’d stopped crying.

I now faced a dilemma – drag everyone into the lifeboat station and subject them to more drama, as Freya would understandably scream as soon as we started cleaning her up, or leave Cameron and Tess to take them onto the beach until we could join them. There was, of course, another option which was to let Cameron accompany Freya into the lifeboat station, but the hostile vibes emanating from him towards Artie put paid to that, so I had to go for the ‘beach without me’ scenario.

Artie was a first aider and must have had the gentlest touch because there were a few cries and some whimpering but none of the screams I’d have elicited from Freya. Must learn to be gentler in future! She’d scraped her hands and one of her arms too.

‘Please can I have plasters on my hurts?’ she asked after Artie cleaned the blood from her legs and patted them dry.

‘You certainly can. I can’t offer you any special plasters for your knees as we don’t have any big enough, but I might have some picture ones for your arm. Would you like that?’

She nodded enthusiastically and he handed her a box to rummage through while he taped large white pads over her knees.

‘Thanks for all your help,’ I said while Freya deliberated over the plasters.

‘It was no bother. I’m glad I was there to help. I was just on my way back when she came hurtling round the lighthouse and it was one of those slow-motion moments where I could see her going but I knew I wasn’t going to get to her in time. I swear she flew for a moment.’

‘She’d been told not to run off, hadn’t you, sweetie?’

‘But I wanted to see the mermaid.’

‘And the mermaid would still have been there if you’d waited for two minutes.’ I decided it would be best not to point out that she hadn’t ended up seeing the mermaid in case that set her off again.

She finally chose a plaster of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* which Artie applied.

'Your knees are going to feel stiff when I help you down but they'll ease. Are you ready to show your mummy and me what a brave girl you are?'

She nodded solemnly and Artie lifted her down off the kitchen unit. I saw the wince of pain as she took her first steps but a few words of praise from Artie helped.

She asked if she could use the toilet, so Artie showed her where it was.

'I hope I didn't overstep the mark by carrying her,' Artie said as we waited outside.

'Not at all. I couldn't have done it.'

'I was thinking more about Freya's dad.' The wrinkle of his nose suggested to me that he hadn't missed Cameron's dirty looks.

'He'll get over it.'

'You said the other woman was his fiancée?'

'Yeah. I'd love to say we're some forward-thinking blended family rubbing along beautifully, but this is all new. I haven't seen Cameron for nearly seven years and he's decided he wants a relationship with the kids now so it's... erm... it's...'

'Complicated?' he suggested when I tailed off, wondering why I'd just blurted all that out.

'That's one word for it, along with exhausting, frustrating, different and lots of words I probably shouldn't say with a six-year-old on the other side of the door. Bet you wish you hadn't asked.'

'Not at all. Look, I was wondering—'

But Freya bursting out of the toilets declaring that she'd had a huge poo interrupted him. I was getting twitchy about the others, so Artie saw us to the door and it was only when

I'd joined them on the beach that I realised he'd never finished his sentence.

Noah was in the sea swimming, Maisie was paddling in the shallows with Jayden, and Tess was sitting cross-legged on a towel surrounded by bags, watching them.

She turned as we approached. 'Are you all cleaned up now, Freya?'

'Artie made me better.'

'That's good. He seemed really nice.'

'He's my friend. Mummy, can I sit on a towel? I don't want to get my plasters wet.'

I was glad she'd thought of that herself because I didn't think she'd have liked me saying it. I billowed out her beach towel and she sat down on it for all of thirty seconds before declaring she was bored and would go looking for shells instead.

'Don't go far,' I said as she grabbed a small pink bucket.

I took her place on the towel and sighed heavily.

'Why is it that, when we're kids, we can't just walk?' Tess said. 'It has to be running or skipping.'

'And then, as adults, we wish we had the energy to run and skip everywhere.'

I watched them playing, letting the tension ebb away. It was quite windy today, so the waves weren't as gentle as last time we'd visited the beach, making them far more fun for jumping over.

'Have you and Artie been friends for long?' Tess asked after a while.

I smiled to myself. Had Cameron asked her to quiz me on who this hero was who his youngest daughter seemed to adore, or was she pre-emptively asking, knowing the subject would come up later?

'Not long. My boss Hollie and her husband Jake are both RNLI volunteers, so they know Artie really well and he was

Jake's best man. I met him at their wedding last month and again a couple of weeks later when there was an open day at the lifeboat station which the kids wanted to go to.'

I suspected she wanted to ask whether we were more than friends, but I hoped she wouldn't. I didn't want there to be a thing about who I was or wasn't seeing and whether that person was or wasn't a 'threat' to Cameron's relationship with his children. It would be hypocritical from the couple planning their wedding. Thankfully she kept further questions about Artie to herself.

As I'd supplied the picnics for the previous two outings, Cameron was adamant that he'd buy fish and chips for everyone for lunch today. Noah and Maisie gathered up the litter after we'd eaten and all four of the children thanked their dad for the food without any prompts from me, which made me proud.

'I have an idea,' Tess said later that afternoon.

'Fire away.'

'What would you say to you and me leaving Cameron with the children for a bit? We could nip to one of those cafés over there and grab a coffee. It only needs to be for half an hour but it'll give you a break and it'll give him a boost in confidence being left alone with them.'

It wasn't a terrible idea, but I wasn't sure. I looked over to Freya, who was making a pattern in the sand with the shells she'd gathered before lunch. Cameron was playing with a ball in the sea with the other three.

'Of course, it's completely up to you. If it's a no – and I understand why it might be – then we can forget I asked. I haven't discussed this with Cam, so he needn't know.'

Jayden started laughing after Cam reached too far for the ball he'd just thrown and splatted into the waves. Thirty minutes? It wasn't long. He'd been looking after three of them for longer than that already today while I stayed on the beach with Freya.

‘Okay. Thirty minutes max, but ask Cameron first in case he’s not ready for it.’

‘I will.’

‘And if he’s up for it, it’s only if the kids say it’s okay. *All* of them.’

‘Completely agree.’

‘They have to be sprayed in more sun lotion first too.’

She smiled at me and did a mock salute.

‘Sorry. It’s always only been me. This is weird.’

‘I know. I get it. But it’s only thirty minutes. What could possibly go wrong?’

KERRY



With Cameron and the kids being in approval of him spending thirty minutes without me, I topped up the sun lotion and left the beach, my stomach in knots.

Tess and I found a café over the road, but I asked for a table inside away from the window, knowing I'd spend the time watching the beach otherwise. It wasn't that I didn't trust Cameron, but being alone with four young children was a big thing when you weren't used to it, especially when there was so much in-fighting.

'Can I ask you a personal question?' I said to Tess when we'd settled at our table. 'Do you and Cameron plan on having children?'

'We can't. Or, at least, I can't. I had extremely heavy periods and severe pelvic pain and nothing eased it so I had a hysterectomy in my mid-twenties, which I was fine with because I didn't want kids. After Guatemala, when Cam opened up about wanting to see his children, I started questioning what I'd done and wondering if I'd been too hasty. I don't regret the surgery – the pain was horrific – but maybe I could have explored having my eggs frozen. The corporate Tess didn't want children, but she wasn't really me and I suspect the counsellor Tess would have liked them.'

She dropped a sugar lump into her cappuccino and stirred it, her expression wistful.

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

‘When Cam and I got together, I was so mindful of not making any of this about me and I want to assure you that I’m not trying to fill some void in my life with your children. It’s not like that at all. It’s an honour being able to spend time with the four of them and I hope they’ll grow to like me and want to spend time with me, but they’re your children and I’ll always respect your position as their mum. I don’t know if I’m being very articulate there, but I hope it makes sense.’

‘It does, and I appreciate the honest answer. Another personal question. How old are you?’

‘Older than you two. I’m thirty-eight.’

‘Wow! You don’t look it.’

‘I don’t feel it!’

We fell into easy conversation about nothing in particular and the time flew by. Tess was getting her debit card out to pay the bill when my mobile started ringing.

We both looked at Cameron’s name flashing up on the screen.

‘He’s probably making sure we’re on our way back,’ Tess said, smiling. We had gone a little over time.

‘Hi, Cameron,’ I said, rolling my eyes at Tess as she pressed her card against the reader.

‘Something bad’s happened.’

His voice sounded strangled and my blood ran cold. ‘What?’

‘I’ve called the Coastguard. I’m so sorry.’

Knocking my chair over in my haste to leave, I ran out of the door and across the road, ignoring the beep from a driver who had to slam the brakes on.

‘What’s happened?’

‘I didn’t know it would be dangerous. She begged me to —’

There was a scuffling noise and Maisie came onto the phone. 'He bought Freya a dinghy and the wind took her and Jayden. We can't see them! Artie's taken the lifeboat out.'

'Where are you?'

'Lifeboat station.'

'I'll be right there.'

I was already on the beach, so I changed direction and raced towards the lifeboat station. Tess caught up with me but the anxiety had closed my throat and I could barely breathe, let alone speak. I pointed to the lifeboat station, assuming she'd understand and follow me.

A woman who I vaguely recognised from the wedding was on the forecourt and ran towards me.

'Kerry?'

'Have you found them?' I asked, continuing towards the door.

She took my arms, stopping me. 'Yes! It's all right. They've found them and they're both safe.'

'Oh, thank God!' It was just as well she was holding my arms because my legs turned to jelly, making me slump against her.

'I've got you,' she said, gently. 'They're on the way back. Won't be long. I'll help you inside. I'm Pam.'

She put her arm round my waist and Tess did the same as we shuffled to the door and up some stairs.

Maisie, Noah and Cameron were at the far end of what I recognised from our tour as the training room, looking out of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The children ran towards me and Maisie burst into tears as I hugged them.

I looked up at Cameron, who was staring at us, one hand pressed over his mouth, the other on the back of his head, looking terrified.

'I'm so sorry,' he said. 'I didn't know.'

My head was screaming *What the hell were you thinking?* but my heart was telling me *They're safe, so focus on that for now.* We could dissect it later, even though I could guess what had happened from the few snippets of information I'd been given. Freya would have begged Cameron to buy her an inflatable, likely complaining she couldn't go in the sea otherwise as she'd get her plasters wet, and he'd have relented, figuring they could all have a go on it. He wouldn't have thought about tethering it. He wouldn't have known the dangers.

So I said nothing and hugged Maisie and Noah a little tighter while Tess put her arm round her fiancé and rested her head on his shoulder.

There was a crackle on Pam's radio and she left the room to respond to it.

'Kerry, I'm so sorry,' Cameron pleaded.

'Not now, Cam,' I said, trying to keep my voice steady. 'We'll talk later.'

Pam returned. 'They're taking the children to the harbour. If you look out the window, you'll spot the ILB any second.'

Sure enough, the orange dinghy appeared from round the back of the lighthouse.

'I'm sure they'll want their mum there so, Kerry, do you want to come with me? The rest of you can join us or stay here.'

'We're coming,' Noah and Maisie said together.

Cameron and Tess didn't speak but they walked towards us, so presumably they were coming too.

'Your stuff will be safe here,' Pam said.

I hadn't even realised that our bags and towels were in a heap on the tables.

When we made it onto the pontoon, Jayden was already out of the lifeboat and Artie was lifting a weeping Freya out.

Jayden ran up to me, but he was all smiles. ‘Mummy! I got a ride on the lifeboat. Did you see me? It was awesome!’

He still had his lifejacket on as he launched himself at me, so it wasn’t easy to hug him.

One of the crew joined us. ‘How about I help you out of your lifejacket, Jayden?’

‘Can’t I keep it?’

‘I’m afraid not, bud. We need it for our next rescue, but if anyone has a phone on them, I could take a photo of you in it.’

‘Wicked! Thanks, Simba! Can I have your phone, Mum?’

I unlocked and passed Jayden the phone, relieved that he seemed to have survived the ordeal completely unscathed.

‘Freya!’ I called.

‘Mummy! I was so scared.’

‘I know you were, sweetie, but you’re safe now.’

Another of the crew removed Freya’s lifejacket, then Artie handed her over to me. She put each of her legs round my waist and her arms round my neck and clung on like a koala bear as I kissed and stroked her windswept hair.

‘Artie, I can’t thank you enough. I’d never have... They’re so dangerous.’ I kept my voice low so Cameron couldn’t hear. I didn’t want to start apportioning blame, but it felt important to me that Artie didn’t think I was clueless about water safety.

‘I know. Freya told me. Come on, let’s get them inside and warmed up.’

Jayden ran up to us, accompanied by Maisie and Noah.

‘Put your life jacket back on, Freya. I’ll take a photo.’

‘Don’t want to.’

‘Please!’

‘No!’

‘Why don’t you take a couple of quick photos of the ILB,’ Artie suggested. ‘Simba, can you sort that and bring the three

of them into the station as soon as you're done? Is that all right, Kerry?'

'Yeah, it's fine.'

'Five minutes maximum,' Artie said, 'then take the ILB round. Pam, can you radio that to the shore crew?'

I carried Freya along the pontoon, following Artie. Cameron and Tess were at the end by the slipway. Cameron's face was so pale, I thought he might pass out at any moment.

Artie paused beside them. 'Most people haven't a clue about the dangers of inflatables in the sea – even those who've lived by the sea all their lives – so please don't punish yourself. You did the right thing by alerting the Coastguard immediately and they're both safe and well.'

Cameron nodded, but he didn't look convinced. As I walked past him, Freya reached out with her hand for a high-five, so I stopped for a moment.

'I'm all right, Daddy, but you can take the dinghy back to the shop.'

He managed a weak smile. 'That's a good idea. I'm sorry. I'm so relieved you're safe.'

'Can I have an ice cream?'

'I'm sure we can manage that, but I think your mummy will want to get you home, so maybe Tess and I can buy some tubs of ice cream and drop them off in a bit.'

His eyes searched mine for permission, but I struggled to inject any warmth into my voice as I said, 'That's fine.'

Back at the lifeboat station, Pam made some juice for Maisie and Noah and a cup of hot chocolate for the twins. I still couldn't get over how animated Jayden was about the whole thing.

We stayed in the training room for about half an hour while the story was relayed, with everyone chipping in. It had played out as I'd suspected, with Freya begging for an inflatable unicorn. Cameron had refused and she'd cried because she couldn't go in the sea like the others. He'd

eventually relented and suggested a dinghy as it would hold two at a time. Freya had wanted the first go and Jayden volunteered to join her. They'd been fine for a few minutes, bobbing about in the shallows, but a gust of wind suddenly took the dinghy out to sea and it kept on going.

'I could hear Freya screaming,' Cameron said, his voice cracking, 'and there was nothing I could do.'

How the wind hadn't tipped the dinghy, I'll never know, but it had remained buoyant with the children inside. If it had tipped... I shuddered, unable to bear thinking about that.

When the twins had finished their drinks and warmed up, I was eager to get them home and was going to call a taxi, but Artie insisted on giving us a lift. He said he had a large car with two extra seats folded down in the boot so could take the children and me together. He offered to return for Cameron and Tess but they said they'd walk back to their car and call at Park Lodge a little later with some ice cream as promised. I suspected they needed the space to process it all.

Back at the house, the children wanted to watch a film together. Freya asked if they could all get into my bed like they did at Christmas, which meant they were upstairs out of the way when a grey-looking Cameron arrived with Tess.

'I'll put these in the freezer,' I said, taking the tubs of ice cream from Tess and leading them into the kitchen. 'I thought we'd better talk first before the kids come down. Grab a seat.'

Tess sat with her arms folded across her body, her head dipped, and Cameron rested his elbows on the table, his head in his hands. The only sounds were the whirring of the coffee machine, the clink of mugs, and the thudding of my heart.

I wasn't going to vent. He'd likely already punished himself enough, so he didn't need me to make him feel any worse. I wanted to talk without the children so I could make sure he was okay and tell him that, at an appropriate point, Freya would receive a strongly worded lecture about why she mustn't try to play one parent off against the other.

I placed the mugs on the table in front of them and was about to open up the conversation by asking Cameron how he was, but he lowered his hands and surprised me by speaking first.

‘I’m so sorry. I wanted to stop her crying and I never thought about the danger. You’d already told me no gifts and I ignored it. I thought I knew better.’

The words were spewing out faster and faster, his voice becoming increasingly shakier and I could only pick out certain words and phrases.

I’m useless... could have killed our children... can’t be trusted... parents were right about me... lost cause... should never have got back in touch... better off without me.

Tess looked as shocked as me and kept trying to interject with reassurances, but he was on a roll.

‘Cameron,’ I said. ‘*Cameron!*’

After repeating his name for a third time – each one louder – with no break in his rant, I lost my patience and slammed my mug down on the table, wincing at the crack in the side.

‘That’s enough! This isn’t helping anyone, least of all you. If you thought I was going to give you a lecture and decided to get in there first, you’re wrong. I’m not blaming you for buying the dinghy, or Freya for manipulating you, or Tess for convincing me to give you some alone time, or me for agreeing with her. Stuff like this happens and we need to learn from it and thank our lucky stars it wasn’t worse. Your parents are *not* right about you and you need to believe that or you’re not going to enjoy a single moment of parenthood because you’ll over-analyse every word and action and really mess yourself up.’

I paused for breath and Tess jumped in.

‘She’s right, Cam. It has to start with you.’

Cameron kept his head dipped so I resumed, unable to keep what Noah called the ‘scary teacher’ tone from my voice.

‘Every parent gets things wrong and that’s just how it is. None of us are perfect and you’re just going to have to suck it up. If you decide to call it a day because of one incident, then you’re right that those kids are better off without you because they don’t need someone who’s going to run off the moment it gets tough – exactly what I feared right from the start. So I suggest you pack it in with the pity party. I know your parents screwed you up and they’ve left deep scars, but this is your chance to prove them wrong, to prove you’re not like them. If you want a bit of space, I get that. Today was scary. But if you decide not to do this anymore, that’s it.’

His head shot up. ‘What do you mean?’

I softened my voice. ‘I mean you can’t expect to dip in and out of their lives as and when it suits you. I’ve been clear about that all along. My top priority is the kids and I won’t have them messed about. I can’t. Surely you understand that.’

‘Yes,’ he whispered.

‘We both do,’ Tess said. ‘I hear everything you’ve said and I completely support you and I’m sure Cam does too.’

She looked at him and he nodded his head.

‘Our top priority is the kids too and, regardless of what he’s just said, I know he wants to be there for them and is as serious as ever about his commitment to them, aren’t you, Cam?’

‘I love them,’ he said, his voice husky, tears in his eyes.

‘Then you’re welcome in their lives.’

Tess patted Cameron’s arm. ‘Why don’t we say hi and goodbye to the kids, tell them we’ve brought them some ice cream and take off?’

‘Yeah, that’d be good.’

I shouted up the stairs that their dad was here and took some pastel-coloured sundae bowls out of the cupboard.

‘Do you want to do the honours?’ I asked Cameron as the kids thundered down the stairs.

He managed to hold it together while he discovered which colour bowl belonged to which child and who favoured Neapolitan over raspberry ripple flavour. He said goodbye and they all gave him a hug and Tess too before racing back upstairs with strict instructions not to get ice cream all over my bed.

I closed the door and got a weak smile and thank you from Cameron but, peeking through the kitchen blinds moments later, I saw Tess with her arms round him and I could see how broken he was. My heart went out to him because I was feeling guilty enough myself and I wasn't the one who'd bought the dinghy, but I didn't have the energy to give him the reassurances he needed and build him back up again. He'd need to rely on Tess for that. My responsibility was to my four children, even if that meant taking a hard line with Cameron.

KERRY



‘Why don’t you get an early night?’ Mum said, looking at me with concern.

I looked at the lounge clock – 8.15 p.m. – and shook my head. ‘Too early and there’s no way I’ll settle. Too much in my head.’

‘Then go for a walk. You’ve nearly lost the light but it’ll still be busy down North Bay.’

My head felt fuzzy and my body was tense. Some air might help. ‘Okay. You’re sure you don’t mind?’

Freya and Jayden had both gone to bed half an hour ago, exhausted after today’s drama. Jayden had been asleep within five minutes but Freya had been unsettled and tearful before fatigue overcame her and she drifted off, cuddling her soft Tinker Bell doll.

‘If she wakes up, I’ll do what I’ve always done – hugs and a story – and she’ll be fine. And I’ll make sure Noah and Maisie are in bed by nine.’

The temperature had dropped, so I changed out of my shorts into a pair of jeans and a zipped hoodie. Darkness had pretty much fallen when I left Park Lodge, but there were streetlights either side of Ocean Ravine and plenty of people around. I never felt unsafe here if I was out alone on an evening.

As I passed Hearnshaw Park, I smiled at the colourful lanterns strung across the side of the lake. Freya loved walking

past them, pretending to spot fairies.

What a day! I hoped never to experience anything like that again. The cold fear that had gripped me when Cameron said something had happened and he'd called the Coastguard would haunt me for a long time. For a terrifying moment, I thought I'd lost one or even all of my precious children to the sea.

When I reached North Bay corner, I turned left onto the promenade running between the colourful beach huts on the left and the beach on the right. One of the many things I loved about North Bay was how different the atmosphere was depending on the time of day and year. On a winter's day it could be busy but, by the evening, there was only a handful of dog walkers and the occasional runner. In the summer, it was buzzing all day with a crowded beach and many of the beach huts open for owners or hirers. Then on a summer's evening it changed again, especially when the sun had set. The beach was still popular but it was the beach huts where the buzz was, with delectable smells drifting from barbeques.

Victorian-style lampposts provided plenty of light and there were strings of warm white bulbs strung between each post, conveying a party atmosphere. I could hear chatter and laughter and the clink of bottles as tourists enjoyed their holidays alongside locals relaxing for the evening.

On the promenade, there were several people walking, some with dogs. A group of six women, all wearing fluorescent yellow vests, jogged past me, followed by a couple of cyclists, and then my heart leapt. A lone jogger was coming towards me and he'd just clocked me too.

'Three times in one day,' Artie said, jogging on the spot as he reached me. 'How's Freya?'

'Tearful, but all right thanks to you and your crew.'

'And you?'

'I needed an escape.' I swept my arm along the promenade. 'This is it.'

I was very aware of him jogging on the spot and much as I'd have loved to stay and talk to him, he was here for a reason.

'Don't let me stop you from your run.'

'Actually, I'm nearly done. I just need to run to the corner and stretch out.'

'I was going to sit on the sea wall at the end. You can find me when you're done if you want. Or not. You've probably got evening plans.'

He laughed that belly laugh of his. 'It's quarter to nine on a Saturday night and I'm out for a run on my own. I think it's safe to say I don't have plans.'

'Then I'll see you shortly.'

He ran off and a ripple of delight ran through me at the thought of some alone time with him, but the excitement disappeared within a few paces as the weariness of the current situation took hold once more. My life was messy and complicated and I wasn't sure I could even squeeze Artie in as a friend. I certainly couldn't think of introducing a little romance into my life, so it didn't matter that my heart thumped when I saw him or my stomach fizzed. Nothing could happen.

* * *

I'd been sitting on the wall facing the sea, my legs dangling about six feet above the beach, for maybe fifteen minutes when Artie joined me.

'Apologies I took a bit longer. I needed to grab a water from the shop and thought you might like a drink too, but I didn't know what you'd like, so I brought choices.'

He placed a paper carrier bag on the wall and I peered inside, laughing at the mix of fizzy drinks and fruit juices.

'Milk?' I asked, raising my eyebrows as I lifted out the pint of semi-skimmed.

‘I figured I’d have all bases covered that way.’

I put the milk back and chose a blackcurrant fruit drink. ‘This is perfect. Thank you.’

He placed the bag on the ground and eased himself onto the wall facing inland. There was enough space for another adult to sit between us, but it felt like he was right beside me, his arms brushing against mine.

‘Is being out here helping clear your head?’ he asked.

‘A bit. It’s been a tough day for everyone. When Cameron phoned to say something had happened, I’ve never been so scared. A million thoughts were racing through my mind, all of them bad.’

‘He looked pretty shaken up.’

‘He was. I really appreciated what you said to him, but it went in one ear and out the other. When they came to the house later, he lost it...’

Artie listened as I explained what had happened.

‘It sounds like he needs some time and space to accept that it could have happened to anyone.’

‘He does, but he doesn’t have that luxury. He’s only in the area for the summer.’

‘So he’s not local.’

‘No.’ I looked up at Artie, his head tilted to one side, his eyes soft, his expression curious and I felt like I had an ally. I’d already told him I hadn’t seen Cameron for nearly seven years and I felt compelled to tell him why.

Artie listened attentively as I told him how we’d met through to the day he left. He was so easy to talk to, letting me get it out at my own pace. I felt so comfortable with him that I didn’t even cringe when I shared about Cameron’s reappearance and what he’d told me about never being in love with me.

‘It really hurt to hear that,’ I admitted. ‘It made me somehow feel like a failure, as though I was never good

enough for him.’

‘From what I’m hearing, it’s the other way round.’ His eyes fixed on mine and something shifted in the air. My heart began pounding, my lips tingled and everything around us – even the sound of the waves lapping below – seemed to silence as I focused on his face, wondering what it would be like to kiss him, to run my hands through his beard and that thick hair of his.

‘I don’t know how he could be with you and not...’ His voice was husky as he inched a little closer to me, but he looked away and shook his head. ‘I’m sorry he made you feel like that. You did nothing wrong. It’s all on him. I hope you know that.’

‘I do, but it doesn’t hurt to hear someone else say it.’ I rolled my shoulders. ‘So what about you? Any dodgy exes haunting you?’

‘No, nothing like that.’ He paused for a moment. ‘I was married, but she died. It’s been eleven years now.’ He shook his head. ‘I can’t believe it’s been that long.’

‘Oh, Artie! I’m so sorry.’

My heart broke for him. Widowed? I guessed he was in his mid-forties, so he wouldn’t have been that much older than I was now when it happened.

‘Can I ask about her?’

‘Sure. Her name was Suzanna. I met her fourteen years ago on a rescue. She was out on a double kayak with a friend and they somehow managed to get grounded on some rocks. When we got to them, the tide was going out and the kayak was stuck on these rocks with the pair of them inside, about a foot above the sea, terrified of moving and overbalancing.’

He smiled at the memory. ‘It was one of the strangest sights I’ve ever seen. One of the crew took a photo and we show it to new recruits to make a point about expecting the unexpected when you go on a shout. Suzanna came back to the station the following day with some thank you chocolates and

we got talking. A year later, we were married, and less than two years after that, she was gone.'

He took a swig on his water, a frown creasing his brow.

'Was she ill?'

'No. It was an accident. She was a marketing executive with a big company in York and often had to go down to their head office in London. She'd had enough of all the travel and we wanted to start a family anyway, so she handed in her notice, but they begged her to do one last London trip. On her way to the hotel that evening, she was mugged by a couple of kids on a moped. They mounted the pavement, grabbed her phone and her bag and knocked her into the road, straight under a bus.'

'Oh, Artie! That's horrific.'

'It was the worst thing ever, especially as she was...'

He tailed off and wrapped his arms across his chest as though seeking comfort.

'She was what?' I asked gently.

Artie turned to me, his eyes searching mine.

'I've never told anyone this before. The reason she'd handed in her notice at work wasn't just because we wanted a family – it was because she was already pregnant. We'd had the dating scan and were going to make the announcement when she got back from London, but she never came back.'

'So you lost your baby too?' I placed my hand lightly on his leg. 'Artie! How did you cope with that?'

'By working every hour God sent and then, when the coxswain post at the station came up, applying for that. I probably spend more time at the lifeboat station than I do at home. Too many memories at home. We'd bought a big family house overlooking the park. I knew I should probably have moved out a couple of years after she was killed, but I couldn't seem to bring myself to take that final step of a complete goodbye.'

'How about now? Is moving an option?'

‘It is, but I’ve become too lazy. Every New Year for the past five or six years, I’ve told myself I’ll freshen it up and get it on the market in the spring – let someone else enjoy it as the family home it should be – and I never seem to quite get round to it.’

‘It’s scary to think about how one decision can change everything. If your wife hadn’t agreed to that one last trip... If Cameron hadn’t made promises to his granny...’

‘I know,’ Artie said, his voice soft, ‘but sometimes those decisions lead to amazing things. You wouldn’t have your gorgeous children if Cameron hadn’t made those promises.’

‘I keep telling myself that.’

‘I made another decision a long time ago that changed everything for me. I’d had no plans to join the RNLI, but a mate of mine had an interview lined up. He bottled it last minute – too much effort – and wouldn’t phone to cancel. I thought that was rude, so I went down to the station to let them know he wasn’t coming and got chatting to the coxswain. The more I discovered, the more I loved the sound of it. I’d never have met Suzanna if I hadn’t joined and, despite the devastation of what happened, I’ll never regret my short time with her. When I lost her, being in the RNLI, saving lives, being supported by that volunteering family, saved my life too. It gave me a reason to wake up each morning and face the day without my wife, baby and the future we had planned. But it would *never* have happened if I hadn’t made that decision to apologise on my mate’s behalf.’

‘That’s an amazing story.’

‘Several of the crew have incredible stories about how they ended up volunteering and quite a few are serendipitous like mine.’

I smiled at him. ‘That’s one of my favourite words.’

‘Serendipitous? Mine too. But can you say it quickly five times in a row without stumbling?’

‘Of course! It’s not that hard.’

Turns out it was. I got to the fourth attempt and stumbled so I challenged Artie back and he was no better. We were soon laughing helplessly because the more we both tried, the worse we got, until we could barely say the word even once.

‘I needed that,’ I said when we’d calmed ourselves. ‘Thank you.’

‘Thank you. I needed that too. And I think I needed to tell someone about the baby. Thank you for listening.’

‘I’m honoured that you felt you could tell me and I’m so very sorry.’

‘I’m sorry for what you’ve been through. Cameron sounds like a...’ He paused and bit his lip. ‘He’s still the father of your children so I won’t say it. But you deserve so much better.’

We smiled at each other and that crackle in the air was back once more, but I couldn’t stay any longer to explore what it might be. I needed to make sure Freya was okay.

‘You need to get back, don’t you?’ Artie said, as though reading my thoughts.

‘Mum’s there, but I feel I should be too in case Freya wakes up.’

‘I understand. I’m just round the corner from you so I’ll walk you back.’

He picked up the bag of drinks and we strolled along the promenade. There were still a few stragglers outside the beach huts but no more joggers and not many folk wandering about either.

Artie asked about the children as we walked – where they went to school, what their interests were – and expressed amazement at how many activities they did during term-time.

‘I’m exhausted just thinking about it,’ he said as we set off up Ocean Ravine. ‘Do you ever get any time to yourself?’

‘Hardly ever, although I grasp my moments when I can. Hollie invited the kids to the whole wedding and I decided to go alone and let them come to the evening do instead. It was

lovely having adult company without being interrupted every five minutes.'

We'd reached the junction between Ocean Ravine and Hearnshaw Drive and paused.

'Do you live up there?' I asked, pointing up Hearnshaw Drive. It was the only road I could think of which had big family houses overlooking the park.

'I do, but I'll walk you to your house.'

'It's fine, honestly, you can see our house from here. But thanks for the offer.'

'Okay. Well, thanks for the company tonight. Best run I've had in ages.'

'And thank you for yours. After the crap day I've had, I didn't expect it to end laughing about the word "serendipitous", of all things.'

We smiled at each other under the glow of the lamplight. He was about a foot away from me yet I had that feeling of being incredibly close to him that I'd had earlier.

'If you were able to grasp one of those moments to yourself again, do you think you might consider going out with me for a drink or something to eat?'

He moved a tiny bit closer and I did too.

'I'd love that.'

'I know you'll need to give the kids lots of attention over the next few days, but if you have any free moments after that...'

We were even closer now and I wondered if he could feel my heart pounding.

'There aren't any activities in the holidays. Friday? Or Thursday?'

'Thursday's good for me.' His voice was deep, husky and oh, so sexy.

‘It’s a date,’ I whispered, my gaze dropping to his lips, wondering once more what they’d feel like against mine.

‘I wish it was Thursday now.’

‘Me too.’

Suddenly I didn’t need to wonder because he bent forward and brushed his lips lightly against mine. They were soft and full and I wanted more. I snaked my arms round his neck, pressing my body against his as I responded with passion. I’d thought it would feel strange kissing someone for the first time since Cameron, but it felt so natural and right. He ran his fingers through my hair, his kiss deepening. Every fibre of my body felt like it was on fire. I was vaguely aware of some kids going past calling, ‘Get a room!’ and sniggering, but it didn’t stop me. I was completely consumed with desire for this amazing man, this real-life hero, this broken being who’d lost everything but kept going with a life devoted to saving others.

And then the spell was broken by my phone ringing. I groaned as I pulled away, apologising.

‘It’s my mum.’ I connected the call. ‘Everything okay?’

‘I’m so sorry to call you, love, but Freya had a bad dream and woke up screaming. She got herself into such a state that she was sick all over her bed. I’ve done my best, but she just wants her mummy.’

‘Aw, bless her. I’m on my way back. Five minutes.’ I hung up and grimaced at Artie. ‘Did you catch that?’

‘Yeah. Give her my best.’

‘I will.’ I gazed at his kind face and ran my hand down his soft beard and drew him into a last, sensuous kiss.

‘Thursday,’ I said, smiling as I dashed across the road and back to Park Lodge, feeling like I was on cloud nine despite having a poorly child and some soiled sheets to return to. I wasn’t going to go out tonight but, as Artie said, some decisions led to positives and Artie was one of the most positive people I knew. Right now, I couldn’t imagine a better person coming into my life.

* * *

‘She’s asleep,’ I said to Mum as I joined her in the lounge, holding the baby monitor. ‘Dug this out in case she’s sick again, although I’ve put a bucket by her bed.’

I settled my head against the chair back and closed my eyes for a moment. The moment I did that, I was back in the park, experiencing that amazing kiss.

‘What’s that smile for?’ Mum asked.

I opened my eyes. ‘I wasn’t aware I was smiling.’

‘You were, which is a surprise considering the day you’ve just had. What’s going on?’

Never one to keep things from my mum, I told her about bumping into Artie on the seafront and the kiss we’d shared.

‘Why are you crying?’ I asked, shocked to see her tears. I hardly ever saw Mum cry.

‘Because I’ve waited a long time to see you like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like you are now. Sparkling. Excited. I never saw you like this with Cameron.’

‘I never felt like this with Cameron,’ I admitted. ‘But that’s crazy, isn’t it? We’ve only just met. I hardly know him.’

‘It’s not about time, honey. You can spend a lifetime with someone and still never really know them, and you can spend a few hours with someone else and your souls instantly connect. You know what I think? I think you’ve found your Howard.’

That nearly set me off. Howard was a wonderful man who made my mum very happy and adored my children. If I’d found the equivalent in Artie, I was a very lucky woman and I needed to do what I could to hang onto that, no matter how difficult things were right now.

HOLLIE



I'd booked my dating scan for a Thursday to avoid any unexplained absence from work.

'I'm going to apply some gel and it might feel a bit cold,' Dawn, the sonographer said.

She wasn't exaggerating about the gel being cold, but I didn't mind. Jake, sitting beside me, took my left hand in his and we both fixed our eyes on the monitor on the right.

Dawn ran the handheld probe across my abdomen and I waited eagerly for our baby to appear on the screen and the heartbeat to fill the room.

'It can sometimes take a bit of toing and froing to find it,' Dawn said, her soft voice full of reassurance. 'Where are you, little one?'

A dark shape appeared on the screen and, as I glanced up at Dawn, I didn't miss the flicker of a frown. Goose bumps prickled my arms and I had a horrible feeling in my gut.

'Okay, Hollie, can you wipe the gel off you and then nip to the bathroom and empty your bladder? I'm going to need to do a transvaginal ultrasound, which means inserting a probe. I can typically see your uterus better that way. Is that all right with you?'

'That's fine,' I said, my voice sounding distant as I took the tissue she handed me.

'Don't look so worried,' she said, smiling. 'This happens a lot.'

I tried to focus on something unrelated as I used the bathroom but all I could think about was that slight frown and the lack of heartbeat. Was something wrong?

Jake and Dawn were laughing when I returned to the room, which was comforting. If there was something to worry about, surely she'd have shared it with a fellow medical professional.

'Right, Hollie, get yourself settled in the chair again with your knees up towards your chest and relax your legs outwards like you would for a cervical scan.'

I did as she asked and she confirmed my position was good before inserting the lubricated probe. I held my breath, waiting for the heartbeat, but, once more, there was silence. I glanced up at Jake and he gave a slight shrug.

A small dark shape appeared on the screen like before. No sound. A deeper frown from Dawn.

'You see this darker shape...'. She pointed to the screen after what felt like forever. 'This is your pregnancy sac, but I'm struggling to detect a heartbeat today, so we'll need you to come back in a week's time for another scan.'

'Is there something wrong?' Jake asked.

'There are many reasons why we don't pick up a foetal heartbeat on a first scan. The most common is that the dates are incorrect and the pregnancy isn't as far along as expected, which is why we wait a week for another scan.'

She removed the probe and handed me some tissue paper. I didn't want to ask the next question, but I had to know.

'Could it mean something bad?'

'It's possible, but it's too early to say, especially when I can see the pregnancy sac. We'll know more in a week's time. I'm sorry I can't be more specific.'

I stood numbly beside Jake at the reception desk a little later while he made an appointment for next week, looking at the faces of the women in the waiting room. My gaze rested on two women who looked so similar that they had to be mother and daughter, grinning at a scan photo and laughing as they

tilted it to see the baby better. That's what I'd expected to be doing right now. In my head, I'd already prepared an announcement for the staff at the café tomorrow.

'Are you okay?' Jake asked as we walked back to the car.

'Do you think we're losing the baby?'

He didn't answer immediately and, when he finally spoke, I could hear the fear despite the positive words.

'You heard what Dawn said about the dates. It sounds like that's a common thing.'

My phone rang and Angie's name flashed up on the screen.

'Hi, Angie.'

'How did it go, honey?' she asked and, at that point, I broke. My lip wobbled and tears rushed to my eyes as I thrust the phone at Jake.

'Hi, Angie,' he said. 'Erm, we're not really sure at the minute. We've had the scan but it was, erm, inconclusive. We've got an appointment for another one next Thursday.'

Silent tears coursed down my cheeks. Inconclusive. That was one word for it.

I hadn't realised Jake had ended the call until he wrapped his arms round me. I rested my head on his chest, the tears still falling, and we stood there in the middle of the hospital car park, caught in a crossroads in our life. Which way was it going to go? Would we be celebrating impending parenthood or mourning the loss of our baby?

* * *

Back at Sandy Croft, Jake heated up some soup for lunch and, even though I didn't feel like eating, I knew I needed to in the hope that all would be well at the scan next week and it really was a case of being too early to detect the heartbeat.

'I don't have to go out with the camera this afternoon,' Jake said as he cleared the dishes away. 'We can do something

together.’

‘No, there’s no point in either of us changing our plans, especially when Dawn says it’s nothing to worry about just yet. I’d rather be busy. Is that okay?’

‘Of course. I just didn’t want to abandon you if you’d prefer the company.’

‘You could maybe leave Pickle with me,’ I said, looking across to where he was sprawled out on the rug in the snug. ‘If I do need to clear my head, I can take him out for a walk.’

‘That’s fine but, if you don’t get a chance to walk him, I can take him out when I get back or we can go together.’

I wouldn’t say I felt lifted, but I did feel better knowing my day was planned out.

‘You’d better let Irene know before she rings us,’ I said. Even though we hadn’t wanted to go wider with the news, I’d been hit with a wave of nausea when visiting Irene at the weekend and she’d guessed. She was delighted and had already dug out her knitting needles and some pastel-coloured wool to start on a blanket. I prayed that, in a week’s time, I wouldn’t have to tell her to put the kitting away.

Jake went upstairs to his studio to phone Irene and get his camera bag packed while I made a fruit tea. I’d wait until he was ready to leave before I went to the workshop.

I was on one of the sofas in the snug with Pickle curled up beside me, responding to some lovely customer reviews on the café’s social media profiles, when Jake reappeared with his backpack and tripod.

‘Irene sends her love. She says to tell you that the daughter of a former neighbour of ours experienced the same thing a few years back and everything was fine when she went back for her scan a week later.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ I stood up and gave him a goodbye hug. ‘I’m going to do my best to stay positive, but I think it’s going to be a long week. How are you feeling?’

‘Reassured to hear of a real case too, but I agree. Long week ahead.’

* * *

I’d had a really constructive afternoon in my workshop. My original plan had been to paint some Hollie’s Wood houses but I’d felt the need to take out some frustration with the power tools instead, so I left Pickle in the house away from the noise and spent some time drilling holes in chunks of wood to make tealight holders. When I felt calmer, I fetched him over to the workshop and spent the rest of the afternoon gluing pieces together to create some small pieces of wall art – a starfish, a seahorse and a seal – only breaking to give Pickle a quick walk round the block.

At 5.30 p.m., I was thinking about clearing everything away and taking Pickle out for a proper walk when there was a knock on the workshop door.

‘Hello? Only me!’ Angie called, pushing it open. ‘Thought I’d pop in on my way home to see how you’re holding up.’

I’d held it together all afternoon, but a few words of kindness and I crumbled.

‘Aw, honey,’ she said, ‘come here.’

She held me in her arms and rubbed my back until the worst of the sobs subsided and I let her lead me and Pickle inside and onto the sofas in the snug.

‘I got the gist from Jake, but do you want to tell me what happened?’ she said, her voice gentle and encouraging.

I talked her through everything Dawn had told us, and Irene’s positive story.

‘I’m so sorry it wasn’t what you’d have expected or hoped for,’ she said, ‘but I agree with you about staying positive. The technology they have these days is incredible but there are clearly limitations on picking up a heartbeat so early in pregnancy.’

‘I’m really hoping that’s it, but what if it isn’t? What if it is bad news?’

She grasped my hand in hers and fixed her eyes on mine. ‘If it’s bad news, you’ll be heartbroken but you’ll find the strength to get through it.’

‘Did this happen to you?’ I asked. Last year, Angie had shared with me that the reason she and Martin didn’t have children wasn’t because they hadn’t wanted any as I’d believed, but because she’d had five miscarriages before they made the tough decision not to try again.

‘It was different then. There wasn’t a dating scan. Most women would get one at about twenty weeks but my first four angel babies didn’t make it nearly that far and, with Bella, I was booked in for a scan but ended up having it a couple of days early when she’d stopped moving at twenty-one weeks. It was devastating having confirmation that she’d died but, deep down, I already knew.’

She released my hand as Pickle jumped up onto her knee, wanting attention.

‘If you do want me to talk about what happened, I don’t mind going through the details. It’s not pretty, but I’m okay with it if it would help. Right now, though, my advice is not to go there. Don’t go online searching for answers because it’ll scare you. Try to put it out of your head and stay positive. Next week, you’ll have answers and you’ll hopefully be grinning from ear to ear and coming straight over to the café, waving your scan photo.’

‘I like that image.’

‘Then stick with it.’

KERRY



I should have been on top of the world, my heart racing in nervous anticipation of my first date with Artie. And not just my first date with him – my first date since Cameron, my first date since I was seventeen. My heart *was* racing but it was because I'd just sprinted up two flights of stairs for the fourth time in twenty minutes to break up yet another argument.

‘What is going on in here?’ I cried, bursting into the playroom, my patience well and truly spent.

Freya was in one corner wailing with a pale-faced Maisie’s arms around her. Noah and Jayden had hold of each other by their T-shirts, cheeks flushed, teeth bared, and there was a broken snow globe on the wooden floor, a pool of sparkly liquid seeping into the edge of the rug. With a heavy heart, I clocked that it was Freya’s beloved Tinker Bell snow globe which she’d asked Father Christmas for last year.

‘Let go of each other,’ I demanded, separating the boys.

They both started shouting at once and Maisie joined in too. With that and Freya’s cries, it was impossible to hear anything. A bubble of fury welled inside me and I yelled, ‘Stop. Right. Now!’

I hadn’t known I was capable of such volume. I never shouted at the kids, although they’d never given me reason to until recently. It did the trick. They all stared at me wide-eyed and even Freya’s sobs subsided. For a moment.

‘Right now, I’m not interested in who said what or who did what so don’t even try to explain. Off to your bedrooms, all of

you. Early night. No television and no computer games.'

The protests started but I raised my hand in a stop motion and glared at them all which secured silence.

'You know I'm meant to be going out, but now I'm going to have to clean this up, so that's just great. Thanks for that. While you're in your rooms, I suggest you all think about your foul behaviour this summer towards me, towards Nanna and Howard, and towards each other and what you're going to do to change it. Tomorrow, we'll discuss your ideas as well as what's gone on here this evening.'

'But we're going to Fendale tomorrow,' Noah protested.

'Not anymore. Not after this.'

The protests and apologies came thick and fast, but it was too little, too late. They'd been warned that there'd be consequences if the nastiness continued and I was determined to see that through.

'Bed!' I called, cutting across them all and pointing to the door. 'Now! And if I have to come up again, there'll be no trips out next week either. Do I make myself clear?'

As they trooped past me, shoulders dropped, eyes downcast, it took every ounce of willpower not to gather them in my arms and tell them it was all right and we'd still go to Fendale Fun Farm tomorrow, especially as I knew why this evening had been so fraught.

I stood in the playroom with my eyes closed for a moment and listened to the sound of two doors closing and two slamming. I wouldn't like to speculate which of them that had been as I was pretty sure they were all fuming and hated me right now. I was fuming too, but more with Cameron for making me the bad guy in all of this.

He'd emailed me late last night:

To: Kerry Marsden

From: Cameron Fullerton

Subject: Saturday

Hope the kids are all OK and that Freya in particular has recovered. I'm struggling. I know the scenarios are completely different but the brush with death has triggered a few things about Guatemala that I clearly haven't dealt with. I don't want the children to see me like this so I think it's best that we give Saturday a miss. Can you tell them? I promise to see them the following weekend no matter how I'm feeling because I am in this for the long haul, no matter what this cancellation might suggest.

Although I was disappointed that he'd cancelled, I understood his reasoning and hoped he was accessing help for his issues. What really bothered me was that he'd told me by email instead of picking up the phone, and that he expected me to pass on the glad tidings. What was I supposed to say to explain it? I could hardly tell them that their dad had been held at gunpoint by guerrillas. I settled on 'Daddy's poorly' but, even so, the messenger got shot this morning – hissy fits all round.

I'd given them time to calm down before encouraging them to open up about their feelings on seeing their dad. Either they couldn't articulate their thoughts or they didn't want to as they all pretty much said the same thing – *it's all right spending time with him*. All right? Was that all?

With a sigh, I picked up the main chunk of snow globe. Tinker Bell had been inside the globe reading a story to three of her fairy friends, each sitting on toadstools outside. One of Tinker Bell's wings had smashed off and one of the fairies had been beheaded. I hoped Freya hadn't noticed that.

Mum was at the kitchen table, completing the puzzles page in a magazine. She looked up. 'Dare I ask?'

I held up the remnants of the snow globe. 'Tinker Bell is now flightless and Fawn has been decapitated.'

'Ouch.'

I tossed the pieces in the bin and took a cloth, dustpan and brush from the under-sink cupboard. 'I guess I'm the cleaning fairy again.'

‘Oh, love, I’ll do it. You’re all ready for your date.’

‘I’m not going.’ Tears pricked my eyes as I said it.

‘No! You can’t let a broken snow globe ruin your plans.’

‘But it’s not just a broken snow globe, is it? It’s everything. I can’t bring Artie into this mess and I don’t know what I was thinking getting involved with someone when there’s so much going on at home, so I’m going to have to let that one go and accept it as a shocking case of bad timing.’

Mum opened her mouth to protest but I shook my head and went upstairs to clean up. When that was done, I went to my bedroom, plonked myself on the bed with a sigh and phoned Artie.

‘I’m so sorry, but I need to cancel tonight,’ I said when he answered.

‘Oh no! Is everything all right?’

‘Not really. Cameron has pulled out of Saturday, the kids have had hissy fits about it, and World War III broke out this evening. There were casualties. We have decapitated and wingless fairies in our kitchen bin right now.’

‘Sounds brutal.’

‘It was. I was really looking forward to tonight, but I’m so wound up, I’m not going to be good company.’

‘Do you want to reschedule?’

I sighed heavily, touched by the understanding in his voice. ‘I’d love to, but I can’t. I really like you, Artie – *really* like you – but the timing couldn’t be worse. I need to focus on finding a way back to the happy family we were before Cameron came back, and somehow incorporate Cameron and Tess into that. Right now, I don’t know how to be there for my kids and start a new relationship. I wish I did, but I don’t. I’m so sorry.’

‘Me too.’ There was a slight pause. ‘I’m not going to try to talk you out of it, much as I want to. You don’t need me adding to your problems. Thanks for being honest with me.’

‘I feel like I’ve just given you a pathetic *it’s not you, it’s me* excuse and it effectively is that, but it really, really isn’t. It’s not you at all and it’s not me either – it’s just my situation right now.’

‘Honestly, Kerry, I do get it, so let me put something out there. I know you have your mum and you’re really close to her, but she’s also really close to what’s going on so it’s going to be hard for her to be objective. I’m sure you have stacks of friends to talk to who can offer that objectivity but, if you could use another one, I’m here for you.’

Stacks of friends? Not really. Not proper friends who I could talk to about real stuff. I hadn’t had one of those since Saffy and she’d dumped me because of Cameron. She’d had him sussed, just like Mum had.

‘Thank you. I’m not sure I deserve your kindness.’ I could barely speak for the lump in my throat.

‘You deserve all the kindness in the world,’ he said softly. ‘Look, I’ll let you go but one more offer. When I’m frustrated or need to clear my head, I find there’s nothing better than a run. I’ll cancel our booking and go for one now – not that I’m frustrated with you, mind. You’re welcome to join me. No strings. Just two friends pounding the pavement.’

‘I’m no runner.’

‘You don’t have to be. But there’s no pressure from me. I’ll let you go and hope peace gets restored. You know where I am if you need me.’

‘Thanks, Artie.’

After we’d said our goodbyes, I wandered over to the window and parted the blinds. I could see the rooftops of some of the houses on Hearnshaw Drive, but I didn’t know which one was Artie’s. I liked him even more after our conversation, but it wasn’t to be. Maybe one day?

My phone started ringing and my stomach sank at the name on the screen. Cameron.

‘Hello?’ I said, my voice terse.

‘It’s only me.’

‘I know. Would have been nice if you’d phoned last night instead of a copout email.’

‘It wasn’t a copout. I was in a bad place.’

I nearly said *whatever* but managed to bite my tongue.

‘What do you want, Cameron?’

‘Erm, I’ve been thinking and I’ve changed my mind.’

‘About what?’ My fists clenched. He’d better not say he was going to exit their lives after all and I could be the one to give them the news and pick up the pieces.

‘About Saturday. It was wrong of me to cancel.’

‘Yes, it was. And it was even more wrong to get me to do your dirty work by telling them.’

‘I’m sorry. I’d had a few drinks and I wasn’t thinking straight. I still want to see them on Saturday.’

‘No.’

There was a pause. ‘What do you mean, no?’

‘I mean no to seeing them on Saturday.’

‘But cancelling was a mistake.’

‘Perhaps, but mistakes have consequences. I’ve already told them it’s off and I’ve had the day from hell as a result. If you think I’m going to tell them it’s back on, only for you to cancel again later when you have another wobble, you need your head read.’

‘I’m not going to cancel again,’ he snapped.

‘I’m not prepared to take that risk. You cancelled because you’d been triggered and you felt you needed that time and I think you’re right to take it.’

‘But I want to see the kids.’ He sounded like one of the kids when he said. ‘Are you trying to stop me seeing them?’

‘No. You *can* see them, but it’ll have to be the following weekend.’

‘Kerry! We’re halfway through the holidays already. You’re not playing fair!’

‘Firstly, this isn’t a game. I’m not playing anything. And, secondly, you should have thought of that before you sent that email. Drunk or not, it was obviously on your mind. What did I say to you right from the start? That I wasn’t willing to have the kids messed around. You decided not to see them this Saturday and there was a huge fallout from that which I’ve dealt with. You’ve said you’ll see them next Saturday instead. That’s what the kids expect. That’s what’s going to happen. Surely you can...’

I frowned and moved the phone away from my ear. The cheeky git had hung up on me. I called him back but it went to voicemail. I paced for a couple of minutes in case he hadn’t intentionally hung up and was trying to call me back himself, but there was nothing. A second attempt also went straight to voicemail.

‘Hi, Cameron, I don’t know whether you lost signal or hung up on me but our conversation was unfinished and I’m concerned that you may not have taken in what I said so I want to make it clear here. I am not trying to, and never will, prevent you from seeing our children, but I am refusing to let you see them this Saturday. That’s because you asked me to cancel and the reason you gave was pretty serious and is not something that’s going to be magically fixed overnight. As requested by you, I’ve already told them Saturday’s off, although I obviously didn’t mention Guatemala. It didn’t go down well and we’ve all had a horrendous day as a result. They know they’ll see you when you’re feeling better and they’ve accepted this.

‘Right at the start, we all agreed that the best interests of the kids would be at the heart of everything we did. In my opinion, it’s in the best interests of their well-being that the plans aren’t changed yet again because, believe me, the fact that the cancellation was met with anger does not mean that a reinstatement will be met with delight. It’ll be more anger and confusion and will detrimentally affect your relationship going forwards.

‘I know I said I thought you’d cancel again and I suspect that’ll be the part you focused on. That was unfair of me. My decision about Saturday is nothing to do with that and is purely about the harmful effect of the chopping and changing. It’s also nothing to do with the incident with the dinghy and me thinking you’ve put our kids in danger or me not trusting you with the children or anything else your mind might conjure up because you think you’re a useless parent. It’s nothing like that.

‘Please listen very carefully to these messages and make sure Tess hears them too because I know that a fragile state of mind might mean you don’t take it all in. I emphasise I’m *not* stopping you seeing the children next Saturday. All I’m doing is sticking to your cancellation to avoid a whole pile of grief and lasting damage.’

It took considerable restraint to deliver the message in a calm, rational manner when I really wanted to scream and shout. I shuddered when I hung up, clicked my phone onto silent and tossed it onto the bed. I’d had my fill of Cameron-shaped drama tonight and, if he wanted to call me back, it was his turn to have a voicemail conversation.

I stared at the phone for a moment, upside down on the duvet, and snatched it up again.

‘Artie?’ I said when he answered. ‘If the offer’s still there, I’d like to join you on your run tonight.’

‘Okay. Would meeting in fifteen minutes at the junction of Ocean Ravine and Hearnshaw Drive work for you?’

‘It would. Thanks, Artie.’

‘Any time.’

I disconnected and put the phone on to charge beside my bed. It wasn’t coming with me. My date might have been ruined, but I was determined to have some me-time tonight and that meant being uncontactable.

* * *

Even though my body was screaming with protest that the last time I'd run this far was during school cross country when I was fourteen, Artie was right about the restorative power of running.

He'd suggested we run along The Headland until I'd had enough and then we could stretch out and walk back. With every pounding step, a bubble of rage escaped into the night air and floated away into the darkness. He didn't attempt to engage me in conversation. We were there to vent my frustration – not to chat.

As we approached the skateboard park, I felt my stamina rapidly dwindling. I burst into a final sprint and drew to a halt opposite the park entrance, gulping for air.

'Nice sprint,' Artie said.

'I'm spent now, though.'

'You did brilliantly. Has it helped?'

'Hell, yeah!'

'That's a relief. There was a danger you'd hate every minute of it and hate me for subjecting you to such torture.'

I rolled my shoulders and smiled at him. 'I don't think there's anything you could do that would make me hate you.'

He held my gaze and the chemistry fizzed between us. I wanted another one of those kisses but it wasn't fair to mess him about. He deserved better than that and so did I.

'We'd better stretch out,' he said, lowering his eyes.

He took me through some exercises before we headed back towards the curved lights of North Bay.

'I love it down here,' I said. 'Even at night time, the view along the coast is amazing.'

'What's your favourite view round here?'

'Ooh, that's tricky.' I pondered for a moment, looking ahead and behind me. 'I love the view north, seeing all the beach huts curving round to the Sea Rescue Sanctuary and I

love the view south of the castle, but the ultimate view is from the castle, being able to see in both directions.'

'Do you get to the castle often?'

'Yeah, we're members and the kids love it, especially when there's an event on. You?'

'The last time I went was with Suzanna shortly after we met. I'm way overdue a visit.'

'You'll have to come with us. The kids would love having you there.'

I pictured the six of us wandering round the grounds, Artie carrying Freya or Jayden on his shoulders, lifting the kids onto the cannons, having wooden sword battles with them. I stopped walking, drawing a sharp gasp at the strength of the vision of family life which the five of us had never experienced before.

'Are you okay?' Artie asked, looking at me with such concern that my heart rate – which had only just calmed from the run – increased once more. 'Have you got a stitch?'

'No. It's just that...' I glanced up at the cliff top, although I couldn't see the dark shape of the castle from where we were. 'It's silly, really. I invited you to the castle – it just slipped out – and I could instantly picture you there and it... well, it's only ever been the five of us and it felt like you were meant to be there and... and I'm probably not making any sense at all. Shouldn't go running. It's obviously given my brain a shake.'

Artie smiled. 'It does make sense and I can picture it too. I'd like to take you up on that offer, but only when you're ready. I can wait.'

His expression was so tender that my heart raced even faster. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before. 'Thank you for understanding.'

I couldn't help myself. I had to be close to him and wrapped my arms round his waist, resting my head against his chest. I could feel his heart pounding as fast as mine.

He held me tightly against him with one arm and lightly stroked my hair with the other. I'd never felt such a strong desire to kiss someone but I couldn't cancel our date one moment then kiss him the next. With great reluctance, I released him.

'I'm sorry things are complicated,' I said. 'I don't want to mess you about.'

'You're not. You're being honest with me.'

We set off in silence. My hand twitched to hold his so I thrust both hands into the pockets of my zipped hoodie.

'Do you want to talk about it?' he asked after a couple of minutes. 'No pressure if you'd rather not.'

I pondered for a moment. I didn't want it to take any more of my evening than it had already, but Artie had been so patient with me that it was only fair to give him an explanation.

'Am I being unreasonable?' I asked, once I'd filled him in.

'Not at all. He can't cancel one minute and change his mind the next. That's not fair on you or the kids.'

'That was my thinking. All along, he promised me we'd do what's best for them and the minute I do that but it's not what he wants, he's thrown his toys out the pram.'

I thought I hadn't wanted to talk more about it but now that I had a listening ear, on my side, I opened up about the traumatic week I'd had with the kids and how close I was to snapping.

We'd reached Hearnshaw Park and Artie suggested we walk through the park alongside the colourful lights rather than up the main road.

'Do you think he'll calm down?' he asked.

'I hope so. Tess seems to have her head screwed on, so if he plays her my voicemail as requested, I think she'll support what I'm saying and bring him round.'

'I'm sorry you're going through all this.'

‘I’m sorry you went through all that stuff with your wife. Life can dish out some tough blows.’

‘But it can dish out some precious moments too.’

We’d stopped under a lamp and I looked up at him, longing for another kiss but knowing the timing wasn’t right.

‘Thanks for tonight,’ I said, my voice coming out hoarse.

‘I didn’t do anything.’

‘You did loads. You listened, you understood and you didn’t push me. I appreciate that so much. I’m so sorry it wasn’t the date we’d planned.’

‘It’s okay. It was still a special evening because I got to see you.’

He leaned a little closer and I thought he was going to kiss me. I knew I had no willpower to stop him because I wanted it so badly, but he straightened up and breathed in deeply.

‘We’d better get you home and make sure World War IV hasn’t broken out.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘I might have an email or voicemail rant from Cameron to look forward to. Best summer ever!’

KERRY



Yesterday - the day after the snow globe incident - I refused to let four sorrowful pairs of eyes over breakfast convince me to back down on not taking them to Fendale Fun Farm. After eating, they disappeared upstairs and returned with handmade apology cards which were adorable, but I still wouldn't budge. There needed to be consequences for their behaviour, but I suffered them too. The morning dragged by at the pace of a snail with a limp and I felt restless and couldn't settle on anything. Around mid-afternoon, I was going stir crazy so I took them over to the park for an ice cream as a treat for being quiet and courteous all day, but made it clear that I wasn't open to a discussion about another date to visit Fendale because that would have rendered our quiet day at home pointless.

So far, today wasn't looking good either. The atmosphere at breakfast was sombre. Maisie picked at a slice of toast, and Mum and I exchanged glances as Jayden dropped his spoon into his half-eaten cereal before pushing the bowl away with a sigh.

Even though we'd only had three Saturdays in a row with Cameron and Tess, spending that time with them already felt part of the routine and it didn't feel right not to be getting ready to meet them today.

'When are we going to see Daddy again?' Freya asked.

'I'm not sure. Hopefully next Saturday but I haven't had that confirmed for definite, so please don't be annoyed with

me if it doesn't happen.'

'Then ring him and ask him,' Maisie said, putting her elbow on the table and wearily resting her head against her palm.

'Firstly, that should have been a question with a please in it because I don't take orders from you. Secondly, I'm not going to ring him. I told you he was poorly which was why he had to cancel today and he'll need to feel better before he can confirm he'll be seeing you next weekend. Me phoning him every five minutes to ask if he's better yet is not going to miraculously make him better.'

I heard the edge to the words and softened my voice. 'We can go to the beach after lunch, but North Bay only.'

'Can't we go to South Bay?' Noah asked.

Mum must have noticed my whole body tensing as she stepped in. 'What did your mum just say, Noah?'

'North Bay only.'

'So how about you thank her for her suggestion instead of trying to change it?'

'Thanks, Mum,' he muttered.

'What should we do this morning?' Maisie asked.

'Be nice to each other,' I responded. 'In a house full of toys and crafts with a large back garden, I'm sure you can find something to do. Sun lotion on if you go outside.'

After they'd finished their breakfast, put their plates in the dishwasher and disappeared upstairs, Mum put her hand on my arm.

'Breathe.'

I gave her a grateful smile. 'Thanks for stepping in. I think it had more impact coming from you.'

'They'll be fine after an afternoon on the beach and it's probably a good idea to have Freya back at the seaside after last Saturday, although she'll have to go back to South Bay eventually.'

I ran my fingers through my hair, shaking my head. ‘That hadn’t even crossed my mind. I chose North Bay because I prefer it, it’s closer, and there aren’t all the other attractions to bleed me dry. I never even thought about taking her back to where it happened. Do you think I should make it South Bay?’

‘I’d stick to North Bay because that’s where you’ve said you’ll go. They’re pushing everything at the moment and, if you cave, it’ll be a rod for your own back, just like caving about Fendale would have been. Maybe see how she is in the sea today. If she’s wary, you might need to ask Artie for some advice. And, while you’re at it, you can tell him you’ve changed your mind about putting things on hold.’

I wasn’t sure who Mum was most disappointed in this week – Cameron for the cancel/reinstate debacle or me for pulling out of my date and calling things off with Artie.

‘I can’t, Mum. Artie understands.’

‘I’m glad someone does!’ She fixed me the sort of hard stare that would have made Paddington Bear proud. ‘Honestly, Kerry, *that* man has already done enough damage. I appreciate that the timing isn’t ideal to start a new relationship but you have four young demanding children so timing will *never* be ideal. Artie knows your situation, he knows what he’s getting into, and he’s still keen, so I say to hell with Cameron and do something for you for a change. Go for it!’

She spoke with such passion that I half-expected her to stand up and start waving sparkly pom-poms.

‘I’ll think about it, but I can’t promise you more than that.’

The scraping of her chair across the tiles and the clatter she made putting her bowl and mug in the dishwasher confirmed her disapproval. It was fair enough. I wanted to scrape and clatter too, especially when I’d put my life on hold for Cameron but he still hadn’t even done me the courtesy of responding to Thursday’s voicemail.

By mid-morning, I’d worked myself up into a ball of frustration which even running the vacuum cleaner round the house couldn’t alleviate. I tapped in a message to Cameron,

although I had to significantly edit it before I sent it to add in some pleasantries.

TO CAMERON

Concerned I haven't heard from you and hope you're getting help with what triggered you. The kids send their love and hope they can see you next Saturday. Please confirm asap whether you'll be spending the day with them so I can manage expectations either way. Thank you

I saw the indicators for message delivered and read, and waited for those three little dots to show he was responding, but they never came.

On the beach, I put my phone to silent and played with the kids but, when we set off back to Park Lodge a few hours later, there was still nothing from Cameron. The beach had been fun and relaxing, but I was back to feeling angry. I understood that he was annoyed with me – albeit unfairly when he was the one who'd originally cancelled today – and I understood he had issues to address, but how much effort did it take to reply and say *I'm not sure yet but will let you know soon?* Some contact, even if it didn't have a clear answer, was better than radio silence.

'Can we have ice creams now?' Freya asked, tugging on my shorts as we approached their favourite kiosk.

I was about to say yes – I had promised, after all – but I knew that returning to Park Lodge with no answer from Cameron would mean I'd sit and stew.

'Tell you what, why don't we jump in the car and go to The Starfish Café instead? We can get sundaes and say hello to Pickle if he's there.'

There was a resounding chorus of approval, so we continued towards home to get the car.

As I drove to The Starfish Café, I still couldn't push the situation with Cameron from my mind. My biggest fear was that no contact could mean a solicitor's letter winging its way to me next week demanding access. That was a road we really

didn't want to go down when this could be easily and amicably resolved between the two of us.

I'd done my bit for now. I wasn't going to message him every day. The ball was in his court and, if he did go down the legal route, I hoped he was ready for more heartache because nearly seven years of absence with zero contact didn't paint him as a caring father.

HOLLIE



We'd had our busiest day so far this summer and had even had a queue at lunchtime, which was extremely rare. The great thing about exceptionally busy days was that there was no time to think and that was exactly what I needed as that second scan day ticked ever closer.

At 4 p.m., customers were still coming in and there were no spare tables on the terrace.

'Where are they all coming from?' Angie said as she joined me behind the counter to make a round of drinks. 'Not sure we're going to be able to close at five today.'

'I reckon half past. Are you okay to stay?'

'No problem at all.'

The door opened again and I smiled as Kerry's children appeared and Pickle shot out of his bed to greet them.

'I thought it would be easing off at this time,' Kerry said. 'Do you need a hand?'

'That's lovely of you,' I said, 'but we should be okay. You'll need to sit inside though. Oh, and I'll need to clear a table for you.'

'It's the least I can do.' She leaned over the counter and grabbed a cloth and spray.

Javier took Kerry's order for drinks and sundaes and, by the time they'd finished, the customers had thinned out and we could finally catch our breath. Seeing the children taking

Pickle out onto the terrace, I poured myself a glass of water and took it over to Kerry's table.

'Surprised to see you today,' I said, sitting down opposite her. 'I thought Saturdays were dad days.'

She sighed and rolled her eyes. 'You wouldn't believe the shocker of a week we've had...'

At our RNLI training session on Monday, I'd heard about the terrifying dinghy rescue last Saturday and had called round at Kerry's after work on Tuesday to make sure everyone was okay. I listened in disbelief now as she updated me on what had happened since then.

'I feel like I've been tearing my hair out all week,' she said. 'I'm surprised I'm not bald. Mum's been great, as always, and so has Artie.'

Her voice softened and her expression turned dreamy as she mentioned his name. It struck me that she'd done the same thing on Tuesday when I'd visited, although I'd been too distracted by the drama to notice.

'Is something going on with you and Artie?' I asked.

She bit her lip as she glanced towards the terrace, presumably making sure the children were still out of earshot.

She leaned a little closer and lowered her voice. 'He asked me out.'

'Oh, my God! That's amazing. When's the date?'

'It should have been Thursday, but I had to cancel. That's when I had my run-in with Cameron and my head was a mess. Artie was so good about it. We went for a run instead to burn off the frustration.'

'Are you going to try again?'

She shook her head slowly. 'My family's broken. I need to fix that first.'

I didn't miss the glint of tears and lightly placed my hand on her arm. 'Maybe so, but don't let doing that break you.'

She already looked broken as her tired eyes met mine.
'How do I stop it?'

'By holding on to everything and everyone that makes you happy. That'll give you the strength to get through the dark stuff.'

'Is that what you did?'

'Every day. My mum used to say *there's always someone out there having a worse time than you, so sparkle, shine, you've got this!* You've got this too, but you've also got Artie to help you and I tell you what, if my boat sprung a leak, I couldn't think of anyone better to help me bail it out.'

A couple of tears brimmed over and trickled down her cheeks.

'They're busy with Pickle,' I said as she grabbed one of the napkins, knowing she'd be concerned about the children seeing her upset.

'Thanks, Hollie. I needed to hear that.'

I left Kerry and went to clear some tables, mulling over the situation she was in. I couldn't push her towards Artie if she wasn't ready, but I hoped she would consider what she wanted in this, for her sake and for his. There'd been nobody since Suzanna, so him asking Kerry on a date was huge. I couldn't bear the thought of that wonderful man having his heart broken again, even though I knew that Kerry would never hurt him intentionally.

* * *

We managed to close at 5.15 p.m. – just fifteen minutes late. Jake had stopped by as I had a task for him. It had struck me that we'd put a stack of photos of the café on the socials after the refurbishment last year, proud to showcase the new look, but there hadn't been many since then, so I wanted some photos of the café taken from various angles outside. They were best taken as the sun started setting when the light was gentler.

The idea had grown into photos of the food – something I hadn't done much of recently either – so I was going to prepare some of our popular meals for Jake to photograph out on the terrace.

'Who's been such a good boy today with all those customers?' I asked, reaching for the treat jar. 'I think someone deserves some biscuits.'

'I was a good boy with my patients. Do I get a reward too?' Jake laughed as I held out the treat jar towards him.

'Or I can offer you a kiss?'

'Hmm. Dog biscuit or kiss? It's a tough choice.'

He kissed me slowly and tenderly and, for those wonderful few minutes in his arms, I could push aside my fears for our baby, forget about Larissa being back in Whitsborough Bay, and surrender completely to the man I loved.

I reluctantly pulled away and sighed. 'This isn't going to get any photos taken. Back to work we go.'

'Yes, boss!' Jake brushed his lips against mine one final time before picking up his camera bag to start our photography session.

A few hours later, we huddled together on the terrace, scrolling through the photos on the screen on the back of Jake's camera.

'They're brilliant. Thank you so much.'

'Pleasure. They should keep you going for a while. I'll do some work on them tomorrow and Monday.'

We sipped on glasses of fruit juice, admiring the beginnings of a golden sunset.

'It's beautiful out here,' I said. 'I've seen so many winter nights from here with it getting dark so early, but I rarely get to appreciate a summer night. We should have tea here more often – just the two of us or with a few friends. We could...'

Tears clouded my eyes and I shook my head.

‘What were you going to say?’ Jake asked gently, taking my hand in his.

I gulped down the ball in my throat. ‘I was going to say we could organise something for Thursday, but...’

He ran his thumb over my hand. ‘I know. I hate this feeling of being in limbo. We’ll know soon and, if it isn’t good news, we’ll get through it together. We’ll make that stumble part of our dance.’

HOLLIE



I woke up before the alarm clock on Thursday morning, my stomach churning with nerves. Today we'd find out what was going on after a week that I swear had lasted about a month.

It was Dawn, the same sonographer as before, who called us into the room and explained that we'd go through the same process as last week.

I'd worked hard to stay positive all week, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong and we wouldn't be leaving the hospital today clutching a baby scan photo and excitedly preparing for the arrival of our first baby.

As Dawn ran the probe across my gel-covered abdomen, silence hung heavily in the room. I glanced at the monitor but, this time, I couldn't even make out the dark shape I'd seen before. That couldn't be good.

'Okay, Hollie, I'm not picking up a heartbeat here so we'll try internally again.'

I shuffled to the toilet, emptied my bladder, and returned to the room, my heart heavy as the probe was inserted. I closed my eyes, hoping to hear that swooshing sound of the heartbeat I'd heard so often on television programmes, but there was nothing.

Dawn's sigh was barely perceptible, but it was there and I knew for certain at that point. My worst fears had come to fruition. It was over.

‘Have you had any cramping or bleeding since your last appointment?’ she asked.

I opened my eyes and shook my head. ‘Nothing like that.’

‘Remember how I detected a pregnancy sac last week, but I couldn’t find a heartbeat?’

I recognised that gentle tone. I’d have to ask Jake if part of his medical training included perfecting the ‘bad news’ voice. Jake clearly recognised it too as his hand tightened round mine.

‘Well, today there’s no sac, which sadly means there’s no more foetus. I’m so sorry.’

Beside me, Jake gasped. I’d already known but hearing the words spoken out loud was still a shock. Tears pooled in my eyes and I struggled to breathe over the lump in my throat.

‘That’s definite?’ Jake asked, his voice all husky.

‘It’s definite. I’m afraid you’ve had what’s known as a missed or silent miscarriage, Hollie, which is where your body still believes you’re pregnant so you have the symptoms of pregnancy but none of the symptoms of having a miscarriage.’

Missed miscarriage. Silent miscarriage. I’d never heard either of those terms before. Yes, my body had been silent. No suggestion at all that anything was wrong.

‘I need to refer you to the Women’s Unit but you’ve got three options to consider. You can go home and at some point – likely in the next week or so – you’ll have a natural miscarriage where the foetal tissue passes through the body with the cramping and bleeding I mentioned earlier. The second option is to have a medically assisted miscarriage where you’re given tablets to bring it on. The alternative is that you stay in hospital for a D&C – a dilation and curettage procedure – which is where your uterus is cleared for you rather than you passing the tissue naturally.’

She lightly touched my arm. ‘I appreciate that’s a lot to take in and you don’t need to make any decisions right now. As I say, I’ll refer you to the Women’s Unit and the consultant there will take you through the options in more detail. I’ll

leave you for a few minutes to get dressed. I'm so very sorry for both of you.'

As soon as the door closed behind her, I crumbled. 'I knew it was going to be bad.'

Jake rocked me as I sobbed. 'I thought it was going to be all right. I thought we'd both had too much loss already.'

I wrapped my arms tighter round him. That same thought had gone through my mind. It seemed too cruel that we'd both lost our families and would also lose our baby. My logical mind told me the two things weren't connected and that one in four pregnancies ended in loss – something I'd found online before I'd stopped myself from going down that rabbit hole. Why did I have to be that one?

Conscious that the room would be needed for another scan, I wiped my tears and got dressed.

'I want the D&C,' I told Jake. 'I can't spend the next week or so waiting for it to happen.'

He nodded. 'I was hoping you'd say that. The thought of it happening at some point when you're on your own makes me feel sick.'

He pulled me into his arms once more and kissed the top of my head. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Me too.'

We were still hugging when Dawn poked her head round the door.

'Do you need a bit longer?' she asked.

'No, and I know you said there's no rush, but we've got a decision. I'll go for the D&C. When will that happen?'

'I've just spoken to the Women's Unit to check availability and they can do it today. If you could take a seat back in the waiting room, I'll update your records and get you an appointment with the consultant who'll go through all the details.'

I hung my head in the waiting room, unable to witness any joy or excitement from expectant mums when our plans had just been crushed. Jake rested his hand on my thigh and I leaned against his side.

I'm not sure how long passed before Dawn reappeared with some paperwork and an instruction to go to another part of the hospital. Jake knew where she meant so I followed him down the corridor and up a flight of stairs, fighting back the tears every step of the way.

* * *

We hadn't been in the waiting room upstairs for long when a short, curvaceous woman with wild grey curls and red-framed glasses called us into a consulting room and asked us to sit at a round table. There were several watercolours of flowers surrounded by bees and butterflies on the wall and a large noticeboard covered in thank you cards.

'My name's Jo Lambert,' she said, joining us at the table. 'I'm a senior consultant here on the Women's Unit. I understand you've been for your dating scan and had some sad news.' Her expression was soft and her voice warm and gentle, empathy flowing from her.

All I could do was nod, unable to push any words past the lump in my throat.

'I'm so very sorry,' Jo said. 'I know how difficult that must have been for you both. I'm here to explain what will happen next and to answer any questions you might have. Don't feel there's anything you can't ask.'

She paused, presumably to give some space for questions. I had one. It had popped into my head in the waiting room downstairs and it wouldn't go away.

'Is it my fault?' I asked, my voice coming out hoarse. 'Did I do something wrong?'

Jo shook her head slowly. 'It's a question I hear so often and the answer's no. It's unfortunately just one of those things.'

Let me give you the technical explanation first, and then I'll give you my take on it. Is that okay?'

When I nodded, she continued. 'There's still so much we don't know about the whys and wherefores, but typically a miscarriage in the first trimester is caused by chromosome problems. This is right at the point of conception where the foetus, for whatever reason, has either received too many or too few and therefore can't develop properly. We don't know why this happens – it just does. Which brings me onto my personal take. If you had a packet of seeds or a tray of bedding plants and planted them in your garden, they wouldn't all grow. They're the same plants and they have the same soil, water and light, but some will develop and others won't and there's no reason why. There's nothing the gardener did wrong – those plants simply weren't meant to be – and, by the same vein, there's nothing that you've done wrong. Does that make sense?'

'Yes, thank you.' It was some small comfort to look at it that way.

'There are lots of misconceptions about miscarriage,' Jo said, 'and so many myths about what can increase the risk – feeling stressed or depressed, flying, eating spicy food, lifting or straining, having a shock. It's none of those things. It's nature and it happens to one in four women, so it's a lot more common than most people realise.'

'Could it happen again?' Jake asked.

'Yes, but it's less likely. Please don't let the fear of it happening again put you off. Some women do have recurrent miscarriages and, if that does happen, we're here to give them support and do further investigations, but most miscarriages are one-off events. Do you have any more questions?'

'Not at the moment,' I said. 'Just what happens next.'

I glanced at Jake and he nodded to confirm that's what he wanted to know too.

'Dawn downstairs tells me you would like a D&C. Are you fixed on that or do you want me to go through the other

options in more detail?’

‘I’m fixed on it.’

‘Okay. Let me explain what will happen...’

* * *

I needed to return to the hospital for 3 p.m. to take some medication ahead of the D&C, which would be conducted under general anaesthetic an hour later. It was shortly before noon when we said goodbye to Jo, so there was no point sticking around for three hours. Pickle was at home and I had an overwhelming urge to hold him close.

Outside the hospital, Jake hugged me then held my hand as we walked back to his car. We didn’t need words. What was there to say anyway? I felt weary and just wanted the operation to be over and for today to end.

An upbeat dance track was playing on the radio when Jake started the engine and he swiftly changed the station to something more chilled. I barely registered the music as we travelled back to Sandy Croft, staring out of the window as we passed houses and shops. When Jake and I had originally discussed trying for a baby last summer, I’d told him that I was fairly relaxed about the whole thing because I’d given up on ever meeting anyone and therefore anticipated a future without motherhood. But it had happened and the day I saw that positive pregnancy test, everything changed. There was a baby growing inside of me and I already loved it. Or rather there had been a baby growing inside of me.

Pickle was waiting for us by the kitchen door and I scooped him up and buried my head in his soft fur, settling on one of the snug sofas, cuddling him. He’d have normally squirmed free to get some attention from Jake, returning to me when he’d welcomed us both home, but today he stayed with me. It was as though he knew how badly I needed him, not that Jake wasn’t hurting too and didn’t need comfort. We’d both lost our baby and had our plans for the future ripped from us, but it was my body going through this. My body that had

let us down. Me who'd failed. I'd had one job to do. One job to protect and grow our baby and I hadn't done it. No matter what Jo Lambert said, I couldn't shake the guilt that this was somehow my fault.

* * *

I'd started shivering when I came round from the D&C. A nurse told me it wasn't unusual for that to happen after an operation and they'd made sure I was warmed up before being discharged.

Travelling home this evening, I still felt cold even though the shivering had long ceased, and longed to curl up under the duvet and sleep, closing down this incredibly difficult day.

'Did you get in touch with everyone?' I asked, meaning Angie, Artie, Katie and Irene – the ones who knew about the baby.

'Yes, and they all send you their love.'

I looked out of the window, my top teeth teasing a piece of loose skin on my dry bottom lip. My eyes burned and my throat felt tight, but the tears didn't come.

'Are you okay?' I asked, turning back to Jake.

He glanced at me, his eyes shining. 'I'm sad.'

'Me too,' I whispered.

I rested my hand on his thigh and we continued the journey in silence.

At home, Pickle ran up to us but I felt too weak to bend down and stroke him.

'Come upstairs,' I said to him. 'We'll have a cuddle.'

He raced on ahead and was already on the bed waiting for me, tail wagging, as I shuffled into the bedroom. My head was fuzzy and my body felt weak, so Jake helped me into my nightwear.

'Would you like a hot drink?' he asked. 'Anything to eat?'

‘A cup of tea, please. I don’t think I can face food.’

I crawled under the duvet and cuddled Pickle against me and must have drifted off because I opened my eyes and Jake was lying on his side on top of the duvet, his hand on my arm.

‘How long have I been asleep?’ I asked.

‘Only about half an hour, but you obviously needed it. I made you a tea...’

My throat was dry so, at the mention of tea, I immediately twisted to grab the mug and took a gulp.

‘...but it’ll probably be cold,’ Jake said, his warning coming a little late. ‘Sorry. I’ll make you another in a minute.’

I snuggled back under the duvet and Pickle adjusted his position so that his back was pressed against me.

‘How are you feeling?’ Jake asked. ‘Any pain?’

‘No pain. Just sleepy and, as you said earlier, sad.’

He stroked my hair back from my face as he fixed his eyes on mine. ‘I don’t know what to say. Everything seems so inadequate.’

‘You don’t have to say anything. Just having you here is enough.’ I gave him a weak smile. ‘Although I am gasping for a cuppa.’

He smiled back. ‘Your wish is my command. Back soon. Come on, Pickle, I’ll put your tea out.’

Left alone, I pushed back the duvet and retrieved my phone from my handbag. I couldn’t face going into work tomorrow and, even though it was after eight and therefore a little late, Angie would still have time to organise some cover for me. Our summer students were usually open to extra shifts.

There were several messages waiting for me.

FROM KATIE

Jake's just told me. I'm so very sorry. Sending huge healing hugs. I'll give you a ring tomorrow night but message me if you're not ready to talk. Thinking of you both xx

FROM IRENE

Sending you one of those virtual hugs and hope to give you one in person on Sunday x

FROM ARTIE

My thoughts are with you and Jake. Let me know if you need anything

FROM ANGIE

Aw, honey, my heart is breaking for you. I wouldn't wish this experience on my worst enemy. Jake said not to call tonight and I understand that but please know I'm thinking of you and sending my love. I know that work has been a great distraction in the past but I'd urge you to take some time to grieve, if only a couple of days. I can soon sort cover. Here for you to help you through this xxxxx

Tears streamed down my cheeks, the kindness of those four wonderful people breaking me. I couldn't face sending individual replies as that might invite a conversation – something I didn't want right now – so I responded to each with a heart to let them know I'd read and appreciated their messages, then I wiped my tears and typed in a reply to Angie.

TO ANGIE

Thank you. I think you're right. My first instinct was to rush back, but I can't face it just yet. Can you sort cover for tomorrow and Saturday? I'll be back on Monday. If anyone asks, you can tell them the truth. I don't want to lie to them. Speak soon xx

Jake returned with my fresh mug of tea just as I sent the reply to Angie.

‘I’ve told Angie I’m not going into work tomorrow or Saturday,’ I said as he placed the drink on my bedside drawers. ‘I feel like I could do with a few quiet days before I go back.’

He sat beside me and I cuddled up against his chest, thinking about Jo’s gardening analogy and how our baby was like one of those seeds or plants that simply didn’t grow with there being no rhyme or reason for it. I thought about the reassurance that there was nothing I’d done wrong. I’d heard the myth about flying and had been worried that going on honeymoon could have been an issue, or maybe the half a glass of prosecco I’d had at the wedding. And I thought about the one in four statistic. It was common. It happened all the time. It had even happened five times to Angie. And while all those things could potentially bring some comfort, they didn’t help one iota. I didn’t want to be that one in four – I wanted to be one of the three. I wanted to be with Katie on our regular Thursday night out, proudly showing off my baby scan photo and talking about our concurrent pregnancies instead of being tucked under my duvet before 9 p.m. with my heart and womb empty.

‘I told Angie she could tell the others.’

Jake tightened his hold and kissed the top of my head.

‘Will you be okay if they say anything when you go back?’ he asked.

‘Probably not, but they’re my family and I don’t want to lie to them. I’ve been so emotional lately, some of them have probably guessed I’m pregnant.’ My gut wrenched as I corrected myself. ‘*Was* pregnant.’

He didn’t say anything, but I didn’t expect him to. He was hurting too and likely debating whether or not to open up a similar conversation with his colleagues or, perhaps more likely, our RNLI family. It might have physically happened to me, but it had happened to both of us.

I reached for my tea and sipped on it slowly, a jumbled mass of thoughts and feelings taking a stranglehold on me. I slammed my mug down, the tea sloshing over the sides.

‘You know what, Jake? I’m not just sad, I’m angry. Why us? It’s so unfair. Hasn’t life already thrown us enough shit to deal with? It’s like we aren’t allowed to be happy. We’ve finally made it to a good place and wham! Here’s some more death and heartbreak to deal with. Have fun with that!’

I collapsed against him, sobbing. He took a deep shuddery breath and his tears splashed into my hair.

‘I’m sorry,’ I cried. ‘I didn’t mean to make you cry.’

‘It’s not you. It’s what you just said. It’s like you’re in my head. When will it be enough?’

We clung onto each other, our bodies shaking with the combined outpouring of grief. We would get through it. I knew that. We’d find the light but, at this moment, an oh-so-familiar darkness shrouded us. The opening line to Simon and Garfunkel’s ‘The Sound of Silence’ began playing on a loop in my mind, increasing the ferocity of my tears. Darkness was *not* my friend and I didn’t want to greet it. I wanted light, happiness. I wanted my baby.

KERRY



Hollie's words on Saturday had a massive impact on me. I'd twisted myself into knots trying to be patient with Cameron and make his return work for everyone, but at what cost? Our family had always lived for the summer holidays, but so far this year there'd been more tears than laughter, and that couldn't continue. I wouldn't let Cameron rip my family apart and I wouldn't let him break me either. He'd done that once and no way was I going to let him do it again.

I woke up on Sunday morning determined to salvage the second half of the summer. Hollie said I needed to hang onto what made me happy. The summer made me happy. My kids made me happy. They usually made each other happy too and it was time we got that back.

'I'm concerned that this summer is trailing behind other summers we've had,' I said over breakfast on Sunday, 'and that makes me sad. Does it make you sad?'

I noted the nods and mutters of agreement round the table.

'So I've had a chat with Nanna this morning and we've got an idea. There are three weeks left to turn it around and make this the best summer ever, but whether that happens is down to you four. We've planned a full week of awesome days out but they're going to be mystery days, only revealed over breakfast, and I have three strict rules.'

I raised a finger to highlight each one. 'One – if anybody whinges about the plan when it's revealed, we'll stay at home. Two – if anybody pesters me about what's happening on future

days, we'll stay at home. And three – if there are big fights or fallouts, we'll stay at home. You can therefore do a lot of fabulous things, a few, or none. What's it to be? Are you up for the mystery week?'

The enthusiasm was exactly as I'd hoped. I'd wanted to add in a fourth rule – *if anyone interrogates me about seeing your dad again, we'll stay at home* – but it wasn't appropriate. Hopefully the implication was there in the other rules.

We spent Sunday morning in Hearnshaw Park doing the new treasure hunt, followed by an afternoon on the beach. Monday was a visit to the castle and a walk along the river, and Tuesday was a day in Kittrig Forest doing the ropes course and pond-dipping. Yesterday Mum and Howard joined us for a full day at a zoo and theme park about forty minutes' drive from Whitsborough Bay. This morning, we'd been to the Sea Rescue Sanctuary and were heading to Splash Down after lunch – our local water park.

'You're doing brilliantly, love,' Mum said as the kids disappeared upstairs to get into their swimming costumes.

I ran my hands down my face, sighing. 'I'm exhausted. I can't keep this pace up.'

It wasn't being out and about that had drained me. It was the considerable effort needed to keep everything light-hearted and fun and to nip the slightest niggle in the bud before it escalated because the last thing I wanted to do was enforce a day at home for rule-breaking.

'I take it there's still no word,' Mum said.

'Not a peep, but I'm done chasing. He wanted this. If he still wants it, he has to make it happen.'

* * *

There was an ice cream van in the car park when we'd finished our session in Splash Down, so I gave Maisie some money to get ice lollies and sat on a bench guarding the bags.

Checking my phone, I was surprised to see Cameron had finally made contact.

FROM CAMERON

If it's still okay to see the children this Saturday, Tess and I would very much like to spend the day with them. What time and where?

'An apology would have been nice,' I muttered before tapping in the briefest of responses.

TO CAMERON

Fendale Fun Farm. 10.30 by the playground.
Bring lunch. Don't cancel

I'd planned to take them to Fendale on Saturday anyway as we hadn't been since I'd pulled our visit for bad behaviour. Cameron didn't deserve the daddy stars it would earn him, but I was prepared to give him that small win, knowing how happy it would make the kids and therefore how much more smoothly the day would run.

FROM CAMERON

I won't cancel. See you there

The kids joined me, sucking their lollies, and Maisie handed over the change.

'Your dad has been in touch,' I said. 'He's feeling much better now, so I've arranged for you to see him and Tess again on Saturday. I assume that's okay with you all?'

It was met with approval, but a little less enthusiastic than it might have been if Cameron had got his act together sooner.

'Will we still get to do our mystery day on Saturday?' Noah asked.

'Yes. We're still going to the same place I'd planned.' Maybe I wouldn't let Cameron claim those daddy stars after all.

That was met with more enthusiasm and I did feel a tug of guilt which I pushed away. I needed to stop letting my empathy over Guatemala cloud over what he'd done to us. Guatemala might have led to his epiphany – his Scrooge moment – but seeing the light didn't eradicate the darkness from before.

We were walking back to the car, lollies finished, when Freya released an excitable cry and bolted off.

'Freya!' I cried, chasing after her and grabbing her arm. 'There's cars here! It's dangerous!'

'Sorry, Mummy, but I saw Artie.'

My heart leapt. 'Where?'

'In that car!' Her shoulders sagged and she released a heavy sigh. 'It's not him.'

A large man with a ginger beard was lifting a baby out of the car she'd pointed at.

'Can we see Artie again, Mummy?' she asked.

'Can we go out on a lifeboat?' Jayden added, earning him a shocked look and vigorous head shake from his twin.

'No to the lifeboat,' I said, 'but I could ask Artie if he'd like to meet up with us at some point. Would you all want that?'

Cue another twinge of guilt as the suggestion was met with way more enthusiasm than meeting their dad had been.

'No promises,' I said, 'but leave it with me.'

* * *

Back at Park Lodge, we all settled in the lounge with a film. The twins drifted off, their heads resting together, holding hands, and it warmed my heart to see them so close once more. I hoped seeing Cameron again on Saturday didn't unravel all the good this week had done.

The kids had surprised me with the request to see Artie. It had been obvious they all liked him, especially Freya, but I didn't think there was any reason for him to be on their mind. He'd been on my mind all week, especially when we'd visited the castle and that vision I'd had of him being there with us felt so real.

I longed to see him again. I thought about what Hollie had said about Artie being the one she'd want to bail her out if her boat was sinking. I felt like he'd already done that for me and, even though he'd said he'd be there for me with no pressure, I couldn't help feeling that it was unfair on him. But not seeing him was unfair on me. Argh! Why did it have to be so complicated? Maybe I'd wait until we'd seen Cameron again.

Later that evening, after we'd eaten, Artie messaged me.

FROM ARTIE

Hope this week has been a good one for you. Do you realise a whole week has passed since our run? Could you face doing it again tonight?

TO ARTIE

This week has been good but exhausting. A run would be good. Meet you at the junction at 8pm?

* * *

As soon as I saw Artie, there was no denying the strength of my feelings for him. It was so hard not to fling my arms around him and melt into one of his amazing kisses. Running along the seafront towards the skateboard park, it was all that I could think about. Every so often, we needed to dodge round pedestrians and his arm would brush against mine, sending a zip of electricity through me.

My head was all over the place as we stopped and stretched out. I wanted to go for it with Artie because, if I didn't, I was still letting Cameron control my life. But what if things kicked off when we saw Cam again?

‘How’s your week been?’ Artie asked as we set off back.

I updated him on our mystery week and Cameron finally getting in touch, and he told me about rescuing a dog trapped on a beach with an incoming tide. The passion for his work and his caring nature exuded from every word and endeared him to me even more.

We’d walked through the park instead of going along the road. There was a grassy incline beyond the lake, near the benches. Artie paused and looked up at it.

‘There’s something I’d like to show you. Have you ever been up there?’

‘No. It’s just a bunch of trees, isn’t it?’

‘That’s what most people think, but it’s so much more than that.’

I followed him up the incline, my curiosity piqued. It struck me that this might be a ruse to steal me away for a kiss and the idea thrilled me, but I didn’t think Artie would do that when I’d poured my heart out to him about there being too much going on in my life at the moment to start a relationship. I really felt like he’d not only listened – he’d heard too.

It was dark, with only the light from the moon preventing us from tripping over tree roots.

‘We’re nearly at the summit,’ Artie said, his voice almost a whisper. ‘Do you trust me?’

‘Yes. Completely.’

‘In that case, would you be willing to close your eyes and let me guide you for the final few metres? You can say no. This isn’t some weird ritual.’

‘I trust you.’ I put my hands out in front of me. ‘My eyes are closed.’

He took both my hands in his, the warmth of the connection sending another zip of electricity through me.

‘Just a few more paces... nearly there... you’re doing great... pick your right foot up a little more as there’s a root...

Okay, stop there but don't open your eyes just yet. I'm going to put my hands on your shoulders to make sure I get the position just right.'

His hands connecting with my skin sent another fizz through me. I could feel the tickle of his beard against my cheeks, hear him breathing, smell his shampoo.

'That's the right position but don't open your eyes yet. Tell me what you can hear first.'

I concentrated, breathing deeply as I focused on the sounds around me. 'I can hear the leaves whispering, the low hum of traffic. Oh, wow, I can hear the sea! And, what's that?'

I cocked my head and listened again to the delicate tinkling. 'Is that a wind chime?'

'Open your eyes and look straight ahead.'

I did as he said, and my heart leapt. 'Oh, my God, Artie! It's beautiful.'

The branches just ahead of me formed a perfect frame around North Bay. I could see the white domes of the Sea Rescue Sanctuary and the trail of white lights strung between the Victorian lampposts along the promenade.

'Now look the other way.'

'It's the castle. I had no idea you could see that from the park.'

'Only at this height.'

'And can I hear windchimes?'

'Yes. They're just over there.'

He pointed to a tree to my right, where a small set of chimes sang the sweetest song.

'Look down. I'll use the torch on my phone so you can see it.'

I looked into the shaft of light. There was a short wooden post hammered into the ground with a fairy door attached to it.

‘That’s so cute. Freya would love it. She’s obsessed with fairies.’

‘Suzanna used to be too when she was little – still loved them as an adult – and she longed for a girl to pass her collection on to. I don’t know what she was having but we were both convinced it was a girl so, on what would have been our baby’s fifth birthday, I came up here and added the wind chimes and fairy door.’

‘Aw, Artie. Just when I think you couldn’t be any more lovely, you share this view and that story with me.’

‘You said last week that you loved both of those views so I thought I could show you them from somewhere different.’ Worry lines creased his forehead. ‘I promise I didn’t bring you here expecting to—’

I pressed my finger to his lips to silence him. ‘I know you didn’t.’

I ran my hand across his face and into his hair. In this magical place under the light of the moon and the presence of fairies, I brushed my lips against his and he sighed.

‘I promised you some space.’

‘And you gave me it, but I can’t stop thinking about you and I’m so torn.’

He rested his forehead against mine. ‘Same here, but I don’t want to push you into anything. I said last week that I’d wait for you and I meant that.’ He stepped back so he could look into my eyes. ‘There’s been nobody since Suzanna. She was my world and I didn’t think I’d ever feel anything again, but something happened when I saw you at the wedding. Something that had died inside me came alive and, every time we’ve bumped into each other since then, it’s grown.’

He cupped my face and I closed my eyes as he drew me into a soft, sensuous kiss. The chimes tinkled as the warm wind danced round us and I knew at that moment that the same thing had happened to me. Something had died inside me the day Cameron walked out, but now it was alive and screaming *you deserve this!*

‘Here’s an idea,’ Artie said when we parted. ‘What if we take things really slowly? What if we say I’m at the end of the phone for friendship and just round the corner if you need to escape from the house for five minutes and want a hug? What if you come running with me any time you need to work out your frustration? No pressure from me – just being here for you and a promise of patience?’

‘It sounds amazing, but that’s everything on my terms. How’s that fair on you?’

‘It’s fair on me because you don’t play games. You’re honest with me about what you want and what your challenges are. I want you in my life, Kerry. It’s taken me eleven years to feel something again. I’m not going to walk away from that unless you demand it. What do you think?’

‘I think you have the best ideas. If you’re sure, I’d love to give it a go.’

‘I’m sure. Stay honest with me, keep talking to me, and I think we could have something really special together.’

As I snaked my arms round his neck and kissed him once more, I felt in my heart that he was right about it having the potential to be really special. I couldn’t give him my everything right now, but he already had a piece of my heart. It wasn’t going to be easy, but I’d waited a long time too. Why should I let him go?

HOLLIE



Yesterday – the day after we lost our baby – Jake and I chose to shut the world out and focus purely on us. We took Pickle to a remote part of Kittrig Forest, away from the popular walking trails, and had a long walk where we didn't encounter a single soul. That afternoon, we lazed around watching films. We talked, we vented, we hugged and there were more tears but, by the time we settled down to sleep, I felt a little calmer. I'd definitely needed that day off to begin the healing process.

Today, I wondered if I'd made a mistake in taking a second day off. I loved Saturdays at The Starfish Café, especially in the summer when a steady stream of customers kept me occupied. Over breakfast, I asked Jake what he thought about me going in after all.

'It's hard to say. You're the strongest person I know, but you struggle with kindness when you've got your brave face on. If Angie has told your staff, they're going to say something or they're going to give you a sympathetic look and you know it'll set you off.'

That was true and, even though I suspected some sympathy and kindness on Monday or Tuesday or even a week's or month's time would still set me off, it was perhaps a little too raw today and I needed at least one more day to rest.

'I might go into the workshop. I've got some cottages to paint. Will you be okay if I do that?'

'I'll be fine. I've got some photos I want to work on so I'll spend the day in my studio. How about we take Pickle for a

walk on the beach later this afternoon?’

The temperature had dropped over the last few days. The weather was still lovely but more reminiscent of a spring day than mid-August, so walking Pickle during the day didn’t put him at any risk of heatstroke or burnt paws.

Plan agreed, I went into my workshop, put on a playlist of happy music, and had a really productive day. Most of the time, I was all right – the precision needed for roses round the doors or roof tiles meaning there was no room in my head for anything other than the task in hand – but the moment I paused to change paint colour or to give some attention to Pickle, that familiar ache of loss was there.

It was a little after three when I put aside a wooden lighthouse which I’d painted white. It needed to dry before I added the red stripes, so it was as good a place as any to leave it today and take Pickle on his walk.

I was washing my paint brushes when Jake appeared, wearing his cycling helmet. ‘I’ve been paged. Are you okay?’

‘I’m fine. Go! Stay safe.’

I blew him a kiss and he blew one back then disappeared. I’d marked myself unavailable on the crew app as I hadn’t been sure how I’d physically feel after the operation, but I’d encouraged Jake to change his profile to indicate availability for today. It was important for him to return to normality.

‘Should we go out for a walk on our own?’ I asked Pickle. Jake could be back within the hour but he could be gone for several, so there was no point in waiting. We could always go out for another walk together this evening.

I cleaned myself up and changed out of my painting clothes before clipping Pickle’s lead on. We’d crossed the road to the promenade and I stopped, biting my lip. Pickle looked up at me quizzically.

‘Change of plan,’ I told him, crossing back over the road. I missed The Starfish Café and had a longing to be there. I didn’t want to see everyone just yet but I did want to see Angie, to reassure her I was surviving as much as anything.

She'd been through this. She knew the pain. We'd go down to the beach, see the seals, listen to the sea, and I'd text Angie at the end of the day asking her if she could hang back. She could probably use a hug as much as me. This was bound to affect her, not just because of the memories it would have stirred, but because I was the daughter she'd never had and our baby would have been like her grandchild.

* * *

The car park at The Starfish Café was far busier than usual. While fantastic news for the business, I wondered if I'd made the right decision in coming here.

I pulled into a space and hesitated, then opened the door, shaking my head. I was being silly. There was no reason for me to avoid a bunch of strangers on my own beach. If I saw any customers, I could smile and say hello, stop and have a chat, even make a joke about abandoning ship on a busy Saturday. They wouldn't say anything because they wouldn't know. *Smile. Sparkle. You've got this!*

But there was still a knot in my stomach.

Pickle and I stopped several times on the way down to the beach to let people pass. They smiled in appreciation and several joked about the steep ascent, so I suggested they reward themselves with a drink and cake in the amazing café at the top. Each conversation slackened that knot a little.

The tide was out so there was a big expanse of beach, spreading everyone out. Pickle and I turned right when we reached the sand – kinder on his paws than the pebbles – and walked along to the southern end of the beach. I kept my eye out for the recognisable seals. We'd already passed Tank and I'd spotted Stripe – a grey seal with a wide dark stripe round his middle.

'There's Speckles,' I told Pickle. Speckles was a female common seal covered in tiny spots, as though somebody had caught her and gone crazy with a marker pen. Her gorgeous

pup was nearby. I had a pang of emptiness which I pushed aside as I continued our walk.

I was really hoping to see Alice, as it had been several months since I'd last clocked her. With a wide marking across her head like an Alice band, she was a particularly special seal to me. Jake had found her on the beach last year with a wounded flipper and I'd called Mitch from the Sea Rescue Sanctuary to rescue her. She'd been pregnant so they'd kept her there while she had her pup, Lewis, before bringing both of them back home. Lewis had no distinctive markings, so I'd been unable to keep track of which one he was. Despite being social creatures and living in colonies, seals didn't tend to stay in family groups, so I was unlikely to see Alice and Lewis together even if I had been able to recognise him. I was curious as to whether Alice had given birth to another pup this year.

I was about to give up and turn back when I finally spotted her on a low, flat rock. I took a few steps closer and saw that there was a pup bathing beside her. That pang was back again. I was thrilled to see Alice and Speckles with their young, but it was a reminder that mine was gone. If they were seals and I was having this reaction, how would it feel seeing Katie again?

* * *

FROM ANGIE

The coast is clear. Got some treats waiting with Pickle's name on them and some hugs with yours on xx

I smiled at Angie's text. I'd messaged her from the beach asking if she was free for a catch-up but only after everyone had left. I'd already climbed half of the steps and had been resting on a bench, waiting for the all-clear.

As I neared the top, I could see that there were still several cars in the car park and a few stragglers on the picnic benches.

The door was locked, but I never went anywhere without my keys, so I let us in.

‘Angie?’ I called, unclipping Pickle’s lead.

She emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel.

‘That was quick!’

‘We were already halfway when you texted.’

‘No wonder! I’d have left the door open but people kept trying to get in. It’s been non-stop here today.’

She put her arms out and I gratefully stepped into a warm hug.

‘I’m so sorry, honey.’

Tears burned my eyes, but I forced them back. I was already fed up of crying. Her hug was comforting and, as I closed my eyes, I swear I could feel Mum there with me too.

We sat down in one of the booths a little later with a drink while Pickle munched on a couple of biscuits.

‘How are you holding up?’ she asked.

‘Up and down. Still a bit dazed.’

‘You’re bound to feel like that for quite some time. I remember having moments where I’d place my hand on my stomach, feeling as though I was still pregnant, or I’d look at a cute outfit in a shop window and think *I must buy that* before reality kicked in that there was no baby.’

‘How did you get through it all?’

‘I just did. The first time wasn’t so hard because I hadn’t actually known for sure that I was pregnant. I’d suspected it – missed period and all that – but you tended to get confirmation from the doctor back then rather than a home testing kit and the miscarriage happened before I made the appointment, so there’d been no time to get excited or make plans. The second time was the day after I saw the doctor. That was harder. Martin and I had this one night talking about being parents and that possibility was gone the following day.’

‘Were you nervous about trying again?’

She pondered for a moment. ‘I don’t think we were. I don’t know about Martin but I suppose what really carried me through was hope and determination. I always believed I’d be a mum, so I was damned if anything was going to stop that. The third pregnancy lasted longer and I thought my body had cracked it. It knew what to do now, everything was going to be fine, and we’d finally be blessed with a baby.’

She shook her head and shrugged. ‘When I miscarried for a fourth time, I was a wreck. This steadfast belief that motherhood was my destiny had been well and truly shattered. I thought I was doing something wrong or that I was being punished for something, even though I didn’t know what. Martin and I felt we had no choice but to accept it wasn’t going to happen for us and stop trying but, after a couple of years, I convinced him to give it one more go. That was Bella and you know what happened there.’

What I’d experienced had been bad enough. I couldn’t bear to think of going through full labour with a baby you already knew had died – absolutely tragic and heart-breaking.

‘Do you know what I think the hardest words to hear are when you’ve had a miscarriage?’ she said. “‘At least’”. I’d hear it all the time, even from medical professionals. *At least you know you have no problem conceiving.* Oh, yes, whoopie, that’s amazing! But my body couldn’t keep my babies safe, so what the hell kind of consolation was that? Or the horrendous *at least it was early days and you hadn’t splashed out on a pram.*’

My mouth dropped open. ‘Someone actually said that to you?’

‘They did. Unbelievable, isn’t it? Over the years, I came across other women who’d miscarried and that damn phrase kept coming back. For the woman who miscarried in her second pregnancy – *at least you’ve already got a baby.* For the woman who lost one of her twins – *at least you still have one.* I know it’s because they likely hadn’t experienced it themselves and don’t know what to say, so the intention is

good but, as far as I'm concerned, there's no *at least* about any of it. Having other children or saving some money doesn't miraculously make it better. *At least you won't get fat. At least you don't have to give up wine. At least you don't have to go through the pain of labour. At least... at least... at least...* When you have a miscarriage, you've not only lost a child, you've also lost your hopes and dreams for the future and you've lost a little part of you. You don't need someone to look for the positives and point them out to you because there aren't any. All you really need is for them to say *that's really shit, I'm sorry you're going through that*. Because it *is* shit. Let's label it for what it is.'

Angie had steadily become more animated as she spoke, her voice getting higher and more strangled with emotion as the memories came back. By the time she'd finished, we both had tears streaming down our faces. How could people be so careless with their comments? Angie was right about it not being malicious. Bereavements made people uncomfortable and triggered a desire to try to make things better and provide comfort, when sometimes the best thing was to say nothing at all. I'd had so many *at leasts* when I lost my family. *At least Isaac died instantly, at least your dad was unconscious and didn't suffer, at least you had Christmas together, at least they had life assurance, at least your mum managed to fight cancer twice, at least you still have the café...*

'I'm sorry for making you cry,' I said, grasping Angie's hands in mine.

'Right back at you.'

I removed a packet of tissues from my bag and handed Angie a couple.

'So after that rant,' Angie said when she'd dried her tears, 'I need to say that this is shit and I'm really sorry you're going through it.'

'Thank you.'

'If me talking about my experiences can help in any way, I'm happy to keep talking, whether that's today or at any other

point in the future. Please never avoid it for fear of making me cry.'

'There is one more thing I'd like to talk about. You said before that your first two miscarriages were when Mum was pregnant with me, which means she already had Isaac...'

Angie nodded. 'You're thinking of Katie.'

'I've been imagining how I'd feel if it was the other way round – if I had a baby and was expecting my second and Katie had just had a miscarriage. I'd feel awful.'

'She does.'

'You've spoken to her?'

'I rang her. I thought she might need some reassurance.'

I wasn't the only one who Angie looked out for in the absence of a mother. Katie's mother was still very much alive and kicking and just as horrible as ever, so my mum and Angie had always been the mother figures in Katie's life.

'Was she okay?'

'Devastated for you. Wanting to be there but worried it might be too hard for you. Scared of losing you.'

'Exactly what would be going through my mind if the positions were reversed. You said it didn't affect your relationship with Mum?'

'My miscarriages and her having Isaac and then you were different things and I could look at them like that. The first time I was fine, but she was seven months pregnant the second time and I'll admit I did need a few days without seeing her, which Heather completely understood. The next time I saw her, I cuddled Isaac a little closer and shed a few tears, but I never felt envious of your mum and, as soon as you were born, I was straight round wanting cuddles. My struggle was more with customers. When we see them in here with their children, we catch a snapshot of time and it can be so easy to make a judgement about their abilities as a parent based on that, but it's not fair and it's not helpful.'

‘I did a lot of it back then. If I saw a parent snap at their child, I’d find myself resenting them, thinking I’d never do that and why did angry people like that have children when they so clearly didn’t deserve them? Or if there was a child having a tantrum, I’d blame the parents for neglecting them or spoiling them and question why people like that had kids when I didn’t. It got really bad after we lost Bella and I was a bit short with a couple of customers. When your mum suggested I might like to take some time off, it was a wake-up call for me. I didn’t like the person I’d become, making judgements about people who I knew nothing about, especially when I had no personal experience of the challenges of bringing up kids. The parent who snapped could have had the patience of a saint and I’d witnessed that one rare moment where they were at the end of their tether. That child’s tantrum might be nothing to do with the parents. So I took a couple of weeks off and gave myself a really stern talking to.’

‘It’s easy to make those snap judgements.’

‘I know, but there’s a big difference between casually thinking something and behaving in a way that shows what you’re thinking. You’re amazing, honey, and I know you’re all about the caring attitude and the great customer service but this is a heads up that some bitter thoughts might creep in because the other thing that happens once you’ve lost a baby is that suddenly babies are everywhere. They usually are but you somehow notice it so much more. You look at hair colour, notice outfits, tune into cries and laughter way more because babies are at the forefront of your mind. By default, you’ll notice the parents more too and those judgements can creep in when you’re hurting.’

‘That’s such good advice.’

‘I wish someone had given it to me. So, what’s your plan with Katie?’

‘I might see if she’s free tomorrow. We’re taking Irene out for a Sunday carvery and I don’t want to cancel, but I could call in to see Katie on the way home.’

‘I’m sure she’d like that.’

We talked a little more and Angie mentioned that Martin was taking her to The Apple & Peach this evening – a Michelin-starred restaurant up the coast – so I said I wouldn't keep her any longer. We were clearing away when a WhatsApp message pinged through.

FROM JAKE

Back from shout. Where are you? xx

TO JAKE

The café with Angie xx

FROM JAKE

Don't leave. I'm on my way xx

I looked up from the text and shrugged. 'Angie, Jake's on his way here so you might as well get home and prepare for your posh meal and I'll finish off.'

We hugged once more and I thanked her for the comfort and advice before waving her off. There were only a handful of cars left now and nobody loitering on the picnic benches, presumably all gone home for their tea.

Seeing Jake pull in, I unlocked and opened the door. He ran over from his car and hugged me tightly.

'It's all right. I was only here,' I whispered.

'It's not that. I knew if you weren't home, you'd be here or on the beach.'

'Then what is it?'

'I could do with a strong black coffee first,' he said, releasing me.

'Okay. You go out onto the terrace with Pickle and I'll bring it out.'

As I made his coffee, I watched him pacing up and down, his hands locked behind his head. Whatever had happened on

that rescue, it had completely frazzled him. One of the hardest parts of being on the crew was when it was too late for us to save a casualty or when we couldn't even find them. It sent a shockwave through the crew, even those not involved in the rescue, but Jake didn't usually behave like this when that happened.

'Here you go,' I said placing the strong Americano on the table.

He took a couple of gulps and placed the cup down, fixing his eyes on mine. His hair was dishevelled, his eyes were red, there were deep worry lines on his forehead and, of even more concern, there were cuts and bruises all over his face.

'I saw her again. Larissa.'

'Oh, my God! Where?'

'The supermarket. I thought I'd pick up something for tea and I went round a corner with my trolley and ploughed straight into hers. I hadn't realised it was her and started apologising but she shrieked and barged her trolley at mine with such force, I fell into the shelving, sending packets of biscuits toppling. She grabbed packet after packet and pelted them at me, screaming that I was a murderer and a thief and that she hated me and wished I'd drowned. It was nothing new but there were all these people crowding round us and she just didn't stop. I'm covered in cuts and bruises.'

He held out his arms which were indeed covered, just like his face.

I pressed my hand to my chest, my stomach churning.

'A couple of security guards appeared and dragged her away, screaming and swearing. It was just like when she attacked me with the gardening fork. There were biscuits everywhere and all these people staring at me, whispering, pointing, so I ditched my trolley and I ran.'

'I'm not surprised. Jake!'

I threw my arms round his waist and hugged him tightly. His heart was pounding and mine was too. Why did she keep doing this? She was one seriously disturbed woman.

‘Have you phoned the police?’ I asked, my voice gentle. ‘You know you need to this time.’

‘Not yet, but I will. Security probably already have and I feel like I need to give my side because stuff like this could keep happening and I want it on record that I’m the innocent party.’

He glanced at his arms. ‘Who knew packets of biscuits could do so much damage?’

‘I don’t think it was so much the biscuits as the demented woman throwing them.’

He gave me a wry smile. ‘Lucky I wasn’t in the tins aisle. Or the frozen food. A one-kilo frozen chicken might have knocked me out cold.’

I gently kissed him, relieved he could find some humour in the trauma.

‘Finish your coffee and let’s get you home and phone the police.’

‘I feel bad about pressing charges. She’s got a son.’

‘And she should have thought of that before she pelted you with biscuits. You dropped the charges the first time, but now she’s back in Whitsborough Bay and it’s going to keep happening if you don’t do something. She’s already made up a nonsense complaint about you, shoved you into a fence, and now this. I know you feel bad about it, but that’s the difference between you and Larissa. You have a conscience and I don’t think she has.’

I locked up and we wandered over to the cars.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t manage to get anything in for tea,’ Jake said as we paused by mine.

‘We’ll order a takeaway. It’s fine.’

As I followed Jake’s car back to Sandy Croft, that knot returned to my stomach but for a different reason this time. Larissa needed help. It wasn’t healthy or rational to believe that Jake had murdered his parents. Somebody needed to help her see that before she destroyed Jake and her own family.

‘At least it’s a distraction from the miscarriage, eh, Pickle?’ I said, drawing on the earlier conversation with Angie and rolling my eyes at him in the rear-view mirror.

KERRY



The kids squealed with delight when I revealed that the mystery location for our day with their dad was Fendale Fun Farm.

‘Are you coming, Nanna?’ Noah asked.

‘Not today. You’re seeing your dad and Tess.’

Four smiles faltered and my stomach sank. Cameron had messed them around and I didn’t think much of him, but he was their dad. This had to be difficult for him and, to be fair to him, the going had got tough and he hadn’t walked away... yet!

‘Can we see some smiles, please?’ I asked. ‘Your dad’s really looking forward to seeing you. He’s gutted he had to miss last week. You’ll have loads to tell him about.’

‘Do we have to talk to Dad all the time?’ Maisie asked. ‘Or can we still play?’

‘Is that what the glum faces are for?’ I asked. ‘Of course you can still play, but include your dad where you can. Play frisbee golf with him and talk to him over lunch. This is your chance to get to know him as much as his chance to get to know you.’

‘You handled that really well,’ Mum said when they’d gone upstairs to get ready.

‘Thanks, but I feel like I’m winging it.’

‘That’s all any of us do, love.’

* * *

While Cameron played with the kids in the hay barn after lunch, Tess and I had some time out with a coffee.

‘Thank you for being so patient with Cam,’ she said. ‘I can’t imagine any of this has been easy for you.’

‘It hasn’t. The kids have struggled with it and they’ve turned on each other which has been difficult, although I can’t fully blame that on Cameron. Any sort of change to life as they know it could have had the same effect.’

‘They seem to be playing well together today.’

‘They are, but it’s taken a lot of tears and effort to get to this point and it could go back to how it was just like that.’ I clicked my fingers.

‘Is there anything we can do to help?’

‘Actually, yes. Tell Cameron to get his head out of his arse and start communicating better.’

Tess looked shocked, but I wasn’t going to sugar coat this.

‘I’ll happily say it to his face too, but you did ask. You know our story. You know communication from his end was shocking throughout our marriage and then he disappeared without a word. He reckons he’s changed, but I’m not seeing evidence of that as far as contact goes. Do you think it’s acceptable that it took him a week to get in touch again about today? Because I don’t. Not when there are kids involved.’

‘I hadn’t realised he’d left it that long.’

‘Yeah, well, he did and it’s been crap.’

‘He’s had a tough...’ She paused and shrugged. ‘You know it’s been tough. You don’t need me making excuses.’

‘I get it. You love him and you want to defend him but, seriously, how much effort does a one-line text take? I’ve been so careful not to say anything negative about him in front of the kids but that’s not easy when they’re asking me what’s

going on and I have no answers. And if he can't get his act together when he's staying up the road, what happens when you're back in London? Is he going to even bother with the video chats and regular contact or is it going to fizzle out? Because if he doesn't keep on top of things, all this will have been a waste of time.'

'I'll talk to him.'

'I don't mind saying it myself.'

She gave me a weak smile. 'No offence, but I think you're both a little too on edge with each other at the moment for that conversation to go well. I think it'll have more impact if it comes from me.'

'Fine, but it needs sorting.'

'And it will be. You have my word.'

She fixed her gaze on mine and I saw a glimpse of the same steely determination I'd often seen in Cameron. She might have turned her back on the business world but those project management skills were still there, giving me confidence that the conversation would happen.

'Thank you. I don't mean to put you in the middle.'

'Don't worry about it. I had a feeling I'd need to be mediator at some point. I will get it sorted. I promise.'

* * *

Back at Park Lodge, the busy week caught up with the kids and they all headed off to bed early. Mum and I sat out in the back garden with a bottle of wine and a spare glass ready for Howard, who would be arriving shortly with a Chinese takeaway.

'We've made it to two thirds,' she said. 'Two more weeks and then back to school.'

'I never thought I'd say this about the summer break but, for me, the end can't come soon enough.'

‘It’s certainly been a different summer this year.’

‘You can say that again.’

‘Who’d have predicted back in June that Cameron would be back and you’d have found the man of your dreams?’

‘Not me.’

Mum put her glass down with force, making me jump. ‘It’s no good. I can’t have you sitting here with me and Howard when you could be out with Artie. Get him rung.’

‘I saw him on Thursday and we agreed to take it very slowly.’

She tutted at me and jabbed at my phone. ‘Ring him now, or I will!’

She would do too and it would be cringeworthy if she spoke to him, so I grabbed my phone and headed into the house to call him.

‘I was just thinking about you,’ he said when he answered. ‘How did it go with Cameron today?’

‘Are you free to grab a bite to eat and I can tell you in person?’

‘I’m on call tonight. We could grab some chips from South Bay but I’ll have to leave you if my pager goes.’

‘That’s fine.’

‘I’ll drive us down. Give me ten minutes and I’ll pick you up outside your place.’

* * *

After we’d eaten, we walked hand in hand along the promenade.

‘There’s a wedding!’ I exclaimed as we approached The Bay Pavilion.

I led Artie closer to the glass wall and he put his arm round me as we watched the guests milling around.

‘Aw, they look so happy,’ I said as the bride and groom kissed for a photo. ‘And they both look so young too. I think they might only be about eighteen or nineteen. What do you reckon?’

‘I’m hopeless at guessing ages. Speaking of which, I don’t actually know how old you are.’

I laughed. ‘I was thirty-one a couple of weeks before Hollie and Jake’s wedding. What you about you?’

‘Forty-seven in April. Does the age gap bother you?’

‘Not a bit. Age is just a number. It’s the person that counts.’

He kissed me and my insides felt all gooey as I slipped my arms round his waist and pulled him closer.

An announcement from Pavilion Court broke us apart. The guests were being asked to move inside for the bride and groom’s first dance.

‘I wonder what they’ve picked,’ I said, straining my ears to listen.

‘Ed Sheeran,’ we both said together, as the opening lines to ‘Perfect’ drifted out to us.

‘What did you and Suzanna pick?’ I asked.

He smiled. ‘Suzanna liked to do things that weren’t expected. We started off with the opening bars from “Truly, Madly, Deeply” by Savage Garden and it turned into the Black Eyed Peas’ “I Gotta Feeling”.’

‘Oh, I love that song! And I love the idea of going off piste for your first dance.’

‘What about you and Cameron?’

I shook my head. ‘We didn’t have one. We didn’t do the big wedding.’

Some people would probably think it was strange talking to a new partner about our respective weddings, but it felt so natural. Artie and I had met at a wedding, we’d just walked past a wedding, and our own ceremonies were part of who

we'd been back then and had shaped the people we were now. We walked south through the covered walkway, down the steps onto the beach, removed our footwear, and walked along the shoreline back towards the lifeboat station talking about our very different proposals, engagements and weddings.

'Would you do it again? Get married, I mean,' Artie asked as we reached the lifeboat station and sat on the beach below.

'Yeah, I would. I know it didn't work out for Cameron and me, but I still believe in marriage. Obviously I had no idea what was going on in Cameron's head because he never told me. You say you like my honesty and my lack of games. I'm probably that way because of what happened with him. If you have concerns in a relationship, you should share them. People need to know where they stand.'

He put his arm round me and I rested my head against his chest.

'What about you?' I asked. 'Would you do it again?'

'I would. I loved being married. I love the idea of saying: *this is the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. I know there'll be some bad times, but I believe in us, I believe we can get through them, so they're the one I choose.*'

'*For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer...*' I whispered, entwining my fingers with his.

I turned my head and kissed him, my heart racing. I couldn't help picturing Artie in wedding attire looking at me in a bridal gown, with the children gathered round us in suits and flower girl dresses. Sometimes a girl had to have her little fantasy moments. And Artie was well and truly my perfect fantasy.

HOLLIE



On Sunday morning, Jake and I went to see his Uncle Adrian and Auntie Maggs first thing to get some advice. Adrian had been his dad's best friend after meeting when they joined the police together and, although now retired, he'd been the person we'd gone to for some advice last year when we'd worked out why Slippy Smythe was so desperate to get his hands on The Starfish Café but were concerned the police wouldn't believe us.

'I know it's not nice,' Adrian said, 'but I agree that you do need to press charges this time or it'll never end, especially when this is the second assault since she moved back. Do you want me to ring one of the lads and ask them what they need from you?'

He set up an appointment with one of his former colleagues and I stayed with Maggs while Jake and Adrian went down to Whitsborough Bay police station.

When they came back, they reported that Larissa had claimed it was Jake who'd attacked her, but the CCTV from the supermarket and various witness statements corroborated Jake's story of a minor trolley collision turning into an unprovoked and vicious attack by Larissa. He'd been told that he definitely had grounds for pressing charges for that and for the assault in the hospital car park so he's asked them to proceed.

Jake had wanted to pay for the damage at the supermarket, despite it not being him who'd caused it, so they'd been there

too. Adrian knew the manager on duty and, even though she hadn't been in yesterday during the incident, she'd seen the footage. She wouldn't accept any money from Jake but said he'd be welcome to buy the equivalent amount of goods for their food bank bin if he felt he must make amends, so he did that. It eased his conscience about the money but not about pressing charges against his sister.

'She's brought it on herself,' I reminded him. 'She could have just walked away but she chose not to. You only have to look at all those cuts and bruises to know you're doing the right thing.'

Lunch with Irene was the usual blend of catching up on each other's news and getting all the gossip on a stack of people we didn't know, but always presented as though we did – *oh, you know Sally. Used to live behind the chippie, married to Bernie's half-brother, the one with the flatulent Jack Russell.* It never really mattered, as Irene was a gifted storyteller whose vivid details brought all the characters to life.

She didn't mention the miscarriage the whole time we were out but, when we dropped her back at Bay View Care Home, she hugged me for longer than usual and whispered, 'I'm so sorry,' in my ear. 'I wish that hadn't happened to my two favourite people.'

'Me too, Irene. Me too.'

I'd appreciated all the distractions so far, although they couldn't really be labelled as that. They were life continuing, as it had to, as it had done after all my other bereavements. But now I was going to be focusing on the miscarriage because my final visit was to Katie.

Most of the windows of Katie and Trey's house were open and I could hear Lucas crying as I walked along the garden path. I'd wondered whether Katie might have sent Trey out with him, thinking it would be difficult for me to see their baby, so I was glad he was home.

Katie opened the door shortly after I rang the bell.

'Sounds like someone's unhappy,' I said.

‘He’s teething and really struggling, bless him. Come in. Grab some ear defenders.’

I followed her through to the kitchen-diner where there was a jug of something purple full of fruit and a couple of glasses on the table.

‘Don’t ask me what it is,’ she said, pouring us both a glass, ‘but it’s cold, wet and delicious. Non-alcoholic, I’m afraid.’

‘Fine by me.’

I pulled a chair out to sit down, but Katie grabbed my hand and pulled me into a hug.

‘I should have done this when you arrived. I’m sorry. I didn’t want this to be awkward and I’ve just made it awkward.’

‘You haven’t and it’s all right. I don’t want anything to change between us because of this. You being pregnant and me not being pregnant anymore are separate things. It’ll be weird if I’m not part of this, so please don’t think I don’t want to spend time around you or Lucas because I really do. I want to hear all about what’s going on with you, just like I would have if Jake and I weren’t even thinking of having a family. I can’t promise I won’t have a few wobbles, mind.’

‘Tell me if you do.’

‘I will.’

We sat down and I took a sip of the drink which, as promised, was delicious.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, scowling. ‘It’s such a crap thing to have to go through. How are you feeling?’

‘Physically fine. Emotionally...’ I held my hand out and rocked it from side to side.

‘Do you want to talk about it today or would you rather talk about something different?’

‘Would you mind if we talk about something different? I *will* tell you – if you’re okay hearing it – but we’ve missed our last two Thursday catch-ups because of what’s happened and I

feel like I'm way behind on everything and I have some big news. Larissa's back in Whitsborough Bay.'

She gasped. 'No way!'

'Way! And she assaulted Jake last night with several packets of biscuits...'

I left a few hours later, feeling much lighter for having seen Katie again –potentially the hardest thing I needed to do post-miscarriage – and for having had such a good laugh.

Jake's car was on the drive when I got home, but the house was empty, so he must have taken Pickle out for a walk. After a few days of quiet, having so many people to see and talk to today had exhausted me, so I went upstairs, opened the sash windows a little, and lay on the bed, letting the gentle breeze cool me.

I thought about some news Katie had shared about her horrible sister Serena and my ex-fiancé Craig getting divorced (which made me feel a little smug, as they'd had an affair during our engagement), Kerry's situation with her ex back in her life, and the trouble that Larissa had got herself into. All around me, life with its many ups and downs continued.

Opening my bedside drawer, I removed the two cards from Mum which I'd temporarily kept in my wedding planner, along with the journal which Sylvia had gifted me, full of drawings and quotes from her late husband Albert.

I opened the first card showing the girl splashing in a puddle with a golden retriever, her umbrella cast aside despite the rain. Had it really only been eight weeks since I last looked at these on the morning of my wedding? I'd been so happy that day and so excited for my future with Jake and our baby.

I scanned down for those two key phrases which had lifted me so often over the years.

Keep dancing in the rain. There is always, ALWAYS someone having a tougher time than you.

Smile. Sparkle. You've got this!

Were Serena and Craig, Kerry and Larissa all having a tougher time than me? Maybe not, but it showed how challenging life could sometimes be.

I closed that card and placed it on the bed beside me. The second image showed the girl with a plaster across her knee, blowing kisses to her teddy bear, whose arm was in a sling. I opened that one and scanned down it.

If you stumble, make it part of your dance.

Sometimes we get lost or we make decisions we later regret. Learning from those stumbles is what makes them part of your dance. Be brave, take risks, live life to the full and dance in the rain knowing that, if you stumble and fall, the pain will heal.

Always remember what Sir William Hillary said: 'With courage, nothing is impossible!'

'If you stumble and fall, the pain will heal,' I whispered, as the tears fell.

I knew it could because it had done before. To me, healing didn't mean fixed and forgotten. Even the dictionary defined it as a process rather than a complete activity. It simply meant the hurt wasn't quite so acute, the pain numbed a little, the experience was no longer raw.

I seemed to remember that Albert had written a poem about a flower and healing and flicked through his journal until I found it. On the left page, there was a simple pencil sketch of a dandelion surrounded by litter, bursting through a crack in the ground. The only colour added into the sketch was the vibrant yellow of the petals. I read the words on the adjacent page.

*On derelict ground which the world had
disowned*

A burst of bright yellow did make a new home

*Through the cracks in the ground, it sought out
the sun*

Past the litter and debris, new life had begun

*Some would say 'weed' and cast it aside
Oblivious to what it does symbolise
This colourful bloom means happiness and joy
So stroke its curved petals, but do not destroy
The genus name comes from 'taraxos' in Greek
Meaning disorder and remedy, so do not feel
bleak
Take a breath, take a moment, and let yourself
feel
Knowing that, in chaos, it's possible to heal.*

I closed the journal and laid it on the bed with the cards. Such beautiful words and so very true. Albert's journal had brought me so much comfort and I was sure it would continue to do so with each new challenge life threw my way. For now, I'd take a breath, I'd take a moment and feel sad, angry, lost but, like Albert's dandelion bringing healing to that derelict place, I'd find my joy once more. One day.

HOLLIE



Tori called by after work on Monday to take my measurements ready for my bridesmaid dress and show me some swatches of the materials she was going to use. Their theme was autumn and, like at my wedding, the adult bridesmaids would wear the same dress – a bohemian style – but in different colours. Tori’s sister Robyn had already chosen the darkest shade, ‘terracotta’, so I needed to pick from the lightest – ‘pumpkin spice’ – or ‘burnt orange’ in the middle. Charlee loved them both and so did I, but Tori and I concluded that Charlee’s dark hair would look better with the lighter colour and my dirty blonde would contrast better with ‘burnt orange’. I couldn’t wait to see the dresses and was still in awe of Tori and her parents taking on the task themselves, especially with less than six weeks to go.

After we’d talked all things wedding, Tori apologised for hogging the conversation and asked what was going on in my life.

‘It’s been a tough couple of weeks. I’ve had a miscarriage.’

‘Aw, no! How far gone were you?’

‘About twelve weeks.’

‘Well, isn’t that just a pile of bollocks. Are you okay?’

I shrugged. ‘Getting there, taking each day a step at a time.’

‘Why does stuff like that have to happen?’ said Tori. ‘I’m so sorry. Give my love to Jake too.’

‘I will. It helps having things to look forward to like your wedding. Angie and I were talking earlier about bringing the Bonfire Night celebrations back to The Starfish Café too and I think it’s time we re-started the tradition.’

‘This sounds exciting. Tell me more.’

‘You know how they have a big fireworks display over South Bay? People crowd down there to watch it but we have the most amazing view from the terrace without all the crowding. Mum declared the day after Bonfire Night as the start of the Christmas rundown so Mum, Angie and I would put the Christmas tree up in the café straight after work on 5 November and invite family and friends here for a buffet and to watch the display. The last time we did that was eight years ago before the accident. The following year, Mum was really sick so I couldn’t have considered it. Since then, I’ve put the tree up on my own on Bonfire Night to keep a small part of the tradition going and it’s just as well I did because I’d never have met Jake otherwise.’

‘Aw, that’s so lovely. The resurrection of the Bonfire Night party sounds awesome and I’d be completely up for that.’ Tori laughed. ‘I’ve just invited myself. You did say family and friends.’

I laughed with her. ‘You’re definitely on the guest list.’

‘It’s in my diary! If I can be of any help on the day, let me know. Can’t cook but I can arrange some plates and hang a few baubles.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

Telling Tori about the miscarriage but without going into any details was another small piece of the healing process. She’d responded in the way I’d expected and hoped, calling it out for what it was and not having any *at leasts*.

I hadn’t avoided them. The staff all knew now and I’d told some of our favourite customers. Sylvia, bless her, had clasped my hand and said, ‘At least you know you can have children. Hang onto that.’ I didn’t wince because she and Albert had been unable to have children, so it was understandable that

she'd see being able to conceive as a gift. Betty and Tommy had both given me hugs and said how sorry they were, sharing that their daughter, daughter-in-law and one of their grandchildren had all had miscarriages.

That one in four number hadn't had a context until now when it emerged that so many people I knew had either had a miscarriage or knew someone who had. Avril had hugged me and shared that her first pregnancy had ended with a miscarriage, and several of the other staff members had a friend or relative who'd been through it. I'd braved some of the online forums and there was so much chatter about it being something people didn't talk about, but I wasn't sure I agreed. I didn't feel like it was a taboo subject – simply that it was something that was private and not likely to crop up in everyday conversation. It didn't mean I wasn't willing or able to talk about it. I just didn't feel the need to throw it out there to anyone and everyone.

Monday had been overcast and Tuesday continued with more of the same, this time accompanied by scattered showers. Between the showers, Betty and Tommy arrived for their usual morning tea and scones.

'I have something for you, my dear,' she said when I took their order.

She passed me a small gift wrapped in lilac tissue paper. Peeling back the tape, my heart melted.

'Oh, my goodness. Betty!'

After Mum died, Betty had crocheted me a miniature teddy bear wearing a cornflower-blue dress and had added a pair of angel wings to it because Mum's pet name for me was 'Angel' thanks to my middle name, Gabrielle. Among the tissue was an even smaller crocheted bear with a pair of sparkly angel wings.

'For your little one,' she said. 'I didn't put an outfit on it as you didn't know if it was a boy or a girl. Your lovely parents and brother will be looking after him or her now.'

I pressed my hand across my mouth, sobs shaking my body.

‘Oh, Hollie, I should have warned you.’ Betty grasped the hand still holding the bear in hers. ‘I’m so sorry.’

I shook my head, trying to blink away my tears. ‘No, it’s fine. I just... I hadn’t thought about them being with my parents and Isaac, stupid though that might sound. It’s a beautiful thought and a beautiful gift. Thank you.’

Betty released my hand and I wrapped the bear back in its tissue and held it against my heart. ‘I’ll sit this on my shelf next to the other one. Such a treasure.’

I managed to hold it together as I placed the bear safely in my bag in the kitchen, but I could feel it welling up inside me. There was a break in the showers so I slipped out of the emergency exit, and into the woods. Among the dense pine trees, I stumbled into a small clearing where a shaft of sunlight lit up a lone tree. With my hands pressed against the trunk, I opened my mouth and the grief poured out of me once more, silent tears giving way to painful cries. I beat my fists against the bark until they hurt more than the ache inside of me and I slumped down to the damp ground, my eyes blurred with tears, my throat sore, my heart broken.

I have no idea how long I sat there, feeling too drained to move, but the sky darkened and the rain started again. Somehow I heaved myself up, brushed myself down, and returned to work with a smile.

Back at Sandy Croft later that evening, I showed the bear to Jake and he joined me as I placed it on the shelf in our bedroom beside the other one, alongside photos of both our families. I expected to cry again – especially after what had happened in the woods – but I felt warmth and peace instead. Angie had been right about the emotions coming in waves.

She’d also been right about me noticing babies more. Being the summer holidays, there were more children in the café but so many of them were babies. Occasionally I’d glance across at one and think ‘cute’ and move on. Other times, it was like a punch in the gut. Sweeping the floor one evening this

week, I'd found a dummy abandoned under one of the booths. I have no idea why, but I took it home and, with Jake out on a night shift, had curled up on the sofa with my finger looped through it and cried for three hours solid.

* * *

On Wednesday, the weather deteriorated further. It was wet and windy, more reminiscent of autumn or winter than summer. We'd still been busy but not a patch on how we were on sunny days. Upstairs in Driftwood Dell, Grace had taken the opportunity to clean and re-stock the shelves, move a few things around, and draw up a list of the bestsellers we were getting low on. That was really helpful and would give me a great focus for my workshop day tomorrow, taking my mind off it being a fortnight since my miscarriage.

Where had those two weeks gone? It didn't seem that long and yet that feeling of being pregnant – the fatigue and the nausea - seemed like forever ago, almost as though it had never even happened.

'I have some news,' Angie said after all the staff had gone and it was just the two of us doing the final finishing activities.

I looked up from the sales report. 'Oh, yes?'

'Martin is moving back in this weekend.'

'Oh, wow!' I rushed round from behind the counter to hug her. 'That's amazing news. How did that come about?'

We sat down at one of the tables.

'It actually came from your sad news. He came round one night last week and we stayed up all night talking about our miscarriages and Bella. When I first told you about it, you asked if that had contributed to Martin and me splitting up and I said no, but we think maybe it did. Marriage can be hard and a lot of couples go through rough times. Their children are sometimes the reason they stay together, like the cement that binds them. For some, that's a bad thing and they split as soon as the kids leave home. For others, staying together for the

kids helps them find their way back to each other. Martin and I didn't have that cement so we drifted apart. Anyway, we got talking about what we wanted out of our future together and I was completely honest with him – like you told me to be – and said that I wanted a proper marriage, which meant living together. He said he wanted that too but was scared about ruining things because, since getting back together, they've been better than ever.'

'So what convinced him to go for it?'

'We promised to make an effort, to keep the date nights going but, as well as that, you and Jake losing your baby was a stark reminder of how fragile life can be. The stupid man's an undertaker. He shouldn't need that reminder! But I suppose you take it in your stride when you deal with it every day and it's only when it's someone you know and love that it hits you again. The pair of us are in good health now but you just don't know what's round the corner. He didn't want to regret not living life to the full with me just because he was scared of the past repeating itself.'

'Well done that man.' I rolled my eyes at her. 'Finally! Is he going to sell his place?'

'Already on the market. I suggested he hang onto it for a bit but he said that would symbolise him not being fully committed to us trying again and believing it won't work. So, not only is he moving in and selling his place, but he's asked me if I'd like to renew our wedding vows. And I never breathed a word about that. In fact, he actually got down on bended knee and proposed again.'

'Aw, Angie. That's the best news ever! When do you think you'll do it?'

'Still to be decided. We'll get him settled in then confirm a date. We don't know if we want to do a big thing or little thing, home or abroad. Do we do it on our anniversary or not? Lots still to think about.'

'Whatever you decide, make it what you want and no pressure from anyone else. I'd love to be there, but if you

decide on an intimate holiday abroad with just the two of you, I won't be hurt or offended.'

She squeezed my hand across the table. 'You're so lovely but, whatever we decide, I absolutely couldn't do it without you by my side and I know Martin wouldn't want to either, so consider yourself number one on the guest list.'

A loud rap on the door made us both jump. Jake had been on a day off but was meeting some colleagues for a leaving do so he'd be in a pub in town right now.

I opened the inner door and frowned. The person outside had their back to me and their hands thrust into the pockets of a pale grey hoodie which appeared to be soaked through, and they definitely weren't adult sized.

I hastily unlocked the outer door and immediately recognised the boy when he turned round and lowered his hood.

'Are you my Auntie Hollie?'

'Erm, I...' I stared in shock at Larissa's son, Reuben.

'Is Uncle Jake here?'

'No. Erm... come inside. It's Reuben, yes?'

'Yeah.' He stepped into the porch and slicked back his wet hair. 'I don't mind you calling me Roo, but you can't shorten my name to Ben.'

'Okay.'

His cheeks were red and his jeans had soaked rainwater up to his knees. I suspected his feet were squelching.

'Angie, can you grab some towels?' I called as I led Reuben into the café.

Angie's eyes widened. 'Oh, my goodness.'

I shrugged at her, and she dashed into the kitchen as I eased Reuben down into one of the chairs.

'How did you get here?' I asked, fearful that Larissa might appear at any moment with a packet of Rich Teas to pelt at me.

‘I walked from Whitsborough Bay.’

‘But that’s a main road.’

‘I know. Took me ages.’

Angie arrived back with the towels and I passed one to Reuben for his hair and face, and encouraged him to unzip his hooded top. His T-shirt was also soaked through, and I couldn’t leave him like that. I kept a stock of plain white unisex T-shirts in various sizes in the stock cupboard in case I or any of the staff had a food-related disaster which the apron didn’t catch, so I sent Angie upstairs to get Reuben a small one.

‘Does your mum know you’re here?’ I asked after he’d pulled on the dry T-shirt and I’d draped some towels over his shoulders in an attempt to warm him up.

His eyes widened. ‘No, and you can’t tell her. Promise.’

I couldn’t make that promise, so I sat down opposite him while Angie made him a hot chocolate, and tried a different tack.

‘How do you know about your Uncle Jake and me?’

‘We were at Grandma’s house. She prints off photos and sticks them to her fridge with magnets and I saw a photo of her and her friend Sylvia with you and Uncle Jake at your wedding. I told her that I’d seen you both when the boat broke down and the RNLI had to rescue us, so she told me your names and that you owned this café. I called Mum and Dad in to look and Mum went apeshit.’

I winced at the swearword.

‘She grabbed the photo off the fridge and ripped it into tiny pieces and Grandma was really upset because it didn’t belong to Mum and she broke one of Grandma’s favourite magnets.’

Angie returned with the hot chocolate and asked if I wanted her to stay. I knew she had evening plans, so I told her to head home.

‘When your mum saw the photo, is that when she told you that Jake’s her brother?’ I asked Reuben when Angie had

gone.

‘No. Dad told me. We had to go home because Mum was so angry. It was scary. She had to take one of her pills and go to bed. Dad told me that Mum and Uncle Jake weren’t friends and never have been and that’s why I didn’t know about you.’

He paused to take a sip of his hot chocolate.

‘She was in trouble with the police this week and she said it was Uncle Jake’s fault but Dad said it wasn’t. Mum keeps shouting at me and Dad, and I don’t like living here anymore. I didn’t like my school in Wakefield but I liked my mum. In Whitsborough Bay, I like my school but my mum’s horrible. She was all right until the day the boat broke down.’

That made absolute sense to me because that was the day she encountered Jake again. Something had obviously snapped in her at that moment and she’d been on a precipice ever since. The hospital encounter hadn’t been enough for her because she’d been stopped, so the biscuit attack had been her releasing everything that had been building up from that day.

‘I asked Grandma if I can live with her. She laughed and said I was funny, but I wasn’t joking. I don’t want to live with Mum anymore, so can I live with you and Uncle Jake?’

‘As your dad told you, your mum and Uncle Jake aren’t friends so it would cause a lot of problems between them.’

‘Why aren’t they friends?’

‘It’s a long story and I’m really sorry to be so vague, but I don’t think it’s up to me to tell you it.’

Reuben’s head and shoulders drooped. ‘Nobody tells me anything. I’m not a baby, you know.’

‘I know you aren’t, but this is about your mum and Uncle Jake, so it needs to be one of them who explains things.’ I chewed my lip, pondering my next move. ‘Do you like dogs, Roo?’

‘I love dogs but I’m not allowed one. Mum doesn’t like them.’

‘Well, I’ve got a dog at home – a brown shih tzu called Pickle – and he’ll have been on his own for a couple of hours, so I’m really keen to get home and see him. Would you like to come back to my house and meet him?’

His eyes lit up. ‘Can I?’

‘Yes. You finish up your drink while I get myself organised and then I’ll drive you back to mine to meet Pickle.’

In the kitchen, I rang Jake, praying he’d answer his phone as I didn’t feel right sending him a message with the news.

‘Hey, you,’ he said, answering after a few rings. ‘Are you at home?’

‘I’m still at the café, but I’m leaving soon and I need you to come back.’

‘Everything okay?’

‘No. Reuben’s just turned up at the café and he wants to move in with us.’

‘Woah! I wasn’t expecting you to say that. I’m guessing Larissa doesn’t know he’s with you.’

‘No, and he won’t let me tell her although, obviously, it can’t stay that way.’

‘I’ll head straight home. See you there shortly.’

* * *

We made it back before Jake and I’d only just introduced an excited Pickle to an equally excited Reuben when the kitchen door opened. Jake peeled off his waterproof and looked over at Roo on the snug floor stroking Pickle’s belly.

‘Hi, Reuben,’ he said, slowly crossing the kitchen. ‘I’m Jake... Uncle Jake. What’s this about wanting to leave home?’

‘Mum’s always angry and shouty. I don’t like it at home anymore.’

‘Your mum’s probably just having a tough time of it at the moment. I’m sure she’ll be calmer once she knows it’s upsetting you.’

‘She said I wasn’t allowed to see you but that’s not fair. I don’t have any family except Grandma. Do you have children?’

Jake glanced at me. ‘Not yet.’

‘But if you did have children, they’d be my cousins.’

‘That’s right.’

‘So I’d have an uncle, an auntie and cousins. That’s lots of family.’

‘We’d love to spend time with you,’ I said, ‘but it’s not up to us.’

‘Your mum and dad must be really worried about you,’ Jake said. ‘We could do with calling them and letting them know where you are.’

‘I don’t know their numbers.’

‘Do you have a mobile?’ I asked. He hadn’t had one in his hoodie pocket but he might have one in his jeans.

‘It broke.’

‘Then we’ll need to take you home, Roo. We can’t keep you here when your parents don’t know where you are.’

He stopped rubbing Pickle’s belly and lifted the dog up, cuddling him. ‘I’m not telling you where I live.’

‘Please don’t be like that,’ Jake said. ‘We’re trying to help you.’

‘Then let me stay here.’

‘We can’t.’

Reuben had clearly inherited his mother’s stubborn streak and we weren’t getting anywhere. He asked if he could use the toilet, so I gave him directions and, while he was gone, Jake and I agreed that we had to contact Andrew or Larissa.

When Reuben returned, I left Jake to find out a bit more about his nephew and went up to our bedroom, out of earshot, to phone Sylvia and ask for Dorothy's number. Dorothy gave me both Andrew and Larissa's numbers and I tried Andrew first, praying he'd answer, but it just rang out with no connection to voicemail.

I scrunched my eyes tightly and took a few deep calming breaths before I dialled Larissa. It rang four times before being disconnected, which suggested to me she might be screening her calls, hanging up on an unknown number, so I tried again.

She answered this time with a curt, 'Who is this?'

'My name's Hollie and I'm your brother's wife. Please don't hang up. It's about Reuben.'

There was a pause. 'What about him?'

'I own The Starfish Café and he turned up earlier.'

'What? But that's two miles outside town. How the hell did he get there?'

'He walked.'

'Is this some kind of joke?'

'No, this is genuine. He saw a photo of Jake and me on your mother-in-law's fridge and found out who we were. He wanted to meet us and he knew from Dorothy that I owned The Starfish Café, so he came to find us.'

'But he's meant to be at his friend's house.'

'I don't know anything about that. He said he didn't know your number and he wouldn't give me your address, so I got your number off Dorothy because I didn't want you to be worried.'

'Is he at the café now?'

'No, I brought him home. Do you want to come and collect him?'

'Of course I fucking want to collect him. He's my son, you stupid bitch.'

I'd been gentle with her until this point, but a red mist came down and I spoke very clearly and deliberately with anger in every word.

'Your son walks two miles in the rain to find the relatives you've kept hidden from him for his whole life and your response is to swear at me and call me a stupid bitch? No wonder he came looking for us. After what you did to Jake on Saturday, I'm not sure I want to give you my address anyway. Perhaps I should have gone with my gut instinct and called the police.'

There was a sharp intake of breath. I'd imagine the last thing she wanted right now was another encounter with the police, especially where a minor was involved.

'No police necessary. Give me the address and I'll come quietly.'

'Okay. When you get to the house, come down to the side door.'

I gave her our address, praying I wouldn't live to regret that, and started to check she knew where to find us, but she'd already hung up. Stomach churning, I returned downstairs. Jake was sitting on one of the sofas and Roo was sitting on the floor, leaning against the other with Pickle sprawled across his knee, deep in conversation with his uncle.

Jake glanced at me and I indicated that the deed was done with a slight incline of my head. I felt like a traitor. Roo clearly had some major issues at home with Larissa right now and I wished we could help, but with the way Larissa had attacked Jake twice already this summer and lodged that fabricated complaint to try to cause trouble for him with the RNLI, I wouldn't put it past her to suggest that we'd been keeping her son against his free will. I needed to protect Jake from his big sister, even if that meant destroying any chance for us to have a relationship with our nephew.

HOLLIE



Even though I was expecting Larissa, the three sharp bangs on the side door scared the life out of me.

Reuben looked up at me, his eyes wide. ‘Is that my mum?’

‘I’m sorry, Roo. I had to tell her. She’d have been worried about you.’

I opened the door and didn’t even get to say hello. Larissa shoved past me and stormed into the kitchen.

‘Roo! Catch!’ she shouted as she threw a set of car keys to Reuben. ‘Go and wait for me in the car.’

‘But, Mum, I want to—’

‘I don’t care what you want. I said no to seeing him and I meant no. In the car. Now! Don’t make me say it a third time. You’re already in so much trouble.’

‘I don’t think you should be taking it out on him,’ Jake said.

Larissa whipped round to face him. ‘Don’t you *dare* tell me how to raise my son.’

Every word was spoken with such venom, spit flying from her mouth.

‘Now, Reuben!’ she screeched, not taking her eyes from Jake.

Roo, pale-faced and wide-eyed, scrambled to his feet, clutching the car keys, grabbed his hoodie off one of the island

stools where I'd draped it in an attempt to dry it and ran out the kitchen.

I fixed my eyes on Larissa, fearful of what she might do to Jake as soon as Roo left. Sure enough, the moment the door slammed, Larissa lunged at Jake but he was too quick and dodged her, running round the island. My heart pounded as they glared at each other, both poised to move as soon as the other one did. I glanced at the block of professional chef knives, fear cramping my stomach.

'You need to leave,' I shouted.

'I don't take orders from you. Do you know what you've married here? Do you know what he is? Murdering, thieving bas—'

'Stop it!' I cried.

'Let it go, Larissa,' Jake pleaded, his voice surprisingly calm even though he must have been terrified. 'Can't you see what your hatred is doing to your family? I *didn't* kill our parents. Everyone knows that. I think even you know that but you're desperate for someone to blame and I understand that. I was for years too. But your son ran away today because this angry person scares him. Is that who you want to be?'

She bared her teeth at him and hissed, 'You know nothing about me or my son.'

'That's because you never let me.'

'And why would I? Why would I bring a murderer into my home?'

'Do you hear the double-standard there?' Jake cried, flinging his hands in the air in despair. 'You stabbed me.'

'Shame it didn't do the job.'

I saw her eyes flick to the knives and, with shaking fingers, I dialled 999 on my phone.

'Get out or I'll ring.' I held up my phone so she could see the number ready to connect. 'See where that gets you after your arrest this week.'

She banged her fist on the counter, but the threat did the trick.

‘This isn’t over!’ she shouted before storming out of the kitchen.

Jake rushed over to me and gathered me in his arms. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘She’s terrifying, Jake.’

‘I know. But she’s gone now.’

Next minute the door burst open, but Larissa’s whole stance had changed. ‘Roo’s not in the car,’ she said, her voice high-pitched with fear. ‘The keys were on the drive. Help me!’

Jake grabbed his waterproof and dashed outside.

‘I’ll be there in a sec,’ I called, wanting to settle Pickle in his bed first. I couldn’t see him and was worried he might be cowering somewhere, scared by the shouting.

‘Pickle?’ I called.

I listened for his feet tapping on the tiles but there was silence.

‘Pickle?’ A bit louder this time. The door to the hallway was closed so he couldn’t have gone far. I peered under the island and behind the sofa.

‘Pickle, where are you? Would you like a biscuit?’

I lifted the top off the biscuit jar – a sound guaranteed to make him come running, even if he was on the top floor – but the house remained silent. Heart thumping, I looked towards the driftwood hooks near the external door where we kept his lead. It had gone.

‘Jake!’ I cried, shoving my feet into a pair of wellies by the door and grabbing my coat. ‘Jake!’

I knew he wouldn’t be able to hear me – probably already halfway down the cliff searching for Roo. My hands shook as I locked the door and ran down the drive.

It was nearly 7 p.m. – an hour and a quarter until sunset – but the steady rain meant it was already dark. There were very few people about but Jake and Larissa were on the promenade looking round them helplessly.

‘Jake!’ I screamed, sprinting across the road. ‘He’s taken Pickle.’

‘Shit!’

‘What’s Pickle?’ Larissa snapped.

‘Our dog. You did that! You scared him!’ I wanted to shove her, but that would make me no better than her.

‘They’ll both be scared,’ Jake said in a voice way calmer than I’d managed. ‘We need to find them quickly. Does Roo know this area at all?’

‘No. We had a walk along here at the start of the summer but he hasn’t been here since.’

‘Where did you go? Just the promenade?’

‘We went down the cliff and through Cascade Gardens.’

‘Then we need to go down the cliff,’ Jake said. ‘It’s likely he’ll head for somewhere familiar.’

‘I’ll go towards town, just in case,’ I said. ‘Keep me posted.’

I set off running along the promenade, stopping anyone I passed and asking them if they’d seen a young boy in a white T-shirt and grey hoodie with a brown shih tzu, but nobody had. Each no panicked me further.

I’d paused to grab my breath back by the cliff lift when Jake rang.

‘Someone’s seen them,’ he said breathlessly. ‘We’re heading for The Bay Pavilion. They saw them running through the covered walkway.’

I could have cried with relief. It would take me too long to walk to them and I wasn’t sure I had the energy to run all that way.

‘I’ll get the car, drive to Endleigh car park, and work my way towards you.’

I sprinted back to the house, grabbed my car keys and the torch we kept by the door and set off. Endleigh car park was on the top of the cliff at the most southerly end of South Bay. It wasn’t far from the house, but it would be quicker driving than walking and, assuming we found them, the sooner we could get them in a warm car and home, the better.

A couple of minutes later, I parked up and ran down the wide slope to the beach, the torch beam lighting my way. The tide was almost in, so I jogged along the pathway, swinging the beam from side to side to illuminate the path and the tiny stretch of beach. After a minute or so, I saw a couple of figures ahead – Jake and Larissa – and my heart sank.

‘You didn’t catch them?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Jake said. ‘Damn!’

‘There’s nobody down that end and the car park’s empty.’

We shouted Roo’s name and Jake and I shouted for Pickle, but there was no response, no bark, no sign of them.

If Roo had come this far, they’d definitely have seen him as the tide was too high for him to be on the beach, so he’d have had to stick to the path. It was possible he’d doubled back up another cliff path after the covered walkway, but why would he have come all the way down to the seafront only to go back up again?

Which only meant one thing. As though in tune with my thinking, Jake turned at the same time as me and stared into the darkness. There were warning signs but Roo could have missed them in the darkness and rain. My stomach dropped to the ground as my eyes met Jake’s.

‘Call it in,’ he said. ‘I’ll take your car. I can get there in time.’

I passed him my keys. ‘I hope we’re wrong.’

‘Me too. Keep looking.’ He sprinted off.

‘Call what in?’ Larissa asked, her voice full of panic. ‘What’s happening?’

I grimaced at her as the call connected.

‘Which emergency service do you require?’

‘Coastguard.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Larissa pressed her hand to her throat.

‘It’s a precaution,’ I said, trying to reassure her as I waited to be put through to the Coastguard.

‘I’m at the far end of South Bay in Whitsborough Bay,’ I said when the call connected. ‘My nephew was seen down here with my dog a short while ago and we’re worried they might have gone past the warning signs and been cut off...’

I have no idea how I managed to give all the details so calmly when I was so churned up inside.

‘Do you really think Roo could be in danger?’ Larissa asked when the call ended.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know your son and how his mind works, but he was really upset. Upset people keep running and if he ran through the covered walkway, my guess is he kept running until he couldn’t run any further.’

Larissa was shivering and I realised she was only wearing a T-shirt, which was soaked through.

‘There’s nothing we can do down here. It’s dark and wet. The best bet is we go back up to my house and get warmed up and dry off. You never know, they might have gone back there.’

I set off at a brisk pace but Larissa stayed where she was, peering into the darkness.

‘You’re not helping down here,’ I called to her. ‘Come on.’

She ran after me.

‘You might want to call your husband and let him know what’s happening,’ I said as we set off up one of the cliff paths.

‘Oh, God! What’s Andrew going to say? This’ll kill him.’

I was struggling to compute this compliant, caring woman with the fireball I’d seen in our kitchen, although Roo had said his mother had been lovely until the boat incident. Jake was so obviously her trigger.

‘No answer,’ she said. ‘He’s at a work dinner. I’ll keep trying.’

We ascended the first cliff path as quickly as we could. The breathy pace gave me an excuse to avoid conversation. I had so many questions and so much I wanted to say to the woman who’d terrorised my husband, but now wasn’t the time. The only thing that mattered was getting Roo and Pickle home safely. Pickle. I felt sick. If Roo had taken him round the coast, they’d either be trapped in a cove by the rising tide, or they wouldn’t have made it that far. I’d just lost my baby. I couldn’t lose Pickle too.

Jake rang when we were near the top.

‘I’m at the station and I’m waiting for the rest of the crew to kit up. The Coastguard had another call. A jogger saw a young lad and a small dog running along the beach and was concerned they wouldn’t get back before the tide came fully in.’

My heart sank – exactly what we’d feared. ‘Stay safe and bring them home. I love you.’

‘I love you too.’

‘They’ve found him?’ Larissa asked, her voice full of hope.

‘No. They had another report of a lad running along that stretch of beach with a dog. It has to be them. They’ll be taking the ILB out.’

‘ILB?’

‘The inshore lifeboat. It’s the smaller one which can get right in against the cliffs. Come on.’

‘Are we going to the lifeboat station?’

‘Yes, but you’re soaked through and you’re shivering. We’ll get you some dry clothes before you drive down.’

‘I want to go now.’

I winced at the sharpness in her voice so injected sternness into mine. ‘You can’t. We’ll be in the way while they’re doing the launch and every second counts, so it’s vital that goes smoothly.’

‘How the hell do you know?’

‘Because I’m on the crew too. But if you want to rush down there and risk your son’s life even further, you go right ahead.’

She glared at me, but followed me into the house.

I ran upstairs and grabbed a T-shirt, sweater and a pair of elasticated sweatpants with a pull cord. Larissa was slimmer than me so they’d be big on her but the cord should keep them up. She accepted the bundle without a word and went into the bathroom to change.

‘What size shoe are you?’ I asked.

‘Eight.’

‘I’m a six so I can’t help you there.’

She looked down at her soggy canvas shoes. ‘These will do. Have we finished faffing? Can we go now?’

I grabbed Jake’s car keys and was relieved when Larissa said she’d drive her own car. I didn’t want to be in the same space as that despicable woman for longer than necessary. Would a thank you have killed her? Didn’t she understand that it was her foul temper that had put her son and my dog in danger? I didn’t blame Roo for running off like that and taking Pickle, but I did blame Larissa.

* * *

We’d only been at the lifeboat station for a couple of minutes when Larissa’s phone rang. She left the training room saying it

was Andrew and returned a little later, red-eyed and subdued. 'He's on his way.' That conversation had obviously been fraught.

An update came through on the radio that the ILB was parallel with Endleigh car park and was moving in towards the cliffs. Larissa was by the window, her face pale, her hands steepled against her lips as though in prayer.

Much as I'd have loved to give reassurances that they'd find Roo, it was an unknown. He might have entered the water, he might have tried to climb the cliff and got into difficulty, or he might not even be there. The jogger's sighting was very likely to have been of Roo and Pickle, but he'd caught a snapshot of time and couldn't fill in the blanks as to what happened after that.

I hugged my arms round my body, praying Pickle was safe. I could picture the ILB out there, Jake and the crew squinting against the sea spray and the rain as their eyes scanned the coastline. Spotting a casualty on the beach in this weather at night would be tricky but not impossible. But if Roo or Pickle had entered the water, the odds massively decreased. Our Launch Authority had told me that the air sea rescue helicopter had been scrambled. The searchlight was invaluable for searches in the dark and, being at height, the helicopter crew didn't have the same challenge of trying to see across the waves which could make searching from sea level difficult.

One of the things Roo had going for him was what he was wearing. The pale grey hoodie and white T-shirt would be so much easier to pick out in the dark than if he'd been wearing all dark clothing. Pickle, being dark brown, wasn't so fortunate.

The radio crackled. 'We've found them. Preparing to veer down.'

Larissa's whole body seemed to deflate and she hung her head, but she remained silent. I had nothing to say to her, so I stared out of the window, anxious for more news.

The minutes ticked by agonisingly slowly. I knew that veering down – a process of dropping the anchor and releasing the line little by little to back the ILB into the shore – was a challenging manoeuvre and might take several attempts. The crew faced a difficult balance of trying to work quickly to rescue the casualties but slowly and carefully enough to avoid rocks. The last thing they wanted to do was cause any damage to the ILB, putting them all at risk.

Finally, a report came through that they had the casualties safely on board and it was Roo and Pickle. Roo was cold but an initial assessment was that he wasn't hyperthermic and they had him bundled in a foil blanket and were on their way back to the harbour. Pickle was clearly shaken, but delighted to see Jake. I could picture my husband cradling him protectively all the way home, the same thoughts running through his mind as there had been running through mine about what we'd do if we'd lost him.

Some of the shore crew left to meet the ILB at the harbour and they must have met Andrew on their way out, as he appeared in the training room moments later. He scanned the room and rushed up to Larissa, wrapping his arms around her.

'They've got him,' she cried.

'I know. They said.'

I couldn't hear any sobs but, from the shaking of her body, I knew Larissa was crying. It was obvious she loved her son deeply and this whole experience had to be agony for her. Would it be too much to hope that a valuable lesson could be learned out of something so horrendous?

The rain had intensified on the ILB's journey back and Larissa and Andrew were asked to stay in the lifeboat station as the priority was to get Roo inside and warmed up, which would be difficult if they met him at the harbour.

A message came through a little later to say that they'd arrived back at the lifeboat station and Jake was checking Roo over while Artie got Pickle warmed up. I glanced across at Larissa and Andrew and it was like a switch had been flicked

at the mention of Jake's name. She broke out of their hug and raced towards the door.

'He's not going anywhere near my son!'

'Larissa!' Andrew called, running after her.

I followed them as she thundered down the stairs, screeching, 'Leave him alone! Don't touch him!'

The door to the first aid room burst open and Artie's huge frame completely filled it.

'What's going on?' he demanded.

'He's not allowed to touch my son,' she yelled, trying to get past him.

Andrew caught up with her and grabbed her around the waist. As though she was a small child, he lifted her up and moved her away from Artie, who'd closed the door behind him, presumably so Jake could get on with his treatment of Roo.

'I need my son!' Larissa kicked her legs out but Andrew still had a tight hold of her.

'Your son is cold and in shock and he has several cuts on his hands where he attempted to climb the cliff, so Jake is treating him,' Artie said, his voice strong and commanding. 'I'm not interested in your squabbles. I'm only interested in your son and, right now, he needs medical attention. Jake is a nurse and the best person to give that. Do I make myself clear?'

'It's his fault Roo ran.' Some of the power had gone out of Larissa's voice and she wasn't fighting Andrew to release her. 'It's always his fault.'

I wasn't taking that. Conscious that Roo was on the other side of the door, I kept my voice low but strong. 'No! It was *nothing* to do with Jake. *You* yelled at him and scared him away. I'm sorry, Larissa, but if you want to blame someone for all of this, you need to take a long hard look in the mirror.'

'But he killed our parents. He's the one who—'

‘Enough!’ Andrew cried. ‘This ends here!’

From the look of disbelief on Larissa’s face, I suspected Andrew never raised his voice. He let go of her and she backed away to the end of the corridor. Artie slipped back into the room and I hesitated on the stairs, wondering if I should retreat too.

‘I’ve put up with your shit for decades,’ Andrew snapped, ‘but not anymore. This obsession with your brother has got to stop.’

He lowered his voice as Larissa sagged against the wall, but I was on the stairs just above her and close enough to hear what he said.

‘I understand you’re in pain, but Jake did not kill your parents and you know it. You *knew* from the start they were told not to try for another baby. I know it hurts that they were willing to take that risk but they made that choice. He was an innocent baby.’

Larissa opened her mouth as though to protest, but Andrew continued.

‘As for your dad drowning, my uncle was there, remember? Yes, Jake went down onto the slipway and your dad called him back, but he wasn’t giving him his full attention because he was talking to my uncle. None of them were to know what was going to happen. It was a tragic accident.’

‘But he shouldn’t have been on the slipway.’

‘No, he shouldn’t, but what nine-year-old boy knows how dangerous something like that can be? Just like a twelve-year-old running along the beach in the darkness with no idea of the danger of the tides. Roo’s three years older than Jake was – nearly four – and he didn’t know the risks, so how the hell would Jake?’

Larissa put her hands over her face and slowly slid down the wall, her shoulders shaking. I hesitated, feeling like I was intruding on something intensely personal, but unable to tear myself away. She’d always known about their parents being

advised not to have another baby? Jake thought he'd revealed that to her the day she stabbed him. If I stayed, might I hear something else that could help Jake understand why she'd treated him so heinously?

'I don't want to upset you, but you have to hear this,' Andrew said, his voice now soft and compassionate. 'You've persecuted your brother. Persecuted. And don't think I don't know why. Deep down, you blame yourself. You think you weren't enough for your parents, that your mother was willing to risk her life having a second child because you weren't enough for them. You think that, if you hadn't refused to have anything to do with your brother, you might have gone out for a family meal on Jake's birthday and they'd never have been by the sea.'

I wrapped my arms across my chest for comfort as goose bumps covered my entire body. Had Andrew nailed it? Had Larissa's hatred for Jake sprouted from her guilt?

Larissa looked up at her husband, her cheeks streaked with tears and her words confirmed he was right. 'They didn't love me.'

He gathered her in his arms, rocking her. 'Of course they did, but they wanted another baby, like so many other couples out there. It doesn't mean they love the first one any less.'

The door to the first aid room opened once more.

'Reuben's warmed up and he says he doesn't want a shower. He just wants to go home, but I thought I'd better check you're ready for him.'

I admired Artie so much for his choice of words and the way he was protecting Roo from seeing his mum in such a mess. Larissa hastily wiped her cheeks and Andrew helped her to her feet. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead.

'I love you. I always have and I always will, but you need some help. This is out of control and I should have put a stop to it long ago. Tonight could have been a lot worse. I'm not

blaming you, but you can't blame Jake. Promise me you'll stop this.'

She nodded numbly.

'I need to hear it.'

'I promise I'll get help.'

'Good. Because I can't do this anymore if you don't. I mean that.'

She visibly gulped and nodded her head before wiping her cheeks once more with the palms of her hands. She took a deep breath, rolled her shoulders, and pasted a smile on her face.

'I'm ready to see Roo now.'

Artie opened the door and Roo, dressed in donated clothes, ran out. The three of them huddled together and I pushed down the lump in my throat. Somebody else needed a hug. Aside from the trauma of Pickle going missing, Jake would have heard the initial shouts that brought Artie out of the room. Tonight would have been a hell of an ordeal for him.

'Is Jake okay?' I whispered to Artie once I'd made my way down the rest of the stairs.

'A bit shaken. I'll just grab the lad's wet clothes and then they can go.'

I could hear the unspoken part of that statement – *and then Jake will be safe*. Please let that be the case going forwards too. Andrew had put his foot down and even suggested their marriage would be over if she didn't get help. I hoped that possibility, alongside tonight's terrifying incident, would be enough.

'And is Pickle okay?' I asked, desperate for cuddles from my little dog, but knowing getting Larissa out of the station had to be the top priority..

'Pickle's a star. He did a great job of keeping young Roo distracted. He'll be glad to see you and so will Jake. What a night!'

* * *

Back home, Jake and I lay on our bed, facing each other, with Pickle curled up between us, fast asleep. He hadn't wanted to talk about it immediately, but he was ready to talk now.

'The relief I felt when I heard him bark,' Jake said, stroking Pickle's back. 'I've never known anything like it.'

'I can imagine. I felt the same when I heard he was safely on the ILB.'

He told me more about the rescue and how sorry Roo had been for running off and especially for taking Pickle with him. He'd told Jake that Pickle ran to the door with him and Roo spotted the lead as he was pulling his trainers on. Next minute, he'd grabbed it and clipped it on, wanting to get Pickle away from the shouting. He hadn't thought about where they were going or how worried we'd all be – he'd just wanted to escape.

I filled him in on what Larissa and I had done up until we'd heard the crew were back at the station.

'I heard her shouting her accusations,' he said, his voice weary. 'Roo did too, poor kid.'

'How much did you hear?'

'Andrew shouted at her to stop, and I didn't hear anything after that. I didn't want Roo to hear any more so I put a playlist on and fired questions at him about school and hobbies – anything to take his mind, and mine, off whatever was kicking off outside. Pickle demanded his attention too.'

'I heard it all,' I said. 'I don't think Andrew realised I was still on the stairs...'

I filled Jake in on what he'd said and how Larissa reacted. He shook his head, sighing.

'She did it all because she felt guilty? That's seriously messed up.'

'I know. She's promised Andrew she'll get help.'

‘I hope she does and that it works for her, but I’m through. Her anger tonight could have ended in tragedy.’

His voice cracked and he gently pulled Pickle closer to his side.

‘It’s all right,’ I whispered. ‘He’s safe now.’

KERRY



I'd feared that the bad behaviour might return after Fendale and I was right, but there was no way I could do another mystery week. Cost aside, the weather had been terrible all week. We'd nipped to the park to do the new treasure hunt on Sunday but had stayed home since then, only venturing out to borrow some new books from the library. By Wednesday evening, I was sick of playing referee and had sent the kids off to their separate rooms to read or watch television.

It was now past nine and the twins and Noah were asleep, with Maisie just finishing the last couple of chapters in her library book. Mum was round at a friend's house so I'd been unable to see Artie, but I longed to hear his voice and picked up the phone. I caught him driving back home after a shout and he didn't sound like his usual cheerful self.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'Tough shout this evening and we had a fatality earlier.'

'Oh, no! I'm so sorry. That's awful.'

'Sadly it's part of the job and we already knew it was a body pick-up – an elderly man who slipped down a cliff – but it doesn't make it any easier.'

'Makes my day with the kids sound like a walk in the park. Sounds like you need a hug more than me.'

'I'd love one, but hearing your voice is the next best thing. How's your day been?'

I was about to tell him about it when I heard the front door open and peeked outside. Mum's car was back on the drive.

'Are you nearly home?' I asked.

'Driving round The Headland.'

'Mum's home. Meet me in the shelter by the junction in ten minutes.'

The stone shelter at the junction between our two roads was often occupied on an evening by teenagers, but it was deserted tonight, presumably thanks to the torrential rain earlier which had now stopped.

Artie was already there and he put his arms out and drew me close. I could have stayed there forever, feeling safe and warm in his arms.

We sat on the bench and he told me about his rescue that evening. I was stunned to hear that it had been Hollie and Jake's nephew because I had no idea they even had a nephew. It transpired that neither had they until very recently.

'He wasn't alone,' Artie said. 'He had Pickle with him.'

I clapped my hand to my mouth. 'Is he okay?'

'Thankfully, yes. Quite an ordeal for them all.'

He filled me in on the details of the rescue and explained that rescuing children and animals always affected him more, but it was Jake's sister's behaviour that had been the most upsetting.

'I don't know how Jake has managed to hold it together over the years,' he said, running his hand down his beard. 'The stuff he's been through thanks to her. I should have been there for him more. I mean, he has Hollie now, but before that. He was always quiet – it's why we call him Mouse – but I didn't know it was because he was too afraid to let anyone get close in case they agreed with his sister that it was his fault.'

I put my arm round his shoulders and rested my head against his. 'That's heart-breaking. The strong, silent type. Like someone else I know.'

He smiled at that. 'You think I'm quiet?'

'Not around me but, from a few things you've said, I get the impression you're friends with everyone and they all love you, but you maintain just that little bit of distance, keeping the parts that hurt hidden away.'

He adjusted position to face me. 'Except from you.'

'Except from me,' I agreed, running my fingers lightly across his cheek. 'That's because I see you, and I know you see me.'

'I do.'

He cupped my face and tenderly kissed me and I knew at that point that it didn't matter that we hadn't said we loved each other and we weren't ready to jump into bed together. This unexpected thing between us was real and special and everlasting and if he was going to be part of my life, he needed to be fully part of my life. No sneaking out for hugs, no nights out 'with a friend' when I could squeeze it in. My children needed to know we were together and that having Artie in my life didn't mean less time for them. The timing wasn't perfect, but when would it ever be? Besides, they had asked if they could see him again. This might not have been what they were expecting, but it was time.

* * *

After three bad days, the weather finally turned and Thursday arrived with a welcome return of sunshine and heat.

'Are you nervous?' Mum asked as she helped me prepare a picnic tea after lunch while the kids were upstairs getting ready for our trip to Starfish Point.

'A bit. I've never been in this position before. I'd like to think they'll take it well, especially as they've already met Artie and they like him, but having him presented as my boyfriend is a different thing.' I rolled my eyes at her. 'Boyfriend. Makes me sound like a teenager again. It's all still a bit surreal. I never expected this to happen.'

‘But it did, and nobody deserves it more. I’m glad you’ve decided to tell them early on. I really do think they’ll be excited for you, especially when they all like Artie so much. You’ll probably have Maisie and Freya asking if they can be bridesmaids.’

‘Steady on! We’ve only just started seeing each other.’

Mum winked at me. ‘But when you know, you know.’

I wasn’t prone to blushing, but it suddenly felt very hot in the kitchen. Yes, I did know. I hadn’t said it and he hadn’t either, both of us wanting to take it slowly after being single for so long and so wounded by the ending of our marriages, albeit in very different circumstances, but that didn’t stop me feeling it. After seeing that wedding at The Bay Pavilion and talking about whether we’d take that chance again, I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about being Artie’s wife. I’d even found myself gazing at the photos I’d taken at Hollie and Jake’s wedding, imagining what our day might look like. Crazy behaviour!

So Artie was going to meet us at Starfish Point after work this evening for a picnic tea as I felt that having him join us on the beach was more natural than inviting him round to the house or going out for a meal. My plan was not to mention anything about Artie being our guest until he texted to say he’d arrived at the car park. Depending on the reaction I got to that news, I’d either tell them we were in a relationship there and then or I’d wait until Artie joined us for the big reveal. It was pointless thinking too hard about what to say and when because, with four children, conversations were frequently steered in unanticipated directions.

‘Any news from Cameron on his plans for the rest of the summer?’ Mum asked, bringing my attention back to the present.

‘Nope. All I have is confirmation that he’ll do something with the kids on Saturday again and that he’d like to come up with the location, but no word on where that is or what happens beyond it. So either Tess hasn’t talked to him about

getting a grip on his shocking communication skills, or she has and it's gone in one ear and out the other.'

'Ooh, that man! He makes me so mad.'

'You and me both, Mum. For a project manager who treats his family as a project, he seems to be pretty crap at the whole planning thing. I've had it up to here with him.' I raised my hand way above my head.

She raised her eyebrows at me. 'He's finally found your limit, then?'

'I'm sick of defending him. I'll never say anything bad around the kids but, yes, I've had my fill. You know, there was a time when I thought we might get through this and end up being friends, but I don't like him and his hiding behind his excuses. He's an adult and I appreciate he's influenced by some bad stuff he's faced, but aren't we all? The difference is how we choose to let it affect us and those around us. I could be bitter and angry about my husband walking out on me when I was pregnant with twins, but I choose not to be. I wish Cameron would make some better choices.'

I heard a door banging and voices so held my finger to my lips to halt the conversation. Mum crossed the kitchen and hugged me tightly.

'Absolutely that,' she whispered. 'Stay strong.'

Freya and Jayden ran into the kitchen, firing questions about what was in the picnic, and I assumed enthusiastic mum mode, answering their questions and getting them to choose the drinks they wanted. I would stay strong because I always did. But I appreciated that Mum was always there for me when I didn't feel it and that I had Artie on my side now too to share what sometimes felt like an overwhelming responsibility.

* * *

We had a lovely afternoon on the beach and it was a relief to see all four of them playing nicely together again. Going to Starfish Point was a different type of beach visit than North or

South Bay. Noah couldn't swim in the sea here because of the seal colony. It was their space – not ours – and we needed to respect that. There were rock pools to explore, some small caves in the cliffs, and they could build sandcastles so there was still plenty to do.

Jayden borrowed my phone to take photos of the seals while Freya played with the fairy figurines she'd brought with her. She seemed quite content playing with them on the sand while the older two searched through the rock pools.

When Jayden returned my phone, he complained he was hungry, which set the others off making noises about having tea. I deflected them saying it was still too early but, when a message came through from Artie to say he'd left the lifeboat station and was looking forward to seeing us, I called them all over.

'I know you're hungry but we're going to have our tea in about half an hour because we have a special guest joining us and he needs to get here from work.'

'Is it Daddy?' Freya asked.

'No, it's not Daddy.'

'Nanna?' Jayden said, earning him a nudge from Noah who pointed out that I'd said 'he'.

'I think you'll be pleased because you did ask me last week if you could see him again.' I paused for effect. 'It's Artie.'

Freya and Jayden squealed and jumped up and down together and Maisie and Noah were both smiling. This reaction was good, although they didn't have the full picture, so it might change.

'Is he bringing the lifeboat?' Jayden asked.

'Not today. He doesn't get to use that whenever he wants – just on a rescue. He'll be driving here.'

'Is he your boyfriend?' Maisie asked.

Straight in there! I hadn't expected that.

‘What makes you ask that?’

‘You look at each other all gooey like they do in the films,’ Noah said.

Jayden and Freya gazed at each other like lovesick puppies, making me wonder whether all four of them had been discussing it. If they’d picked up on that – which would have been before Artie and I got together – they were way more perceptive than I thought.

‘And Maisie saw you in the shelter snogging last night,’ Noah added, making them all giggle.

I felt a hot flush from head to toe. Of course! I’d never even thought about the fact that the shelter could be seen from Maisie’s bedroom at the front of Park Lodge.

‘Busted!’ I said. ‘Yes, he is my boyfriend. Are you all okay with that?’

‘We all like him,’ Maisie said.

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

‘Can I be a bridesmaid?’ Freya asked. ‘I could be bridesmaid for you and for Daddy.’

‘We have no plans at the moment to get married but, if we ever did, that would be a yes. As for Daddy, that’s up to Tess and I think the focus is on you all getting to know him first, so no pressurising her.’

Freya shrugged then flung herself at me for a hug. ‘I love you, Mummy. Is Artie my new daddy now?’

‘I love you too, but Daddy is your daddy and Artie is Artie, just like I’m your mummy and Tess is Tess. Does that make sense?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Does Dad know about Artie?’ Maisie asked.

‘Not yet, but I will tell him.’

And that was the bit I was dreading. I needed to do it before they saw him next because I wasn’t going to ask the

children to keep it a secret – not fair on them, especially when secrets had a habit of leaking out. I was going to have to go back on my plans to leave Cameron to it because I couldn't bear not knowing what was happening on Saturday. I'd phone him to find out and let him know about Artie at the same time, which I didn't relish. I pictured his dark looks in Artie's direction when he'd helped Freya after her fall and how he'd quizzed me about who Artie was. How much of that hostility was connected to the idea of us being an item versus jealousy of Freya's obvious adoration of Artie, I wasn't sure, but I was certain it would be a difficult conversation.

My heart leapt a little later as I spotted Artie striding along the beach towards us. I stood up and brushed some sand off my shorts, smiling widely as the children ran up to him. Freya launched herself at him, wrapping her legs round his waist, and Jayden took his hand while Noah and Maisie walked alongside, talking over each other.

'I'm loving the welcoming committee,' he said as he reached me.

'They know and they're happy for us,' I said.

He placed Freya down and brushed his lips against mine, which set them all off giggling.

'Does his beard tickle?' Freya asked.

'It does, but I like it. And that's the last question I'll be answering on kissing. Who's hungry?'

They each had an adjective for how hungry they were as they dived on the sandwiches like a flock of seagulls on a box of chips. Artie sat beside me, smiling as he entwined his fingers with mine.

A sudden thought took my breath away. This was my family, just like in that vision I'd had of us at the castle. When Cameron and I had Maisie and Noah, this was how I'd pictured our future but it had never happened. We'd taken them out as babies, of course, but we'd never had this. As they grew, I'd taken them on stacks of days out but it was always just me, and sometimes Mum. Now, with Artie by my side, I

had the dream and I didn't care what Cameron thought. I'd tell him out of respect, but he wasn't going to ruin this for me. I didn't need his approval or permission. I didn't need anything from him.

KERRY



I would have phoned Cameron on Thursday night to let him know about Artie but the kids invited Artie back to the house and we ended up having a riotous board games challenge with Hungry Hippos, Ker-Plunk, Guess Who? and Pie-Face. The sight of Artie's beard covered in cream had us all creased up in hysterics for ages – another glimpse of the family unit I'd dreamed of.

On Friday morning, there was no putting it off, so I called Cameron first thing. The call didn't start well.

'You'd better not be calling to cancel,' he said the moment he answered.

'Hi, Kerry, how are you?' I said in a sing-song voice. 'I'm very well thanks, Cameron, how are you?'

'Sorry,' he muttered. 'It's been a tough few weeks.'

'For all of us. So have you decided on a venue for tomorrow?'

'Not yet. Still debating between a couple of places.'

'If you want ideas of where they—'

'I'm quite capable, thank you.'

'But there's an event on at the castle which—'

'Kerry! *I'll* decide.'

That was me told! Oh well, it was up to him to deal with the fallout if he chose somewhere they hated or which would

be too crowded on a bank holiday weekend.

‘Was there anything else?’ he asked.

A conversation about the rest of the summer could happen tomorrow with Tess mediating, which just left my main purpose for ringing.

‘Out of courtesy, I want to tell you something. You know Artie from the lifeboat station? We’ve started seeing each other. The kids know and they’re fine with it and I didn’t want you to hear it from one of them.’

‘So you lied when you said you were friends and you told Tess you barely knew him.’

‘I didn’t say I barely knew him. I said we hadn’t known each other for long and, at that point, we were new friends. That has now moved from being friends into a relationship. Friendships do that sometimes, as you well know, because that’s how it happened for you and Tess.’

He ignored the reminder. ‘And you say the kids know?’

‘Yes. I told them yesterday and now I’m telling you.’

‘For God’s sake, Kerry. They’re only just getting to know me. What are you playing at, introducing another man into their lives?’

My whole body tensed. ‘I’m not playing at anything and how dare you question my judgement when you’ve been back for five minutes and I’ve been raising them single-handedly for nearly seven years?’

‘It’s confusing for them.’

‘No, it isn’t. They know Artie isn’t a replacement dad, just as they know Tess isn’t a replacement mum. It’s only confusing or complicated if you make it that way. And could you be more hypocritical about me seeing Artie when you’re the one getting married? I’m allowed to be with someone too, you know.’

‘Well, he’s not coming out with us tomorrow.’

I was already riled by the conversation and that final comment tipped me over the edge. It was just as well we weren't on FaceTime because I couldn't stop myself sticking up two fingers at the phone.

'I don't need your permission. I accepted Tess from the start and I expect you to accept Artie if I asked him. As it happens, he isn't coming because he's on call. Even if he wasn't, I wouldn't have asked him because I want the focus to be on you spending time with the kids, but that is *my* choice and not yours. Understand?'

'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Would help if we had a venue.'

'Bloody hell, Kerry. Change the record! I'll text you later. Bye.'

'Looking forward to it,' I said sarcastically, tossing the phone on the bed with a frustrated growl as soon as I'd disconnected. He really did make my blood boil.

Ten minutes later, he surprised me by texting.

FROM CAMERON

I'm sorry. You're right that your relationships are your choice and none of my business. I hope you're happy together. Thanks for the courtesy of letting me know

TO CAMERON

Apology appreciated and accepted but I would just like to clarify relationship singular, not plural. My priority and focus has always and will always be the children so my decision to date Artie and tell the children – the first time I've dated ANYONE since you left – was not one I took lightly. See you tomorrow

* * *

Mum and Howard decided to take the children ten-pin bowling late that afternoon and said they'd take them to McDonald's for tea afterwards, which left me at a loose end. Artie was still at work and I knew he'd arranged to go for a run with Finley afterwards.

I picked up one of Mum's magazines and threw myself onto the sofa to flick through it but I couldn't concentrate on any of the stories. So much had happened recently and my mind was buzzing with conversations I'd had, some of them heated, some of them loving. But one conversation that was nudging at me more than any other was what Artie had told me about Hollie and Jake. As well as the situation with Jake's sister, he'd mentioned Hollie's miscarriage. He'd thought I'd known with being staff as he understood she'd shared it with the team but, with not working over the holidays, I'd missed that sad news. Hollie had been so good to me and I wanted to see if I could do anything to return the favour. I probably couldn't, but at least she'd know the offer was there.

TO HOLLIE

Hope the café has been thriving this summer. As always, I'm missing it. I'm also missing adult company. Don't suppose you're free for a cuppa and catch-up when you lock up tonight? x

FROM HOLLIE

Sounds perfect. See you later. I've made your favourite today – raspberry and white chocolate cake – so I'll save you a piece x

Angie was leaving as I arrived, so I had a quick chat in the car park with her, thrilled to discover her exciting news that she and Martin were together once more and he was moving back in over the weekend.

Hollie hugged me and we took cake and fruit juices out onto the terrace.

'I hear there was a dramatic rescue on Wednesday,' I said, picking up Pickle and scratching his ears.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘How do you know about that?’

‘Artie told me.’

Her eyes widened now. ‘Artie? Has something happened between you two?’

Hollie listened intently, eyes shining, as I gave a potted overview of the events leading up to us becoming an item.

‘I’m so thrilled for you both. You couldn’t pick a better man than Artie. He’s a snuggly teddy bear and he deserves to find someone lovely like you.’

‘Are you and Jake okay after what happened on Wednesday? I mean the stuff with his sister. I know Artie was shaken by it and really worried about you both.’

‘Yeah. It’s been horrible but we’re hoping Larissa gets the help she needs to control her anger and come to terms with the loss of her parents. We’ve not heard anything from them since the rescue, not that we were expecting to. Some people pop into the lifeboat station to give their thanks to the crew but not everyone does and that’s fine. The crew don’t do it for the gratitude.’

‘There’s something else Artie told me. He wasn’t betraying confidences. He thought I already knew.’

‘Oh, God!’ said Hollie. ‘I never even thought about you not being here. Yes, I had a miscarriage a fortnight ago.’

‘Are you okay?’

‘Most of the time.’

‘I’m really sorry. My mum had a miscarriage. I was actually meant to be a twin. There were two of us when she went for her first scan and a couple of days later she started cramping and bleeding. They did another scan and there was only me there. Vanishing twin syndrome, they call it. Isn’t that an awful term?’

Hollie grimaced. ‘I’ve never heard of it.’

‘Most people haven’t. My mum said it was so weird because she was half-grieving, half-celebrating. She didn’t

tend to talk about the miscarriage part because the response was always *at least you still have one baby* which she felt was like people telling her to stop moping and be grateful.'

'People can say careless things. I've had a couple of comments and I can brush them off most of the time. Some days are harder.'

'I'm a listening ear if ever you want to talk.'

We chatted for a while longer until my phone beeped with a notification from Mum that she and Howard were on their way back home with the kids.

'I'd better head back,' I said, pushing my chair back. I took one last lingering look at the view. 'Gosh, summer nights up here are stunning.'

'Aren't they just? I've spent quite a few of them out here. It's so peaceful and beautiful. I'm very lucky to have this, although I feel like we need to be drinking Pimm's and lemonade.'

'Ooh, I could just imagine that.'

'Then let's do it. We'll get a few of us together for some Pimm's and nibbles and see the summer out in style.'

'You're on!'

HOLLIE



Jake was still asleep as I crept out of bed on Saturday morning and showered. He was stirring as I dressed, so I clambered across the bed and kissed him.

‘Why don’t you and Pickle come to the café after we close?’ I suggested. ‘I’ll have been run off my feet all day, so it’ll be nice to sit on the terrace and unwind.’

‘Sounds good. See you then.’

As expected for a sunny bank holiday weekend, the Starfish Café was busy from the minute we opened, but I had all of my students in to keep everything running smoothly and to give Grace some support in Driftwood Dell as she would struggle to serve, re-stock between and answer customer questions. Tourists often wanted some detail around the locations where Jake’s photos were taken or advice on the wooden buildings which were most reminiscent of their favourite places.

It was still really busy at 4 p.m. with only an hour until closing time when the door opened and my stomach dropped to the floor. Larissa, Andrew and Roo looked around and Roo pointed out to the terrace where a couple of tables had recently been cleared.

Heart in my mouth, I watched them perusing the menu. A few minutes later, Javier went out to take their order. He pointed towards the counter and there was lots of nodding, making my body tense. Hopefully he was pointing out where they needed to come if they wanted to look at the cake

selection, but I couldn't help thinking Javier was pointing to me. Next minute, Larissa stood up and made her way back inside. She approached the counter and I forced a polite smile.

'Hi, Larissa. How's Roo?'

'He's really good. He, erm... Can I have a word with you somewhere quiet? I know you're really busy, but...'

The only place where people weren't was out the back of the kitchen where I kept a couple of chairs and a table for staff breaks. I indicated for her to sit down.

'Thank you for what you did on Wednesday night. I'd never have found Roo without you and Jake so I've got my boy alive and well today thanks to you.'

I nodded, but didn't say anything.

'I know he ran off because of me and I know you both had nothing to do with that. I'm sorry he took your dog too. He feels awful about that. Is he...?'

'Pickle's fine. Survived the ordeal unscathed.' My voice softened. 'Roo did a great job of looking after him. He held on tight to the lead, which probably saved Pickle's life.'

She bit her lip, nodding slowly.

'I need some professional help to deal with my issues but that's going to take a long time because there's a lot of them.'

She attempted a weak smile but tears pricked her eyes and her lip wobbled instead.

'Anyway, I'm not in a good place to speak to Jake. I'm really grateful for what he did but there's too much going on in here...' She tapped her head, '...and I don't think it's a good idea for me to see him until I can get my head straight enough to articulate anything to him. And, even then, Jake might not think it's a good idea. If I was him, I'd never want to see me again.'

Her fingernails were already bitten down to the quick but she still managed to find something to nibble on.

‘Even when I can find some words for Jake, I don’t think it’s possible for us to have a relationship. I think I broke him and us a long time ago.’

‘I can’t speak for certain for Jake, but I’d say that’s fair. What you put him through has had a lasting impact. He has physical scars and he has emotional ones.’

She nodded slowly and gulped. ‘While a relationship between Jake and me is almost definitely off the table, I don’t think it’s fair on Roo to keep him away from you both when he has so few relatives. Andrew has said he won’t allow it anyway. I will understand if you want nothing to do with our family because of me, but if you would be willing to have Roo in your life, it would mean a lot to him and Andrew and, because my son and husband mean everything to me, it would mean a lot to me too.’

‘Again, I can’t speak for certain for Jake, but I’m pretty sure he’d want that.’

‘I promise I won’t be awkward, but I won’t lie and say it’ll be an easy adjustment. I’m hurting too.’

‘I understand that.’

‘If Jake does approve, would you mind if we took it really slow? Maybe Roo can come round for tea one evening after school goes back or spend a couple of hours with you one Sunday. I can get Andrew to do the drop-offs and pick-ups.’

‘I’ll speak to Jake and drop you a text. A heads up for you now, though. Jake will be here for closing time, so I don’t want to rush you out, but you might like to be gone by quarter to five.’

She stood up and nodded vigorously. ‘Thanks for that. We’ll have some cake and leave. Can Roo say hello to you?’

‘That’s fine. Tell him to come up to the counter.’

* * *

Larissa, Andrew and Roo had left about ten minutes before Jake and Pickle arrived. Roo had given me a hug, which had been lovely, and had apologised for taking Pickle. Andrew shook my hand and thanked me for everything. He seemed like a decent bloke who must have had barrels full of patience and love for Larissa to stick by her all of these years. I guess he got to see the loving, caring side of her and he stayed because that outweighed the bad stuff.

‘I can’t believe she’s been here,’ Jake said as we sat on the terrace and I told him about Larissa’s visit over lattes.

‘How do you feel about us seeing Roo?’

‘She definitely said Andrew would bring him and pick him up?’

‘Yes.’

‘In that case, yes. I’d love to get to know my nephew and there’s a little dog I think will be delighted to have his playmate back, even if that playmate placed him in danger.’

Pickle wagged his tail as we both looked down at him.

‘What are your thoughts on what she said about your relationship being irreparable?’ I asked.

‘I think she’s right. I’m sure we can be polite and tolerate each other to allow Roo to be part of our lives, but I don’t want anything to do with her. I really hope she addresses her demons and is able to find peace with what happened, but it’s way past that for me. I was a kid and she was an adult. She knew what she was doing. She deliberately set out to hurt me and Nanna and I’m not going to forgive and forget. If and when she feels ready to articulate whatever is going on for her, I *might* hear her out, but there’s no guarantee.’

‘I completely agree and I’ll support you 100 per cent, whatever you decide. Roo’s innocent in this, but Larissa is extremely guilty. A thousand apologies isn’t going to cut it.’

‘No, it isn’t. And that’s plenty of unpleasant stuff for this evening. Busy day?’

‘Never stopped.’

‘Foot rub?’

‘Ooh, would you?’ I rested my feet across Jake’s lap and welcomed the easing massage as we discussed our days.

The evenings were getting cooler, the days were getting shorter, and the café would soon be getting quieter, with schools going back in just over a week. Not many more summer nights to be enjoyed on the terrace and I was anxious to make the most of the ones that were, including an extremely last-minute ‘Pimm’s and Nibbles Summer Soiree’ tomorrow night.

KERRY



It was the evening of Bank Holiday Monday at the end of August when Angie, Avril, Grace, Katie, Tori, Mum and I gathered on the terrace of The Starfish Café to toast the end of summer at Hollie's 'Pimm's and Nibbles Summer Soiree'.

'It's so lovely to have you all here,' Hollie said, looking round the group. 'It's been an eventful summer, full of highs and lows, but we've nearly made it through it. Cheers!'

We toasted her with a Pimm's and lemonade or a non-alcoholic equivalent. Eventful? She wasn't kidding!

The drama had continued, with Cameron sending me a text after the kids had gone to bed on Friday night saying he'd chosen Kittrig Forest for Saturday. We'd already been but the kids loved it so, in theory, there was no harm going again, but I knew from personal experience that the forest was best avoided on a bank holiday weekend. Even though he'd shut me down on the phone when I'd offered advice, it was worth another try, so I texted back with a heads up that the forest would be heaving and suggested Whitsborough Bay Castle instead as there was a special event on. I had a snappy response about being capable of deciding on days out without my help, so we went with his plan and, as predicted, Kittrig Forest was swarming with people. They couldn't get on the ropes course because the queue was far too long, we had tears from Freya after getting repeatedly pushed out of the way by bigger kids on the playground, and the whole day was tense. I felt sorry for Cameron, but he'd brought it on himself for refusing to listen to me.

Yesterday, we went to the castle with Mum and the kids had a fantastic time, watching a battle re-enactment, wandering round the mediaeval camp, having wooden sword fights, and trying on armour. I'd badly wanted to invite Artie to join us but, after Cameron's disastrous day, it felt like I'd be rubbing his nose in it. I could just imagine the kids tactlessly comparing the two days and the two men in front of him, which wasn't going to help the situation. It wasn't a competition and the last thing I wanted was for Cameron to feel threatened by Artie. It wasn't that they didn't like being around their dad. He was attentive towards them, had worked out what made them laugh, and I could see that relationship building. It was the lack of communication, once again, that remained a problem.

'I *did* speak to him,' Tess told me, shrugging apologetically when Cameron took a soggy Jayden to the toilets to change after he'd been pushed over in the crowded stream. 'I'll keep chipping away.'

'Please do because I tried to warn him about today and he wouldn't listen. He needs to learn to take feedback and accept it as me being helpful instead of seeing it as personal criticism. He's doing a good job, but he could make it so much easier on himself.'

Last night, I'd been stunned by a phone call from Cameron with an apology and a promise to listen to me in future. We'd talked at length, during which time he admitted that he'd known it would be hard stepping back into their lives but had completely underestimated how much time would be needed to gain their trust and build a relationship. He also hadn't appreciated how important my support was in that happening.

I wanted to show him that the trust was building, so I suggested he and Tess take the kids out for a meal this evening and stay over at Park Lodge. They hadn't spent enough time with the kids to have them sleeping over in Whitby, but this would give them a chance to manage the bedtime routine and meant Mum could join me instead of babysitting. I thought he'd try to push for the kids to go to Whitby instead, but he

agreed that it would be a step too far and this was a great compromise.

‘How are you feeling about leaving Cameron in charge?’ Hollie asked me a little later.

‘Surprisingly calm, although a few glasses of Pimm’s have helped. How are you holding up?’

‘Good days and bad days, but mostly good ones. It’s been a great summer for the café but, personally, I say summer can do one. Bring on the autumn!’

‘Cheers to that!’ I clinked my glass against hers, smiling.

‘And how’s Artie?’ she asked, giving me a cheeky wink.

My smile widened and my heart raced. ‘Amazing. Meeting him has been the best thing about the worst summer ever.’

‘I’m so pleased for you both and glad there was one positive for you.’

I pondered for a moment. ‘Actually, despite the challenges, I can’t look at Cameron’s return as negative. My kids now have a relationship with their dad. I *never* expected that to happen. I’ve finally had an explanation for why he left, which has given me the closure I needed. And, even though we’ve had some hairy moments, we’ve had some great days out too. We spent a week with Pickle and that was really special.’

‘So overall a pretty successful summer,’ she said, laughing.

‘It didn’t feel like it at the time, but it really was.’

‘You’ve got me thinking about mine now. Maybe it wasn’t so bad either.’

‘Well, you did start the summer getting married...’

It turned out that, despite the heartache, we could both find plenty of positives and one of those included getting to know each other better. Before the summer, I’d have said that Hollie was a great boss with whom I enjoyed spending time. Now, I’d properly call her a friend.

‘I think we should make this a regular thing,’ Hollie said as the evening wrapped up a little later. ‘What do you all think?’

It had been an evening full of friendship and laughter, so her proposal was met with unanimous agreement.

‘Here’s to summer nights at The Starfish Café,’ Angie said. ‘And autumn, winter, spring.’

That social life Mum thought I needed? She was right. My kids were my absolute world, but there was room for me to have relationships too. I realised that now and I was so ready for it.

HOLLIE



One month later

The autumnal theme of Tori and Finley's wedding couldn't have been more perfect. The sky was baby blue with that nip in the air that reminded us that summer had flown – just as well Robyn, Charlee, India and I had capes to wear over our dresses.

Tori's dress was stunning. In a pale cream Boho-style with slashed lace sleeves and a short train, the wide waistband and the tops of the shoulders had stunning embroidered leaves, toadstools and berries in autumnal threads.

The derelict church – *L'eglise des arbres* – was straight out of a fairy tale. Already smothered in ivy, autumnal flowers and white fairy lights had been added and there were flameless candles of assorted sizes flickering everywhere.

Guests were transported to the church by horse and cart, also beautifully decorated, and the last trip across was for the bridal party – the bridesmaids, best man and ushers. Finley had asked Roman to be his best man, which was just adorable, and the ushers were Jake and Dean – an old school friend of his who was married to Charlee's best friend Jodie. The bride, groom and Tori's parents all rode in on horseback.

The ceremony itself was beautiful, with the most heartfelt vows from both of them and with Tori's mum Vivienne reading a passage about love from one of the books she and

Tori's dad Ralph had written, which so perfectly described Tori and Finley's relationship.

'Made me want to have our wedding day all over again,' I said to Jake as we travelled back to the manor house where the wedding breakfast was being served in a marquee on the lawn.

'I can't believe it was only three months ago,' he said, kissing my hand. 'So much has happened since then.'

I still had days that were harder and suspected that would be the case for a long time. We'd had a couple of conversations about when we might be ready to try again but neither of us felt comfortable saying we'd be ready in a week/a month/three months so had decided not to make a decision to actively try for a baby and just leave it to Mother Nature.

We'd seen Roo a couple of times. He'd come to our house for tea after the school term resumed, and we'd gone ten-pin bowling with him last Sunday. It had been lovely getting to know him. He'd told us he loved sailing – something he'd inherited from Andrew – and was determined to join the RNLI when he was older, following in his Uncle Jake's footsteps. Jake loved the idea of having his nephew on crew – the second generation of his side of the family. Roo surprised us by saying his mum supported it. Our biggest relief was to hear that she was calmer. The shouting had stopped and Roo was glad they'd moved to Whitsborough Bay after all. Whether Larissa was, that remained to be seen. But, if she continued to get help, then hopefully the town would prove to be big enough for both siblings.

KERRY



The last time I'd been to a wedding, I'd met Artie Briars and now we were at Tori and Finley's wedding as a couple and I couldn't be happier. It was a wonderfully romantic day in a fairy-tale setting with no children interrupting us every five minutes and I was looking forward to the evening on our own too, as the kids had other plans. Cameron and Tess were up from London for the weekend and staying with us. They were in full charge of the weekend but I'd been touched that Cameron had asked for my suggestions as to how to spend it. He'd finally listened.

The wedding breakfast had finished by 4 p.m. and we were invited to explore if we wished. With only a couple of hours of light left, Artie and I decided on the grounds before the house. I'd heard there were water features and follies and I loved things like that.

Artie took my hand and led me down a winding path. 'I was speaking to Tori's dad earlier and he's given me directions to a hidden folly. I hope I can remember them.'

We meandered down pathways and through trailing vines until we came to a curved wall with a glassless window near one end, offering a glimpse of a beautiful wildflower garden.

'What are you doing?' I asked Artie as he went to the other end of the wall and ran his hands along the bricks.

'Ah! That's so clever.'

Before my eyes, he disappeared from sight.

‘Artie? How did you do that?’

His hand wrapped round mine and he gently pulled me to the left.

‘Optical illusion,’ he said. ‘A wall behind a wall.’

‘I’d never have spotted that.’

‘Which means we’re going somewhere nobody else will find.’ He winked as he led me down some steps and round a bend.

We both gasped. Ahead of us was a stone structure like a bandstand with a waterfall cascading from the other side into a large pond.

‘This is so magical,’ I said, mesmerised by the waterfall.

Artie slipped his arms round my waist from behind and I cosied into him, enjoying the warmth of his body against mine. He kissed my neck and I moaned softly as he ran his hands down my curves.

I twisted to meet his lips with mine and melted into a passionate kiss – one that wasn’t going to be disturbed by a phone call or text because there was no reception here and Mum was the emergency contact tonight.

‘I need to tell you something,’ Artie said, taking my hands in his and fixing his eyes on mine, ‘and I can’t imagine a better place to say it. I’ve wanted to say it from our very first kiss but I didn’t want to scare you off by going too fast, too soon.’

My heart raced with anticipation.

‘I hope you could already feel it without me needing to put it into words but, just in case there’s any doubt, I love you.’

‘I love you too, so very much, and I didn’t want to say it too soon either, but I felt it right from the start, from you and for you.’

We stood in the middle of the folly and lost ourselves in a deep kiss as the leaves whispered their approval and the waterfall sang with joy.

HOLLIE



Five weeks later

It was Bonfire Night and those initial conversations I'd had with Angie about bringing The Starfish Café Bonfire Night celebrations back to life were now a reality. I didn't want to copy what we used to do because it was never going to be the same without my family there.

My first change was that, for the first time in forever, I didn't decorate the Christmas tree. I left that to Tori – interior designer extraordinaire – with some assistance from Finley, Jake and Katie, although Katie wasn't much help as she kept knocking the baubles off with her baby bump, which was so funny to see. Her due date was just over a month away now and they were expecting another boy.

Angie and I focused on the food, but we'd scrapped the buffet for a simple warming menu of tomato soup, jacket potatoes, hot dogs, and s'mores for dessert over a firepit out the front of the café.

This year, the council had bowed to pressure from various community groups and were trialling silent fireworks. Angie was ecstatic about this idea as she loved the colours but was terrified of the noise and had spent parties past hidden in the stock cupboard until it was over. It was also great news for pets, wildlife and people who were triggered by the bangs.

The display started and I wasn't the only one to comment that the silent fireworks were so much better as we could appreciate the beauty of the display while still playing music and talking.

'Enjoying yourself?' I asked Roo as he watched the fireworks next to Andrew.

'Love it!'

Andrew smiled appreciatively. Each time we saw Roo, we had a chat with Andrew, and I felt like we were forming a friendship. Things were a little more tense between him and Jake – he had, after all, stood by Larissa while she'd repeatedly attacked her young brother – but they were getting there. The main thing was the relationship with Roo.

'It's so lovely to be out here on the terrace with you all instead of cowering in the stock cupboard,' Angie said, slipping her arm round my waist. 'And it's lovely to have this tradition back.'

Angie and Martin had set a date for the renewal of their marriage vows. Having considered a variety of venues on the coast, inland and abroad, they told me that there was one venue they kept coming back to which meant a lot to both of them – The Starfish Café.

'There are two women I want by my side that day. One of them is you and the other is your mum,' Angie had told me. 'I can't have your mum in person, but her spirit is in this place, so it's the next best thing.'

I was so touched by that, and of course it was a yes.

They'd wondered about renewing their vows on their May wedding anniversary but had decided to celebrate a different anniversary instead – the date they'd first met. So there would be a vow renewals ceremony at The Starfish Café on Tuesday, 16 July next year and I couldn't be more thrilled for them. The only potential challenge was that I had exciting news of my own and it might just clash. I'd taken a pregnancy test on Friday night and it was positive. Jake and I were pretty sure that it was the result of a passionate night in an opulent four-

poster bed at Redamancy Castle after Tori and Finley's wedding, but we'd know for sure after our dating scan. If all went well this time, I would either be very heavily pregnant, or I'd be attending the vow renewal with a baby.

This time, we weren't going to tell anyone, not even those closest to us. I didn't want any concerned looks or constant checks on how I was feeling. There was no reason for this seedling not to grow into a beautiful flower and we were both hanging onto that. Our scan would likely be due around Christmas or New Year, and we were both hoping to start the New Year by announcing our good news.

Jake wrapped his arms around me, and I snuggled against him as the fireworks drew to their finale of multiple colourful explosions.

'I feel like they're for us,' he whispered, subtly brushing his hand over my stomach.

'They are,' I whispered back. 'It's our time now.'

EPILOGUE

HOLLIE

Eight months later

The Starfish Café closed at 2 p.m. after the lunchtime trade to prepare for Angie and Martin's vow renewal ceremony a few hours later. Tori had taken on the role of wedding designer and had organised a group of my staff to rearrange the furniture and transform the space with flowers.

I felt a little guilty that I couldn't help them, but I was otherwise preoccupied. Two days ago, on Sunday, 14 July, I'd given birth to a beautiful baby girl with a crown of dark hair, just like her dad.

A few months ago, Jake had been on a night shift, and I'd gone to bed early to search for baby names on my laptop. After drawing a blank, I took out Albert's journal and flicked through it. He'd used girls' names in some of his poems and I'd wondered whether any of them might spark, but they didn't. And then my eyes fell on Mum's cards and the adorable little girl in the pink tutu and red wellies, and I wondered if she had a name. I searched on the artist's website, where I found a series of gorgeous illustrations of the same little girl and discovered that she was inspired by the artist's own daughter, whose name was Filia. I'd never come across that name and the more I turned it over, the more I loved it. I searched on its meaning and discovered it had Greek origins and symbolised friendship. Jake and I had started out as friends sharing responsibility for Pickle, and The Starfish Café

where we'd met had always been a place for friendship. The name was perfect and Jake agreed, so we named our daughter Filia Violet Brooks-MacLeod, the middle name in memory of Jake's nanna.

Angie had already met Filia but, for everyone else, tonight was their opportunity. I'd made sure that it was okay to bring her as I didn't want Filia stealing the limelight from Angie on such a special occasion.

'I get to have my honorary first granddaughter at my second wedding to my first husband,' she said. 'That's a privilege and I want her there up front and centre.'

The ceremony was taking place on the terrace. Tori had erected a beautiful white pergola covered in white roses and foliage. She invited me to take a closer look while we waited for Angie and Martin to arrive.

'What flowers can you see among the roses?' she asked.

I gasped as I noticed the colourful bursts of violets and heather and even some sprigs of fake holly. 'That's so lovely.'

'Angie wanted all three of the women in your family to be represented in the flowers, so you'll see them in Angie's bouquet and the table arrangements too. Although I have to say it was a big relief that you'd already told Angie what Filia's middle name was going to be or I'd have had a mad panic trying to source a load of violets yesterday.'

We hadn't shared her first name with anyone but I had told a select few about her middle name. I wondered if that's what had triggered the idea for the floral tribute, knowing all three of us had a plant connection. Angie was so thoughtful.

Filia slept soundly in her pram throughout the ceremony. I'd always known how much Martin meant to Angie because we'd talked about it so often, but Martin wasn't one for expressing his feelings. He went all out for their vow renewals, though, with the most beautiful speech. It had me in bits and, glancing round the terrace, I don't think there were many dry eyes. I couldn't be happier for both of them.

As dusk fell and the party was in full swing, Betty and Tommy pulled me aside.

‘I have something for Filia,’ Betty said, handing me a gift bag.

I removed a gorgeous crocheted teddy bear wearing a pink tutu and red wellington boots. ‘Aw, Betty, it’s just like her namesake.’

‘I’d already made it for you to match those cards from your mum and I couldn’t believe it when you told me that’s where the name had come from.’

‘She’s absolutely beautiful. Thank you both.’

‘Have a look in the bottom of the bag,’ Tommy said. ‘There’s something for you in there.’

I peeked into it and, sure enough, there was a small package in pale pink tissue. I unwrapped it to reveal a miniature teddy bear.

‘No angel wings for this one,’ Betty said, ‘just an angel for a mother.’

‘Aw, you are so wonderful.’ I couldn’t hold the tears back as I hugged her once more.

‘Tell her about your wish,’ Tommy prompted.

‘Oh, yes! When you gave me that delicious birthday cake last year and told me to make a wish, I wished for you to have your own family. I’m sorry it had a difficult start but I knew you’d be blessed with a child soon. Birthday wishes come true, don’t they?’

They left a little after that, walking arm in arm up the car park. What a wonderful couple and amazing friends – and wish-makers – they were.

As dusk approached, Filia awoke and, after a feed and change, had first cuddles with the happy couple before being passed to Katie. I had cuddles with baby Theo in return, now seven months old while Lucas, now twenty months, toddled around the terrace.

‘We got our dream after all,’ Katie said as she swapped Filia for Theo. ‘Our children will be in the same school year and will, of course, be the very best of friends, just like us.’

‘If their friendship lasts as long as ours and as long as Mum’s and Angie’s did, they’ll be very blessed.’

I looked around the guests gathered in the café and on the terrace. There were a handful of friends and colleagues of Martin’s who I didn’t know, plus his sister and family who I’d only met a couple of times, but otherwise they were friends and family of mine. They hadn’t all joined us for the ceremony, but Angie had wanted me to have all my closest friends along on the evening as they were also all friends of hers.

It was amazing how interlinked we all were, with The Starfish Café being at the heart of the connections. Thanks to this place, I’d met my husband and Pickle. Jake had reconnected me with the RNLI, through whom I’d rescued Tori, Charlee and Matt and become good friends with them. From that rescue, Tori had met and later married Finley, and baby Filia was a confirmed result from their wedding night. Through my own wedding, Kerry had met Artie and looking at them slow dancing on the terrace now, I wouldn’t be surprised if the next wedding we attended was theirs.

Filia’s eyes were drooping and it wouldn’t be long before she drifted off once more. I took her over to the driftwood frame showing the evolution of the various versions of The Starfish Café.

‘That’s your grandma in the bulldozer,’ I said to Filia. ‘Her name was Heather and she created this place. I can feel her here. Can you?’

Filia’s lips pouted and her eyes flickered.

‘She made this a special place full of warmth and friendship and it’s brought so many people so much happiness. One day, it’ll be yours, if you want it, but even if you want to go in a different direction, I know you’ll have so many incredible memories of this special place – Bonfire Night celebrations, parties, summer nights on the terrace, snowflakes

and sunshine, spring tides and neap tides, seals and starfish. And maybe a brother or sister. But let's not run away with ourselves on that one. For now, take a look around...' I slowly turned in a circle. 'Welcome to The Starfish Café, where you'll find stunning views, delicious food, and lifelong friendships.'

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In late 2005, newly married and back a few months from an incredible honeymoon in Canada, my husband Mark and I went to our twelve-week dating scan. We hadn't spread the news of my pregnancy – only our parents knew – but we were excited about making the big announcement after the scan. We never imagined anything would go wrong. But it did. They found a pregnancy sac but no heartbeat. *Nothing to worry about. Could be too early. Come back in a week and we'll do another scan.* Nobody mentioned the word 'miscarriage', but it was all I could think about during that agonising week. When we returned a week later, the news wasn't good. I won't tell you what happened next because you've already read about it. Hollie's story is mine, almost exactly how it happened.

To all those who have experienced one or more miscarriages or who have loved ones who have, I send you my love and understanding. So what that it's common, it wasn't your fault and there was nothing you could do to prevent it. That doesn't take the hurt away. And even though you may go on to have a rainbow baby and perhaps other children too, you never forget your angel baby.

This book is formally dedicated to the amazing staff and volunteers of the RNLI and particularly the team at Scarborough Lifeboat Station who have helped considerably with my research. While I didn't put it in the front (as it would have been a spoiler), this book is also dedicated to those who have experience of a miscarriage.

When I write a book, I do it on my own, but the final product comes to you thanks to the work of a team. I'm so blessed with an incredible editor, Nia Beynon, whose insights are second to none. You wouldn't have enjoyed this book as much as you (hopefully) have without Nia's guidance. Thank you to my copy-editor, Cecily Blench, and an extra special

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I'd like to thank the RNA (Romantic Novelists' Association), whose amazing NWS (New Writers' Scheme) gave me the push to finish my first manuscript, and the encouragement that I could write. In 2022, the first book in this series – *Snowflakes Over The Starfish Café* – was a finalist in the RNA's Romantic Novel of the Year Awards, which was such an honour.

To my husband, daughter and mum, reviewers, library staff, members of my Facebook group and those who recommend my work in other groups, I'm so very grateful to you all for being part of my writing journey.

This is the end of *The Starfish Café* series. I've loved writing Hollie and Jake's emotional stories, interwoven with those of Tori and Kerry, and am sad to say goodbye to this wonderful community. Although those who know my books well will know how much I love a cameo, so you never know when you might get a future glimpse!

My final thank you, as always, goes to you. Thank you for choosing my books and sharing your love with me and other readers. You really are the best and I'm eternally grateful for your support. If you want to know more about the worlds I've created, please join the Redland's Readers group on Facebook. I'd love to see you there.

Big hugs

Jessica xx

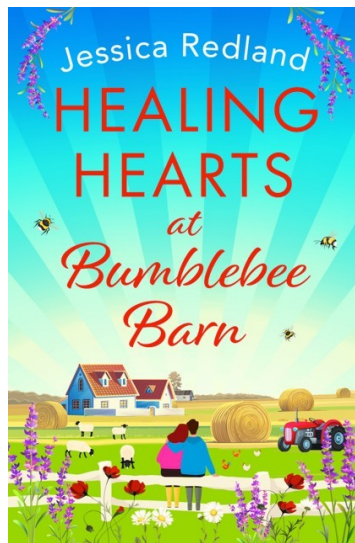
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Chapter 1

‘Barney!’

I was applying toothpaste to my toothbrush when a high-pitched shriek made me drop both items into the sink and race back into the bedroom.

‘Olivia? Are you okay?’

‘No! Make it stop!’ She pulled the duvet over her head with a groan.

The beeps on my mobile phone alarm reached a crescendo as I grabbed it from the bedside drawers, flicking on the lamp at the same time.

‘Sorry. I thought I’d switched it off.’

She yanked the duvet back and narrowed her eyes at me. ‘Well, you obviously hadn’t. It’s 5.30, Barney. Who the hell gets up at this time on a Saturday?’

‘Erm, me.’

She shoved her long platinum-blond hair back from her forehead and scowled.

‘Why?’

‘Because I’m a farmer,’ I said, trying to keep the sarcasm at bay, ‘and that’s what we do.’

‘But it’s Easter weekend. It’s a bank holiday.’

‘And I’m not a bank so I’m not on holiday.’

‘That’s not funny, Barney. *You’re* not funny.’

With a disgusted, ‘Urgh!’ she pulled the duvet back over her head and I sighed inwardly as I lowered myself onto the edge of the bed, a sinking feeling in my stomach in recognition of where this was heading.

‘I’ll be out for a couple of hours,’ I said, gently placing my hand on her rigid back. ‘I’ll make you some breakfast when I get back.’

No response.

‘I’ll see you later, yeah?’

Silence.

I flicked the lamp off and returned to the bathroom. Arms braced against the sink, I squinted at my reflection in the mirror and slowly shook my head. I wouldn’t see Olivia later. She’d be gone by the time I returned – another relationship over when it had barely begun.

‘Probably just as well,’ I murmured, retrieving my toothbrush and paste from the sink. Lambing season would start imminently and my already limited social life would take a nosedive. Olivia would never have stuck around through the long hours and sleepless nights, no matter how ‘adorable’ she imagined it would be to bottle-feed any lambs that couldn’t be fed by their mothers. When she’d gushed about that on the night I met her – out for my best mate Joel’s birthday last month – I’d known it wouldn’t last that long. It never did. Was it time to give up and accept that it was never going to happen for me? That I was destined to run Bumblebee Barn on my own and was never going to have children to pass the farm down to?

Ten minutes later, I pushed open the door to the boot room off the farmhouse kitchen.

‘Morning, Bear! Morning, Harley!’

My Border Collie brother and sister team scrambled out of their beds for a scratch behind the ears.

‘It’s a wet one this morning,’ I said, raising the blind on the door and looking out at the rain. It was so heavy, I couldn’t even see the other side of the farmyard.

I slipped on my waterproof boilersuit, shoved my feet in my wellies, pulled a fleece-lined beanie hat over my messy dark hair and grabbed the keys for the quad bike before leaving the house, ready to start another busy day on the farm. The sun would rise in about an hour so the sky should already have been lightening, but the steady downpour kept it dark and dismal. Like Olivia’s mood.

In the garage – the large barn where I kept the most frequently used vehicles – Bear and Harley jumped onto the seating platform on the back of my red quad bike and we set off into the darkness.

Bumblebee Barn – a large farm on the Yorkshire Wolds – had been in our family for 112 years. It had started as a smallholding run by my great-great-grandfather Dodds on Mum’s side of the family and had passed down through the generations. Each new owner had expanded the farm, although Granddad’s purchase of neighbouring Whisperwood Farm had made the biggest impact, doubling the size to seventy-six hectares.

The whitewashed T-shaped farmhouse couldn’t actually be seen from the road. It was approached by a track flanked by crops and tucked away behind several barns. The boot room and kitchen doors at the back of the house opened onto the farmyard and the front of the house overlooked a large garden with stunning views across the land.

When Granddad retired, Bumblebee Barn should have passed to one of his two children, but Mum, who ran a successful catering and events management business, wasn't interested in farming, and the less said about her younger brother Melvin, the better. It had therefore skipped a generation and I'd become the new owner ten and a half years ago when I turned twenty-one.

An increase in size hadn't been the only major change for Bumblebee Barn. It had started off purely arable, but Whisperwood Farm had been pastoral with cattle and sheep, so the new larger farm became a mixed one and had stayed that way. I'd sold off the last of the cattle last year, we still had two breeds of sheep, but my legacy was pigs. It had been Joel's suggestion. He was a shift manager at Claybridge Fresh Foods, a local factory specialising in bacon and pork products. He'd mentioned that the factory was expanding and there was a shortage of local suppliers, so I'd acted quickly and now Bumblebee Barn was one of their main suppliers, bringing in a valuable income stream for me to invest back into the farm, embracing new environmentally friendly thinking.

I'd never taken the farm for granted. I knew how fortunate I was to have a vocation and a home that I loved thanks to the hard work put in across several generations. I hoped it would stay in the family for generations to come but that meant having children of my own, and that wasn't looking hopeful. When it came to farming, I felt like I was winning. When it came to relationships, not so much.

* * *

It had stopped raining when I returned to the farmyard a couple of hours later. Olivia's car was gone. Even though it was expected, my stomach still lurched at the sight of the deserted farmyard.

'Another one bites the dust,' I muttered to Bear and Harley as they jumped down from the quad bike after I parked in the garage and cut the engine.

I crouched down beside Harley and scratched her ears while Bear took a drink from the water trough.

'She lasted six weeks. Bit of a record for me. Can I get a high five?' I held my palm towards Harley and she placed her front paw against it. 'Good girl.'

'Who's hungry?' I asked them. 'Let's grab some breakfast.'

They followed me across the farmyard through the puddles.

'Who thinks she'll have left a note?' I said, opening the boot room door and removing my hat, wellies and boilersuit. 'No, me neither. Text? WhatsApp? What's that, Bear? You think she'll ghost me? I think you could be right.'

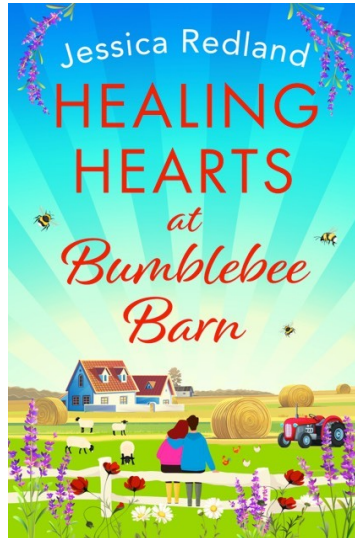
I sat down at the kitchen table a little later with a bowl of porridge but had to really force the first spoonful down my throat. The second attempt was no easier. I dropped my spoon into the bowl and pushed it aside, taking a gulp from my milky coffee instead.

It was so quiet in the kitchen – just the occasional sigh from the dogs punctuating the silence. A kitchen like this should be alive with activity and laughter. It was a kitchen for a family. A home for a family.

I ran my hands through my damp hair and sank back in the chair, gazing up at the beams on the ceiling. It wasn't that it was over with Olivia that bothered me. If she hadn't walked out, I'd probably have ended it myself as I knew we didn't have a

future together. What bothered me was that I couldn't foresee a future with anyone. Just me, the dogs, the farm and the *everything's fine and I love my life* face I wore every time I saw my family or friends. Why was it so hard to admit the truth?

We hope you enjoyed this exclusive extract. ***Healing Hearts at Bumblebee Barn*** is available to buy now by clicking on the image below:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessica Redland writes uplifting stories of love, friendship, family and community set in Yorkshire where she lives. Her Whitsborough Bay books transport readers to the stunning North Yorkshire Coast and her Hedgehog Hollow series takes them into beautiful countryside of the Yorkshire Wolds.

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