



Mistletoe & Wishes
at the
Cornish Bakery



Sarah Hope

Mistletoe & Wishes at The Cornish Bakery

Escape To... The Cornish Bakery

Sarah Hope

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MISTLETOE & WISHES AT THE CORNISH BAKERY

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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Mistletoe & Wishes at The Cornish Bakery_\(Escape To... The Cornish Bakery\)](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty One](#)

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my wonderful children who give me the motivation to keep writing and remind me to keep working towards changing our stars.

For my children
Let's change our stars



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Chapter One



Holly Hughes watched her train leave the platform, slowly gaining speed the further it travelled.

This was it. She was on her own. No, she was being independent.

Yes. Joe was right. She needed to change the words she used, how she thought. Instead of telling herself she was travelling alone, she needed to remind herself that she had chosen to do this, that this was exciting. And it was, wasn't it? She was on an exciting adventure. Travelling down from Manchester, all the way to Cornwall - it was an adventure. It was further than she'd ever travelled by herself. Further than she'd ever travelled full stop.

Hefting her suitcase down from the final step, Holly looked towards the exit of Trestow Train Station. If she was lucky, there would be a taxi rank outside to take her on the last leg of her journey to Penworth Bay and the bakery she had signed up to volunteer at.

She grinned at the memory of telling Susie, Joe, and Lara. They hadn't believed her. Not to begin with. She knew they'd never in a million years think she was capable of doing something like this.

But she'd show them. To prove to them - and herself - that she was capable of travelling on her own. And she'd show Mick he wasn't the only one who was brave enough to take on life's adventures. Yes, Cornwall wasn't quite New Zealand, but it was still travelling.

Pulling the door open, she braced herself as she stepped outside into the cold. The wind whipped at her hair, blowing it into her face. As the door swung slowly shut behind her, trapping any escaping heat, she made her way towards the taxi rank and sighed as the last taxi pulled away, a long line of

other commuters waiting patiently on the path. Hopefully the taxis wouldn't take long to return. She peered around the person in front of her. About nine or ten people were waiting and apart from two women chatting away together, the rest of them looked as though they were lone travellers like herself. Yep, she was in for a wait.

Standing her suitcase on the pavement, she plunged her hands into her pockets and looked around. A large Christmas tree stood outside the front of the station, its colourful lights sparkling in the fading evening light. Blinking she watched as a family paused in front of it, shopping bags hanging from their toddler's pushchair, the parents hugging takeaway cups in their hands and another young child clinging onto the pushchair with one hand, whilst holding a stuffed dog in the other. She smiled sadly; they were the picture of Christmas happiness.

She sighed. If she was honest with herself, it wasn't even the travelling by herself that scared her. No, it was the promise she'd made to Joe, Lara, and Susie. The promise that she'd made to herself. After three years of doing everything and anything she could to avoid anything remotely to do with Christmas, she knew she had to change. She knew that her parents would want her to celebrate Christmas again, to enjoy the festivities for what they were. But in order to do so, she knew she had to create new memories to replace the painful ones.

She caught her breath, the cold air filling her lungs and blinked back the tears stinging the back of her eyes. No, she wouldn't let them fall. Arriving here was the first step in honouring her parents' love of Christmas again. And coming here, hundreds of miles away from her family home, she hoped things might just be a little easier. Here she could create happy memories without those painful ones lurking behind every cupboard door or engrained in every decoration. Yes, she'd done the right thing. She knew she had.

She wrapped her fingers around something in her pocket. Something cold. Something metal. What was it? A key. She could feel the jagged edges now. Her house key was in her

suitcase. She'd slipped it inside one of the side pockets when she'd boarded the train, not wanting to leave it in her pocket in case she lost it.

Holly let out a little scream as realisation dawned on her. It was the key to work. The key to the craft shop she worked at. Oh great. That would be her fired now then. Ever since she'd opened up late three months ago after her friend Joe's birthday party, Mrs Hatton, her boss, had been itching to find an excuse to fire her. And Holly had now given her one. She'd taken the key to Cornwall instead of slipping it through Mrs Hatton's front door yesterday evening after locking up.

She could almost hear Mrs Hatton's disapproving voice, telling her that she'd now lose a day's income because she couldn't open up. Holly fiddled with the two gold rings hanging on a silver chain around her neck. It wasn't as though much money would be lost. Or any, for that matter. Unless Mrs Potter, Mrs Hatton's neighbour and possibly her only returning customer, was due to come and pick up some cotton thread she'd ordered tomorrow.

Yep, she was definitely going to be fired. Not that she much enjoyed working at Mrs Hatton's craft shop, but it was a job and a job she had a lot of free time in, too. A lot of time to read. To do her favourite thing and escape into another world, to leave her own for a little respite.

Pulling her hood up against the wind, she focused on the road in front of her, watching and hoping the next car turning into the station car park would be a taxi.

'Excuse me.'

Turning, she watched as a couple walked towards her. She hoped they weren't going to ask for directions as she didn't have a clue where she was going let alone trying to help anyone else. Besides, the other day she'd directed a passer-by to the supermarket, telling them to go in the completely wrong direction. And that had been in her hometown. This couple wouldn't stand a chance if they were asking her for directions here. 'Hi.'

The woman pointed briefly behind her. ‘We were loading our car when we heard you scream, so we thought we’d come over to check if you needed any help?’

‘Oh, sorry.’ Holly grimaced. ‘Everything’s okay. I just found the key to my workplace in my pocket.’

‘I see.’ The woman nodded, confusion flooding across her face.

Holly fiddled with her necklace again. ‘It probably wasn’t scream-worthy, it’s just I was supposed to post it through my boss’ letterbox after closing up yesterday and now, well, I’ll have to post it back and she’ll miss at least a day or two’s business.’

‘Aw, these things happen. I’m sure she’s got a spare.’ The woman smiled.

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But no. The spare was lost last year, not by me, I might add, not that time anyway.’ Holly shifted on her feet, the cold numbing her toes. ‘So, yep, I’ll likely be out of a job now.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Don’t be. I probably should have left years ago.’ Holly smiled, a quick flash of a smile before looking towards the road snaking around the corner. ‘Do you know how often taxis come this way by any chance, please?’

‘I’m not sure. It does get busy around this time of the year, though.’ The man glanced towards the road.

‘Oh, okay. No worries.’ Holly checked her watch. ‘I’m volunteering at a bakery near here but I don’t have a set time I’ve got to be there anyway so I might grab a coffee and wait until the queue dies down.’

The woman raised her eyebrows and smiled. ‘Which bakery are you volunteering at?’

‘Umm, The Penworth Bay Bakery.’ Holly frowned. Was that right? It didn’t sound it. ‘No, sorry, it might be called something else, but I’m pretty certain it’s in a place called Penworth Bay.’

‘The Cornish Bay Bakery by any chance?’

‘Yes! That’s it! Do you know it?’

‘We sure do. I was volunteering there up until a few weeks ago.’ The woman held out her hand. ‘I’m Tammy and this is my partner, Josh.’

‘Wow, really?’ Holly shook Tammy’s hand and then Josh’s.

‘Yes. We can take you there if you like?’

‘Oh, I couldn’t ask you to do that.’ Holly looked at her suitcase.

‘Honestly, it’s no problem. Josh lives at the lighthouse in the bay and we’re on our way back there now.’ Tammy indicated their car parked a few rows behind.

‘Well, if you’re both sure it wouldn’t be out of your way, that would be amazing, please.’

Chapter Two



‘Here it is, The Cornish Bay Bakery.’ Tammy pointed out of the window as the car slowed to a stop.

‘Thank you so much for this.’ Holly pulled her gloves on again before stepping outside. Turning slowly, she looked around. Warm white Christmas lights were strung from lamppost to lamppost and clung to the shop fronts, the glow illuminating the cobbled street below. She smiled. The scene was something out of a children’s picture book, comforting and exciting all at the same time.

‘I’ll grab your suitcase.’ Josh jumped out of the car and pulled Holly’s suitcase from the boot.

‘Thank you.’ Taking it, Holly stepped towards the door.

‘Are you okay if we rush off?’ Tammy called from her open window.

‘Yes, that’s fine. Thanks again.’

‘No problem. I’ll see you around.’ Tammy smiled. ‘Oh, and can you say hi to Elsie for me, please? And apologise for not hanging around? It’s just we’ve got to get back and change before going out again.’

‘Of course.’ Holly waved as the car set off across the cobbles before turning and knocking on the door. Dragging her suitcase a little closer, she waited, her breath coming out in white swathes on the cold icy air. She was glad Tammy and Josh had offered her a lift. If they hadn’t, she’d have likely still been standing and waiting for a taxi. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle.

‘Holly? Are you Holly, love?’

Turning around, Holly watched as a couple walked towards her, the woman smiling, her pale blue eyes brimming with kindness. ‘Hi, yes, that’s me.’

‘Oh, love, I’m so sorry. We just popped out to drop something off at the restaurant. I’m Elsie and this is my husband, Ian.’ The woman hurried towards her before giving her a quick hug around the shoulders.

‘Hi, lovely to meet you.’ Holly could feel her muscles instantly relax. She hadn’t realised quite how apprehensive she’d felt about coming here, but now meeting Elsie, the owner of the bakery, and her husband, she could feel her confidence returning.

‘I’ll take that.’ Ian smiled as he picked up her suitcase before chuckling. ‘What have you got in there? An entire library of books or a bunch of bricks?’

‘Let’s get you in, love. You must be freezing standing out here in this weather.’ Elsie pulled a bunch of keys from her handbag and unlocked the door, letting Holly step through first. ‘Have you been waiting here long?’

‘No, not long at all.’ Holly stepped inside, the warmth of the bakery immediately enveloping her. She looked around and counted three counters dotted around the room. ‘I ran into Tammy and Josh at the train station, who kindly offered to give me a lift here. Tammy said she used to volunteer for you? And she asked me to apologise for her not being able to pop in and say hello.’

‘That’s lovely that you’ve already met one of us then.’ Elsie grinned as she waited for Ian to lift Holly’s suitcase up the step and through the door before closing it and shutting out the cold. Pulling her gloves off, Elsie laid them on the counter before turning to Holly. ‘How about a tour of the bakery and then Ian and I can order us all a nice takeaway whilst you settle yourself in?’

Holly nodded. A takeaway sounded good. In fact, any food sounded good. She’d only managed to buy a bottle of water and a bag of crisps when swapping trains in London. She didn’t travel on the train often, so she hadn’t wanted to risk missing her connecting train.

‘I’ll pop this upstairs and put the kettle on whilst you do that.’ Ian smiled and headed towards a door behind the biggest

of the three counters.

‘Thanks, love.’ Elsie nodded before turning back to Holly. ‘Right, Holly, we have the bakery counter here where Diane and Brooke work and over at the back the small counter is where Teresa sells coffee and cakes to some of our customers who like to have a cuppa and a bite to eat inside.’

‘That’s a lovely idea.’ Holly smiled.

‘And here,’ Elsie led the way between the tables and chairs positioned in the middle of the bakery towards the third counter on the opposite side of the shop floor. ‘We have our wedding counter.’

Holly peered through the glass at an array of wedding cakes and small cupcake favours. The detailing of the decoration was exquisite. Someone with an abundance of talent had obviously spent a lot of time decorating them. ‘Wow, these cakes are stunning.’

‘They are, aren’t they, love? They’re all Wendy’s talented work.’ Elsie pushed open a door behind the counter to reveal a small office. Photos of weddings adorned the walls, and a large mood board displaying an array of carefully selected photographs was laid out on the desk. ‘Molly and Wendy run our wedding service from here where they help our clients with everything from forming initial ideas of how they would like their big day to be to organising it and making sure everything runs smoothly on the day.’

Holly nodded slowly. ‘It’s a bit more than a bakery here then.’

Elsie chuckled as she closed the office door again. ‘The business has certainly grown and adapted over the years, yes.’

Holly followed her back through the bakery towards a door along the back wall.

‘And last but not least, here is the kitchen.’ Elsie held the door open for her.

Holly stepped through before pausing. Stainless-steel cupboards and counters encircled a large stainless-steel table in the middle of the vast kitchen. ‘Wow.’

Elsie grinned. ‘We seem to get that reaction a lot from our volunteers.’

‘When I applied to volunteer here, I hadn’t realised how big it would be.’ Holly turned to Elsie. ‘I don’t mean that in a bad way, not at all. This all looks amazing.’

‘Thanks, love. We have a great team working here. In fact, we’re more like family than colleagues.’

Holly nodded. If the rest of the staff were as lovely as Tammy had been then she knew she wouldn’t have anything to worry about, and judging by the way Elsie was at the moment, it would be completely different working for her than it was for Mrs Hatton. She grimaced as she remembered the key in her pocket.

‘Is everything okay, love?’ Elsie frowned.

‘Yes, sorry. I just remembered that I accidentally brought the key to the craft shop I work at. I need to send it back.’

‘Oh, I’ve got envelopes and stamps if you need one? And there’s a post box at the bottom of the hill.’

‘That would be great if you don’t mind, please? I think the sooner I send it back, the better. It’s her only one and I don’t think she’s going to be very happy.’

‘These things happen, love. I’m sure she’ll understand. The post won’t be collected now until first thing in the morning, so why don’t I show you your room and then you can pop and post it while we’re waiting for our food to be delivered?’

‘Okay, that sounds like a good idea.’ Holly nodded as she followed Elsie back out into the bakery and through the same door Ian had taken her suitcase. ‘What will I be doing here?’

‘That’s up to you, love.’ Elsie glanced back at Holly before leading the way up the stairs. ‘What do you fancy? You could help serve behind the bakery or if you want to do some baking, you’re welcome to help me out in the kitchen.’

Holly ran her forefinger along the brightly coloured wallpaper as she walked up the stairs. Large parrots peeked

out from behind even bigger green palm leaves. ‘I think I might put you out of business if I offer to bake.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you won’t.’ Elsie chuckled. ‘But you’re welcome to help out behind the bakery counter if you’d prefer. We normally get very busy in the run-up to Christmas, so I know Diane and Brooke will be grateful for the help.’

‘Great.’ Holly grinned. It would be good if the bakery was busy. A stark contrast to the long drawn-out days of no customers back at the craft shop.

Elsie paused at the top of the stairs and looked back at her. ‘Oh, actually, I have a Christmas market over at Trestow tomorrow, if you’d like to help me out there? It’s in the community hall over there so it’s not as though we’ll be standing around in the cold.’

‘Yes, okay. That sounds fun.’ Yes, it would be. It wouldn’t be like the Christmases at home, where she spent the entire festive season trying to avoid anywhere and anything that reminded her of what she’d lost. Yes, this would all be new. It would be good.

‘Great. Okay, along here we have the living room, the kitchen, and your bedroom is just here.’ Elsie indicated to the other rooms before opening a door further along the hallway. ‘I’ll leave you to settle in and when you’re ready, come on through and we’ll get that key sent off.’

‘Great. Thank you.’ Holly nodded as Elsie walked back up the hallway towards the living room before she stepped through into what would be her room for the next few weeks. Switching on the light, she closed the door quietly and looked around. It was perfect. Minimalistic and calm. White walls were all adorned with framed positive quotes and one wall with pale cream and green wallpaper. Yes, it would be the perfect place to relax after a day working down in the bakery.

Bending down, Holly lifted her suitcase from where Ian had left it by the door and laid it on the bed. She unzipped it and opened it before taking out the photo frame she’d carefully wrapped in a jumper and unveiling it. Sitting down, she sank into the thick duvet and smiled at the photo in her

hands. Her parents grinned back at her, each hugging the image of herself from the day they'd visited the ice rink at the garden centre. Their last trip together.

She closed her eyes, trying to block out the images flashing through her mind of that day, of the accident. She gripped the frame tighter; her knuckles turning white. She'd almost thrown the photo, but no, she was glad she hadn't. She just needed to focus on how they'd felt when it had been taken. How she'd felt before her parents had been torn from her.

She often wondered what they'd think of her life now, working for the miserable Mrs Hatton and living in the time capsule of their former home. Since moving back in after breaking up with Mick, she hadn't even got around to redecorating her childhood bedroom. Posters of her teenage idols still stared at her from the dark purple walls and stickers from Top of the Pops magazines still covered her headboard.

Standing up, she placed the photo frame on the bedside table and walked around to the window and looked out. She could just about make out the movement of the ocean in the glow of the Christmas lights strung along the promenade. She would make new Christmas memories this year. She needed to. She didn't want to live the rest of her life running from a time which was supposed to be full of happiness and joy. That was how the carol went, wasn't it? Happiness and joy?

Chapter Three



Holly glanced around the hall before turning back to the man in front of her. They were in Trestow Community Hall, not far from the train station she'd arrived at yesterday. 'Sorry, was that three cupcakes you wanted?'

'Four please.' The man held four fingers up.

'Sorry.'

'That's okay, dear. It's a bit loud in here, even for my ears.' The man tapped the side of his head and grinned.

'Yes, it is.' Smiling, Holly placed the four cupcakes in a cake box. Jolly Christmas tunes were blasting from a speaker at the back of the hall and that, accompanied by the excited chatter and laughter of the people perusing the handcrafted gifts on sale, made it quite difficult to hear. She passed across the cake box.

'Thank you and Merry Christmas.' The man handed her the exact change before disappearing back into the crowds.

'Merry Christmas.' Holly knew her words would be lost in the tunes to 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas', but her mum had always made a point to reply to someone if they wished her a happy Christmas and it was a habit she'd picked up on. She smiled as a young girl made her way towards the bakery stall, her mum following quickly behind.

'Mummy, Mummy, where's the doughnut lady?' The girl looked from Holly to Elsie and back again, a doll gripped in her hands.

'Lauren? She works at the school now. Do you remember me telling you?' The mum took the girl's hand and turned to Holly. 'Hi, this is Evie, and she always asks for Lauren whenever we go to the bakery or to one of your stalls.'

‘Hannah, love. And little Evie too.’ Elsie waved goodbye to her customers before turning to them. ‘How lovely to see you!’

‘I was just saying that however many times I tell Evie that Lauren no longer works for you, she’ll always be the doughnut lady in her eyes.’ Hannah shook her head.

Elsie chuckled. ‘Oh, you just wait until you start school. You might be lucky enough to have her as your teacher.’

‘Really? The doughnut lady might be my teacher?’ Evie’s eyes widened.

Hannah shook her head. ‘You know what she’ll be doing if Lauren is her teacher, don’t you? She’ll be calling her the doughnut lady in class.’ Hannah’s smile faded. ‘Of course, to me, she’ll always be the hero who saved my life.’

‘Aw, love.’ Reaching across the stall, Elsie placed her hand on Hannah’s. ‘It’s good to see you back in here. It must be difficult.’

Hannah nodded. ‘Yes, but I need to put it all behind me. I actually made myself pop into the first craft fair after the hall was rebuilt from the fire.’

‘Mummy, can I have my doughnuts then? Please? Please? Please?’ Evie jumped up and down, the doll’s head bouncing along with her.

Elsie chuckled. ‘Here you go, love. A doughnut for you and one for Mummy too. On the house.’

‘Oh, thank you.’ Hannah smiled before leading Evie away.

Elsie leaned towards Holly, her voice low. ‘There was a fire here last year and poor Hannah thought that Evie was inside still, so, of course, ran in to rescue her. Thankfully, she wasn’t, and Lauren followed Hannah to tell her.’

Holly widened her eyes. ‘Did Lauren volunteer at the bakery? Is she okay?’

‘Yes, yes. She was fine, but it was a close call.’ Elsie looked down at the stall, lost in her thoughts, before looking back up and smiling. ‘And yes, she volunteered at the bakery.’

She's a teacher now at the primary school in the bay. You'll meet her soon. She's Diane's sister.'

Holly nodded and looked around. That would explain why the community hall was newly built then. She'd just assumed it had been refurbished, or just a recent addition to the town.

'It looks as though we have a little lull now, love. Why don't you take a wander around? Stretch your legs a little?'

'Okay, thanks.' Holly nodded. It would be nice to have a look around. Even from where they were positioned along the first wall of stalls, she could see an array of interesting crafts she wanted to take a closer look at. Maybe she could get something for her friends, Lara, Susie and Joe and send them back home in time for Christmas. She hadn't bought Christmas presents in three years. Not since her parents had passed away. Of course, they had, and she'd reluctantly accepted them. Maybe this year she could get them something. But first, she needed a drink.

She weaved around a cluster of people huddled by the silver metal tables and chairs which had been arranged in front of the kitchen hatch.

'What can I get you?' The man behind the counter indicated a sign depicting what was on offer.

'Just a coffee, please?' Holly pulled out some change from her pocket.

'Here you go.' The man passed her a cardboard cup. 'And Merry Christmas.'

'Thanks, and Merry Christmas to you too.' She turned and walked away, finding a space by the back wall to stand. Looking out across the stalls and people in front of her, she took a sip of her coffee and grimaced. It wasn't a patch on the one Elsie had made for her before they'd left, but it would have to do.

She looked down at her clothes, dark and dreary now she'd taken her apron off and then looked out across the crowd of people. Children and adults alike were wearing colourful, festive-themed jumpers and bobble hats. Some even had tinsel

tied in their hair or Santa earrings dangling from their ears. Everyone was here to enjoy the Christmas market, to buy gifts for their family and loved ones, to immerse themselves in the festive spirit.

And here she was, desperately trying to find hers again. After three years of avoiding Christmas, she knew she had to try to find the magic in it all again. Her parents had loved Christmas. They'd lived for Christmas. As soon as Boxing was over, they'd begun counting down the days until the next Christmas. And as soon as the last firework had popped and whizzed on the 5th of November, they had taken it as their signal to begin the preparations for the big day. Her dad had begun checking the Christmas lights before hanging them outside, and her mum had done the same to the ones they'd put up inside.

She took another sip of coffee, letting the hot bitter liquid heat her mouth before swallowing. She should get back to Elsie. She could shop for her friends another time. Now, she just needed to get back behind the stall and back to keeping herself busy. Downing the dregs of her coffee, she threw the cardboard cup in the recycling bin before weaving back through the happy crowds and behind the stall.

Chapter Four



‘I think that’s the last one.’ Holly kicked the back door to the bakery closed behind her and lowered the empty plastic crate she’d brought in from the car to the stainless-steel table.

‘Lovely. Thank you, Holly. And thank you again for coming to help today.’ Elsie took off her gloves and rubbed her hands together. ‘Since Ian retired a few months ago, it’s given me a chance to get out and about a bit more to the various markets and craft fairs. It’s lovely to have the company, though.’

‘You’re welcome. I enjoyed it.’ Unzipping her coat, she shrugged out of it. She had, to a point. Yes, it had been difficult to watch the happy families wandering around the craft stalls, but that’s why she was here. She just had to get used to watching people enjoy this time of the year and then hopefully she’d be able to at some point, too.

‘I’ll get us both a coffee. I think we need one just to warm ourselves up.’ Elsie filled up the cafetière.

‘Yes, it’s freezing out there.’ Holly glanced back at the door, frost was already forming on the small windowpanes and it wasn’t even late, there were still a couple of hours until closing time.

‘Hi, Elsie, love. I thought I heard you come in.’ Coming into the kitchen, Ian let the door swing shut behind him before pecking Elsie on the cheek and turning to Holly. ‘Afternoon, Holly. Someone is waiting for you in the bakery.’

‘For me?’

‘Yes, love. He came in just after lunch asking after you. Diane told him you were out at the Christmas market today,

but he insisted on waiting.’ Ian took a mug of coffee from Elsie. ‘Thanks, love.’

‘That’s strange. I don’t know anyone down here.’ Holly frowned. Who could it be? She’d literally only told her closest friends and, of course, Mrs Hatton had insisted on knowing why she’d asked for holiday leave. Unless... No. It couldn’t be Mick, could it? He knew how difficult this time of the year was for her. Would he have come to Cornwall to see if she was okay? She hadn’t told him she was coming, but she had mentioned it to one of Mick’s friends she’d run into earlier in the week before leaving. She’d wanted him to know he wasn’t the only one doing something different, something exciting with his life, and she’d known it would have gotten back to him.

‘Have a bit of a break if you want to spend some time with your friend, love.’ Elsie smiled as she pulled her apron on.

‘Okay, thanks.’ What would she even say to him? Holly touched her necklace before taking a deep breath and pushing the kitchen door open. As she stepped through into the bakery, she searched the tables in the coffee and cake area. If Mick had been waiting for her for hours, he would have found a chair.

Her shoulders slumped as she realised it wasn’t Mick who had travelled to visit her. It was Joe. What was he doing here? Had something happened? Were Lara and Susie okay? She could feel the panic rising from the pit of her stomach as she made her way across the bakery towards him. ‘Joe? What’s happened? Are you okay? Are Susie and Lara okay?’

A slow grin spread across his face as he turned towards her. ‘Holly, I hear you’ve been at a Christmas market? Did you have a good time?’

Holly shook her head. He hadn’t answered her. ‘What’s happened? Is everyone all right?’

‘Everyone’s fine. I just thought I’d come down to see you. I fancied a bit of travelling myself.’ He shrugged.

‘What?’

‘I thought I’d join you down here for a few days, that we could go exploring the local area together.’

‘Why?’ Confusion quickly turned to frustration and the undeniable spark of anger. He knew she’d wanted, no, needed, to do this on her own. Why had he come down to join her? Did he not trust her that she could keep herself safe? Did he think she was suddenly going to fall apart because she could no longer hide from the festive season, from the memories?

‘Because you’re my mate.’ Standing up, Joe’s smile faded a little. ‘I thought you’d like my company.’

‘You don’t think I can do this by myself, do you? When I told you my plans to travel here and stay here on my own, I knew you, Lara and Susie hadn’t thought I could do it, but to come down here, to admit to me, show to me that you have no faith in me...’ She shook her head before turning and hurrying to the bakery counter. She’d show him. She’d show him that she was perfectly capable. That she could survive on her own, could travel on her own, and could face Christmas on her own. He could sit there and watch for all she cared. Or leave. Now that would be the better option.

‘Holly, I...’

‘Don’t.’ She whispered the word as she slipped behind the bakery counter. She knew he hadn’t heard, but what she could she do? She couldn’t very well shout at him, tell him what she was thinking right here in the middle of the bakery, could she?

‘Everything okay, Holly?’ Diane pulled an apron from the hook and passed it to her.

‘Thanks. Not really.’

‘He’s been sitting waiting by the window for you to come back for hours.’ Diane nodded towards Joe as she placed four rolls in a bag for her customer.

‘Apart from when Mrs and Mr Burton came in and he gave up his table for them because it was busy.’ Brooke smiled. ‘He seems nice. Is he your boyfriend?’

‘Boyfriend? No. He’s just a friend.’ Holly tied her apron strings. ‘I’m not really sure why he’s followed me down here,

to be honest.’

‘No?’ Diane thanked her customer before placing the money in the till.

‘No, he knew this was something I wanted to do on my own. Something I needed to do on my own, so I’m not sure why he thought it was a good idea to just turn up like this.’

Brooke shrugged as she began wiping the counter down. ‘Maybe he just wanted to spend some time with you.’

‘Where has he travelled from? You said you’re from Manchester way, didn’t you?’ Diane picked up an empty tray. The bakery had emptied, apart from a couple sitting at a table in the coffee and cake area. ‘Is he local to here?’

‘No, he lives by me.’

‘Wow.’ Diane widened her eyes. ‘And he’s definitely not your partner?’

‘No, definitely not.’ Holly stepped forward as a woman walked through the door. Had she been too harsh on him? After all, he had come all this way. But why? ‘Hi, can I help you?’

‘Afternoon. Do you have any of your pasties left, please?’ The woman balanced the edge of her handbag on the counter as she rummaged through before pulling out her purse.

Looking down at the counter, Holly nodded. ‘Yes, we have three left. How many can I get you?’

‘Brilliant. All three please?’

As she bagged up the pasties, Holly glanced across at Joe. He was still sitting at the table, his hands wrapped around a mug, undeterred by her earlier outburst. She shook her head before turning back to the woman. ‘Here you are.’

‘Thank you.’ The woman tapped her card against the payment machine before taking the bag and leaving.

Looking behind her, Diane yawned. ‘Boy, am I glad it’s time to close. I’m absolutely shattered today.’

‘Has it been busy?’ Holly turned, positioning herself so she couldn’t see Joe. She needed to focus on being here, in the bakery. She could speak to Joe later.

‘Yes, very.’ Diane walked quickly towards the door and turned the sign around to *Closed* before leaning across the counter and indicating Joe. ‘Why don’t you go and speak to him? Me and Brooke can tidy up.’

Holly sighed. She supposed she couldn’t put this conversation off forever. ‘Okay, thanks. If you’re sure?’

‘Of course we are. You’ve been at the Christmas market all day, anyway. This is our mess.’ Brooke grinned.

‘Thanks.’ Holly walked slowly across to Joe and sunk into the chair opposite him. She hadn’t realised how much her feet ached until now. ‘So?’

Chapter Five



‘So? Hello.’ Joe leaned his elbows on the table and smiled.

‘I don’t understand. You’re acting as though it’s completely normal to travel hundreds of miles to pop in and see one of your mates.’

He held his hand against his chest and widened his eyes. ‘Are you saying you wouldn’t make the trip for me?’

Shaking her head, Holly smiled. ‘Stop. You know what I’m trying to say. Why have you come all this way?’

‘Well, it certainly isn’t because I don’t believe in you, so please don’t think that. If I didn’t think you were capable of travelling all this way by yourself, don’t you think I’d have joined you on the train yesterday?’

‘I suppose.’ Maybe. ‘But you still haven’t answered me.’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I just wanted to see you.’

‘You’re worried about me. Because it’s Christmas.’ She crossed her arms on the tabletop.

‘No, yes. Maybe.’ Shifting in his seat, he leaned back in his chair. ‘Would that be so wrong?’

Holly looked out of the window. The fairy lights were on, sparkling against the frost on the cobbles. Would it be so wrong? She’d made it perfectly clear to him and Susie and Lara that she wanted to do this for herself and by herself, but did that make it wrong for him to care? ‘I don’t know.’

Leaning forward again, he tapped her arm. ‘I can leave.’

She nodded slowly before bringing her fingers to her necklace, rolling the rings hanging from her chain between her forefinger and thumb. First her mum’s and then her dad’s. She could tell just by touching them, she could feel the little

grooves of the dainty flowers cut into the gold of her mum's wedding band. She looked across at him, his deep brown eyes fixed on her, his brow furrowed as he thought. They'd always been close. The closest of the four of them. Ever since they'd met at college the four of them had been close but her and Joe inseparable. He'd been the one she'd rung first from the hospital after the accident. Even before she'd rung Mick, even before she'd thought to ring Mick.

Standing up, Joe picked up his coat. 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come.'

Holly closed her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to run after him and tell him to stay. Tell him that she could do with his support, but if she did that, she wouldn't be proving anything to anyone. And imagine if Mick found out? She shuddered. She could, she could almost picture his face, his mocking, his laugh when he discovered that she hadn't been able to travel down to Cornwall without one of her friends coming to her rescue and yet he could easily and confidently jump on a plane and go halfway around the world by himself.

'Is he leaving already?'

Holly opened her eyes at the sound of Diane's voice and looked outside. Joe was standing there shrugging into his coat, his back to the bakery.

'That's a shame. I would have loved to have had friends who cared enough about me to come all this way to see me.' Diane slipped into the chair opposite Holly, the chair Joe had occupied only moments earlier.

'You have your sister, Lauren.' That was right, wasn't it? That's what Elsie had said.

Diane grinned. 'I do indeed. My so-called friends back home though...' She shrugged. 'You must be close for him to travel all this way and surprise you.'

'Surprise me?' Holly reached out and wrapped her hands around Joe's used cup. He'd come down to surprise her. That's why he hadn't called or messaged to let her know his plans. He'd come all this way for her, because he'd thought she'd

like to see him and now, now she'd just pushed him away, out into the cold hundreds of miles away from home and what had he done? Nothing. He hadn't complained, or once told her she was ungrateful. No, he'd done as she'd asked and left.

'That's what he said when he came by asking for you.'

Diane frowned.

'I think I need to go. Sorry.' Pushing the empty mug back into the centre of the table, Holly pushed her chair back and stood up. He'd done this *for* her, not to spite her, not because he didn't believe in her. Why had she automatically thought the worst of him?

She pulled open the bakery door and stepped out into the freezing cold. She didn't need to answer that. She knew why she had a tendency to automatically think the worst of people's intentions. Because of Mick, that's why. Because everything her ex said or did had always seemed to have an ulterior motive, but Joe wasn't like Mick. Not one jot like him. In fact, Joe was the opposite to Mick. He was kind to Holly, and he truly cared. 'Joe.'

Turning around, Joe looked at Holly, his gaze a little guarded, unsure.

She paused a few feet from him and held her arms out beside her. 'Please stay.'

Joe tilted his head. 'Really?'

She shrugged. 'If you want to after what I've just said.'

'Of course I do. It'll be fun. There's a ton of Christmassy stuff we can do.' He stepped closer to her and lowered his voice. 'Or not. We don't have to. I wouldn't have mentioned it, but I know you said you want to start trying to make new memories of Christmas.'

'You're right. I do.' Holly nodded decisively. 'I need to. For myself and for my parents. Christmas was always so special to them. I want to continue their love of all things festive.'

'Great. In that case, I've found this really cute Christmas tree farm not far from here which hosts wreath making

evenings. I thought we could check that out? I know how much you love crafting.'

She nodded. She did. She loved crafting. Her voice cracked as she answered, 'I do.'

'And then in the next town along...' Joe frowned. 'Are you okay?'

Holly nodded, blinking back the tears threatening to fall. 'Yes, I am. I think I'm actually glad you've come. All of this...' She indicated the fairy lights twinkling along the promenade and the little Christmas trees decorating the small row of shops. 'It's trickier than I thought facing it all.'

Joe stepped forward and took her hands in his. 'Look, Holly. No one's forcing you to do any of this. Heck, I'm happy if you want to go to some little cottage in the middle of the Highlands and bunk down over Christmas. No one is expecting you to suddenly get over what's happened. The accident was awful, devastating, and being so close to Christmas...' He shook his head, his eyes locked with hers. 'No one would blame you if you never wanted to celebrate again.'

Holly looked down at their hands. Hers in his. 'I won't say I haven't thought it, you know I have and part of me... okay, a lot of me, ninety-nine-point-nine percent of me thinks it would be easier to just by-pass all Christmas celebrations for the rest of my life, but you remember what my parents were like. They loved Christmas and I know they'd hate me the thought of me spending the last few Christmases holed up away from everyone and everything.'

'I understand. I just want you to know that there's no pressure.'

She looked back up at him. 'I know. Thank you, but wreath making sounds lovely.' And it did.

Chapter Six



Holly slid the two trays full of freshly baked pasties she was carrying beneath the glass of the counter as the little bell above the bakery door tinkled. Looking up she grinned as Diane, Brooke, Wendy and Molly walked inside. ‘Morning.’

‘Hi.’ Molly closed the door behind her and shivered. ‘It’s absolutely freezing out there today. I’m sure it’s colder than it was yesterday.’

‘Definitely. It’s icy too. I almost slipped twice.’ Brooke grimaced.

‘Yes, and my arm has the bruises to prove it.’ Diane laughed as she took off her coat.

‘Sorry.’ Brooke frowned. ‘I just grabbed out by instinct.’

‘Haha, no need to apologise. I’d rather be your safety net than you fall and break your neck.’ Diane grinned. ‘Ooh, those pasties smell delicious.’

‘They do, don’t they? I don’t think I’ve ever been this hungry first thing in the morning than I have been over these couple of days working here.’ Holly smiled. She’d already had a warm croissant for breakfast, but the smell of those pasties... She already knew what she’d be having for lunch.

Wendy placed her handbag on the counter and grinned. ‘I’ve just remembered what day it is today.’

‘What day is it?’ Holly frowned. What had she missed?

‘It’s the day we put up Santa’s grotto!’ Wendy grinned.

‘In here?’ Holly looked round the bakery. Where would it fit?

‘Yep, in here. We need it fully decorated and ready for the lantern parade next week.’

‘Oh, the lantern parade is beautiful. Local residents and tourists or anyone who’s out and about in the bay really, come into the bakery or go to the cafe next door to decorate paper lanterns.’ Diane slipped her apron over her head. ‘And then everyone gathers together up the hill and Gerald, the pub landlord, leads the procession to the promenade.’

‘Yes, and the bay’s band plays as we sing carols.’ Brooke smiled as she began counting the float in the till.

‘When everyone gets to the promenade, we sing to the residents at Pinworm Bay’s Care Home before everyone descends on the beach for mulled wine and mince pies.’ Molly grinned. ‘It really is amazing. Better than the normal meagre light switch-on most towns get.’

‘Wow, that does sound nice.’ Holly straightened the two trays she’d just placed down. Her parents had always taken her to every light switch-on in the local vicinity they could. They’d called it the Tour of the Towns. She didn’t recall ever taking part in a lantern parade, though. That was a new one.

Wendy turned to Molly. ‘We haven’t got any clients until this afternoon, have we?’

‘Nope. Actually, I think we only have Arthur and Jayne today.’ Molly tugged a small diary from her handbag and flicked through the pages. ‘Yep, and we’re pretty much up to date with our planning.’

‘Great. We’ll be able to help out with the grotto then.’ Wendy grinned.

‘Haha, as if that would have stopped you anyway.’ Diane laughed.

‘You’re right. We’d have had to hold the meetings in the grotto. This is my favourite time of the year and I love love love decorating the grotto.’

‘We’d better go and tie up any loose ends before Arthur and Jayne arrive.’ Molly pulled her handbag onto her shoulder as she and Wendy made their way towards the office.

‘Is there anything else to come out from the kitchen?’ Brooke nodded towards the trays beneath the counter. ‘We

look pretty full.'

'Just the rolls for the baskets, I think.' Holly picked up the wicker baskets sitting at each end of the counter.

'I'll do that if you like? I need to pop and speak to Elsie and Ian, anyway.'

'Okay, thanks.' Holly passed Brooke the baskets before picking up a cloth and wiping the counter down.

'Has that guy gone home?' Diane turned and leaned against the counter.

'Joe? No, he's staying at the pub for a few days.'

Diane nodded.

Holly turned to face her. 'I thought about what you said about him having made the effort to come and visit and thought you were right. It was good of him to travel all the way down here.'

'Ooh, that makes a change, me being right about something,' Diane laughed. 'Seriously though, I'm glad. He seems like a really nice guy.'

'He is. We've been friends for years.'

'Oh, I assumed you two were seeing each other?'

'No, just friends.' Holly smiled. 'Her and Joe? A couple?'

'You just seemed so natural together, so close and theft that he drove hundreds of miles to visit you...' Diane shrugged. 'Sorry, I just assumed.'

'No need to apologise. We are close. We get on so well, always have done.' Holly grinned. 'Out of all her friends, Joe was definitely the one she was closest to, the one she could tell absolutely anything to, however embarrassing or heartfelt.'

'Right, I'd better open up. We don't want to keep people waiting outside in that.' Diane made her way towards the door.



‘DOES IT NEED TO GO across a little?’ Holly stood back and looked at the table she and Teresa had just shifted to the side.

‘Yes, you’re right.’ Teresa placed her hands on her hips and tilted her head. ‘I’ve been doing this for the last three years, you’d have thought I’d have remembered where the tables go to make room for grotto, wouldn’t you? But nope, I always forget.’

Holly laughed. ‘I’d be the same.’

Teresa grinned as they lifted the table again, inching further to the right. ‘I might actually draw a little diagram once we’ve worked it out. It’ll probably save hours next year.’

‘Good idea.’ Holly lowered the table again before tucking the chairs under. They still had half the tables and chairs to shift around, but luckily with only one occupied it shouldn’t take too long.

‘How’s it going?’ Wendy closed the office door behind her before walking across the bakery towards them.

‘I was just saying I might draw a diagram to remind myself where to put the tables.’ Teresa shook her head.

‘That’s what you said last year.’ Wendy grinned.

‘Did I?’ Laughing, Teresa slapped her forehead. ‘I wonder where I put that then.’

‘No idea. I’ll give you Botha. hand though, Molly is just finishing some bits off, then she said she’ll come and help us too.’ Wendy began pulling chairs away from under the next table they had to shift.

‘Wendy!’ Molly hurried towards them, the office door shutting with a click behind her.

Wendy paused and looked up. ‘What’s the matter? Has Jayne rung back already with the colour of the balloons they want?’

‘No, no, it’s not Jayne.’ Hurrying over to them. Molly held up the portable landline phone she was holding. ‘It’s the hospital. They’re asking for you.’

‘The hospital.’ Wendy’s face turned ashen as she took the phone from Molly. ‘This is Wendy. What’s happened? Is Hudson okay? Is he hurt?’

Teresa placed her hand on Wendy’s arm as Wendy listened and nodded.

‘Okay, thanks. Bye.’ Wendy lowered the phone, her hands shaking.

‘Is Hudson all right? What’s happened?’ Teresa asked.

‘Hudson’s fine. It’s Connor. He’s slipped on some ice and fractured his leg. He was taken by ambulance to the hospital.’ Wendy pinched the bridge of her nose. ‘Why didn’t he ring me? Let me know? What if he’s more hurt than they’ve said? There must be a reason they rang me instead of him, mustn’t there?’

‘Not necessarily. He might be in shock, or his phone out of battery. I’m sure they would have said if there was something else.’ Teresa wrapped her arm around Wendy’s shoulder.

‘I need to go up there. I need to check he’s okay.’

‘I’ll get your coat and bag.’ Molly disappeared back into the office.

The kitchen door swung open as Elsie walked through carrying two full trays of cupcakes. As soon as she saw Wendy, she slid the trays onto the nearest table and rushed towards her. ‘Oh love, you look as though you’ve seen a ghost. Whatever’s happened?’

‘It’s Connor. He’s been taken to hospital. He slipped on some ice and has broken his leg.’ Wendy turned to Elsie and sank into her arms.

‘Oh no.’ Elsie wrapped her arms around her before pulling away a little. ‘Right, let’s get you up there, shall we?’

‘It’s okay, I can drive.’ Wendy turned and took her bag and coat from Molly. ‘Thank you.’

‘No, don’t you even think about it, love. I’ll take you.’ Elsie turned towards Teresa. ‘Are you all okay holding down the fort? Ian has just popped out but should be back at any

moment. When he does get back, can you tell him what's happened please?'

'Of course.' Teresa nodded.

'Right, come on then, love. Let's get you to the hospital.' Elsie gently steered Wendy out of the bakery.

'Oh, I hope he's okay.' Holly watched as Elsie and Wendy disappeared into the kitchen.

'I'm sure he will be. Trestow hospital is great, one of the best around here. He's in the right place.' Teresa nodded.

Chapter Seven



Sitting at the table by the window, Holly took a sip of her latte and looked out across the cobbles towards the beach below. She couldn't believe that she'd almost backed out of coming down here and volunteering. If she hadn't already told Mick's mate of her plans she'd have likely not come. She wrapped her hands around her mug, the warmth from the hot liquid warming her skin. The bakery was silent and the promenade quiet. The odd dog walker or couple walking along and pointing out the lights were the only sign of life around.

She smiled. It was nice. Quiet. It reminded her of the village she'd grown up in just outside Manchester. She touched her necklace. The village she lived in. Now. When she and Mick and broken up, she'd moved out of the flat they'd shared and moved back into the house she'd grown up in. The house her parents had left her in their will. The house she'd avoided going into since the accident. She'd not had a choice, though. She couldn't have very well stayed in the flat with Mick, and Mick certainly hadn't been about to move out. It had taken a while, a few months, but she'd got there. Holly looked up from the latte she was drinking and out across the cobbles as car headlights swung past, illuminating the frost against the cobbles.

She grinned. That would be Joe. Standing up, she pulled her gloves on and picked up the two tickets Elsie had given to her. For all the hard times she'd given him for coming down, she was glad he had. He'd always been there for her, and she was glad he was now. It was only now that he was that she realised how much it meant to her that he'd made the effort and come.

Holly pulled the bakery door open and stepped outside.
'Hi.'

‘Hey.’ Joe hugged her before stepping back and pointing to the car. ‘Are you ready? I’ve got the heating on, and the heated seats are running too.’

‘I am definitely ready. You don’t have to mention heated seats and then ask me twice. Especially in this weather.’ Holly laughed as she hurried to the car. Getting in, she smiled and turned to him as he clicked on his seatbelt. ‘Here’s the wreath making tickets. Our slot is at half past seven, so we should have a few minutes to wander around before we start.’

‘Sounds like a plan.’ Glancing across at her, Joe grinned. ‘It’s at the Christmas tree farm just outside the bay, isn’t it?’

Holly held the tickets up, reading them in the light from the streetlamp outside. ‘Yes, that’s right. Nick’s Christmas Tree Farm.’

‘Great. I’m sure I saw a sign for one on my way to Penworth Bay. That’s so lucky you managed to get tickets. I rang them up after we spoke about going and they were full.’

‘Umm, lucky for us, but not for poor Connor. That’s the only reason Elsie and Ian aren’t going, because they’re looking after Hudson whilst Wendy picks him up from the hospital.’

‘Oh yes, he broke his leg, didn’t he? Ouch.’ Joe grimaced.

Holly nodded. ‘I still can’t believe you drove all the way down here just for a few days.’

Joe glanced quickly towards her as he paused at a junction. ‘You’re not still and with me then?’

‘Nope, I’m actually glad you came.’ She smiled. Yes, it had been a shock seeing him at the bakery when she’d got back after the Christmas market and initially, she’d been annoyed that he’d seemingly overstepped and not believed in her, but, now, after she’d had some time to think about it and get used to the idea, what could be better than sharing her adventure with him?

‘You do know I didn’t come because I didn’t believe in you, don’t you? Because I do, belie in you, I mean. I know you Susie and Lara tease you about not being brave enough to travel on your own, but I’ve never thought that about you.’

‘I know you haven’t, and I know Susie and Lara don’t mean anything by it.’ She shook her head. ‘Besides, I did it. I travelled down here on my own, didn’t I?’

Joe chuckled. ‘You sure did.’

‘Although if I’d known you’d be driving down with your heating on full and your heated seats on, I may have happily waited a day and came with you.’ Holly laughed. ‘Being squashed before the door and the toilet standing for hours on a train wasn’t particularly my idea of fun.’

‘Ah, sorry. I hadn’t really thought about coming down until we’d waved you off at the station.’ He patted the steering wheel. ‘I’ve got to admit compared to that, my journey was all comfort. Apart from my legs feeling as though they’d cease up due to being scrunched below the steering wheel for that length of time.’

‘And you’re sure you can take the time off from your work?’ She looked across at him.

‘That’s one of the joys of being self-employed and working from home. I’ve not had to take any time off. Whilst you’re working at the bakery, I’ve been sitting next to a roaring log fire in the pub working on my laptop.’

Holly grinned. ‘It’s such a hard life you lead.’

Joe chuckled. ‘It sure is, what with eating the best pie and mash I’ve ever tasted for lunch and sipping coffee between tasks, what can I say? It sure beats being holed up in the spare bedroom at home.’

‘It does sound as though there are a million pluses about being self-employed.’

‘Why don’t you try it? Being your own boss would surely be an improvement from running around after the formidable Mrs Hatton at that craft shop.’

‘Umm, I have a feeling I won’t be having to deal with her bad moods and useless tasks anymore.’ She pulled out her phone from her coat pocket. She still hadn’t heard from her. Holly had sent a quick message after she’d posted the key

back to her, but so far all Mrs Hatton had done was to give her the silent treatment.

‘Why? What did you do?’

‘Ha, you automatically think it’s my fault! That I’ve upset her.’ Holly widened her eyes in mock-shock.

‘You haven’t?’ Joe looked at her quickly as he slowed down at a roundabout.

Holly shifted in her seat. ‘Well, yes, I admit on this occasion the fault lies entirely with me.’

‘Go on then...’

‘I brought the key to the shop to Cornwall with me,’ Holly muttered and held her breath, waiting for Joe’s reply.

‘You didn’t? Isn’t that the only key she has?’

‘Yes. In my defence, how many times have I told her to get another key cut?’

‘A lot. I think every day for the past three months since the other key got lost, you’ve told us you don’t understand why she won’t get another cut.’

‘Exactly. I rest my case. I have warned on numerous occasions, but did she ever listen to me? Nope. Well, now she’s learnt her lesson, hasn’t she? She wouldn’t have been able to open up yesterday, and she’d have lost out on all of three pounds and sixty-eight pence because Mrs Potter wouldn’t have been able to pop by and pick up her supplies.’

‘You didn’t take the key on purpose, did you? To teach her a lesson?’ Joe raised his eyebrows as a grin danced on his lips.

‘No, I did not.’ she tapped his arm with the tickets and laughed. ‘I wasn’t that forward thinking.’

‘Fair enough. What did she say? I bet she read you the riot act, didn’t she?’

‘Nope. She’s said nothing. She hasn’t even acknowledged the message I sent her grovelling and explaining what had happened.’ Holly shrugged. ‘I’m guessing I’ve just given her a good enough reason to fire me so I might start thinking about

self-employment. Cosying up and working in a pub in front of a log fire and with coffee on tap certainly sounds more appealing than wandering around an all but abandoned craft shop looking for things to do to keep my mind busy.'

'Don't you just read when you've not got customers? You're always reading when I pop by.'

'Well, yes, I do, but Mrs Hatton doesn't know that. I can't imagine she'd be particularly thrilled to realise that she's been paying me these past few years to get through my ever increasing To be Read Pile.' Holly laughed. 'If it wasn't for the fact that she's always having a moan at me for something and if she allowed me to put the heating on when I could see my breath in the air, then it would be quite a cushy job.'

'I think she might just entice some more customers if she had the heating on in the winter.' Joe chuckled as he turned the indicator on. 'We're here.'

Holly looked out of the window as they turned down a narrow lane lined with wooden fences strung with fairy lights and wooden decorations hanging from each fence post.

Slowing the car down to a crawl, Joe looked across at Holly. 'Are you sure you want to do this?'

'Yep. I need to.' With her eyes fixed on a wooden fairy hanging from the fence post to her left, she nodded. Yes, even just the word Christmas itself conjured up numerous memories of her parents and the traditions they used to do together as a family, but they were happy memories and that's she needed to start focusing on. Instead of remembering Christmas as a time when her parents were ripped away from her and her world turned upside down, she needed to focus on the happy memories. Or at least try to. 'My parents made every Christmas so magical for me. They spent so much time and effort in doing so, I can't let that go to waste. I know they'd want me to enjoy it still, and that's what this trip is about.'

'Okay. I just wanted to check.'

'Thanks. and thanks for caring, but I just need to focus on getting through it all.'

‘I won’t mention it again then. That doesn’t mean I don’t care though and it doesn’t mean I’m not here to talk about it if you want to. I am.’ After swinging into a parking space, he pulled the handbrake up and gently touched her hand.

‘I know. Thank you.’ She looked down at the tickets in her hand and tapped them against her other one. ‘Shall we get going before our wreath making session?’

‘Absolutely.’ Getting out of the car, he grabbed his coat from the backseat and shrugged into it. ‘I’m guessing we go down there?’

‘Yes, there are little green arrows not the fences pointing the way.’ She closed the car door and fell into step with him. They walked in a comfortable silence as they made their way down the path towards Nick’s Christmas Tree Farm. She suddenly paused and turned to him. ‘Does Lara and Susie know you’re here?’

‘They do.’ He nodded as they began walking again. ‘You know Susie, she thought it was a rubbish idea and that you wouldn’t want me gate-crashing your break.’

‘And Lara?’

‘She thought it was a great idea.’

Holly smiled. Lara was supportive of them all. She was sure if she’d told Lara she wanted to travel to the moon, she’d have wished her well and supported her. Yes, she hadn’t believed Holly was actually going to make the trip to Cornwall on her own, but she hadn’t said anything. Unlike Susie, Lara had just quietly told her that it didn’t matter if she changed her mind.

‘Look, that’s pretty.’

As they followed the path, a large marquee came into view. Again, fairy lights were strung around the outside and a warm glow illuminated the entrance. ‘Oh, that is.’

‘It looks like a cafe. Maybe we should grab some hot chocolate or something to warm us up before the wreath making?’

‘Good idea.’ Holly paused as they came to the entrance of the courtyard stretching out in front of them, a large Christmas tree adorned with brightly coloured lights and a star stood centre stage in the middle and numerous stalls were dotted about, everything from serving mince pies to exquisitely hand-blown glass baubles.

Chapter Eight



Holly looked across at Joe's wreath and widened her eyes. 'Yours is so much better than mine.'

Turning to her, Joe grinned. 'You sound surprised.'

'Haha, not at all, juts jealous.' Holly laughed before looking around the barn, tables had been arranged in a semicircle. In front of which, another long table held crates of moss, red berries, mistletoe, sprigs of greenery and fir cones, as well as a few completed wreaths for inspiration. She looked back down at hers and wound a short length of ivy back around the circle of moss. Nope, it still looked rubbish. She glanced at the teacher, who was making her way around the tables, and threw a berry at Joe, trying to catch his attention again.

Joe watched as the berry fell onto his wreath before picking it up between his finger and thumb and throwing it back to her. 'Oi.'

'Help me. Please? Mine's a complete mess and I thought it would be nice to give it to Elsie to thank her for letting me stay.' She pouted.

'I thought you were working for her in exchange for board?' He raised his eyebrows.

She shrugged. 'I am, but she's so lovely and working at the bakery feels more like hanging out with friends than actual working.'

'You're being spoilt after having Mrs Hatton as a boss.'

'Haha, exactly.' She sat back on her stool. 'I mean I deserve a break so I'm making the most of it, but I did want to give it to her, but the only place this deserves to go is the bin at the moment.'

Standing up, Joe shook his head and stepped across to her. 'That's not so bad. What's wrong with it?'

'This.' Lifting her wreath, Holly watched the ivy fall to the tabletop, leaving the wreath ring bare except for the moss.

'Oh.' Joe chuckled as he picked up the fallen ivy. 'Look, you just need to wind it around the ring and secure it.'

Holly laughed. 'I've spent the last fifteen minutes trying to do just that. You make it look so easy.'

'It is. You just need to know how.' Sitting back down, Joe began working on his wreath again.

'And when exactly did you learn how to do it?' Picking up a length of ivy again, she wound it around the wreath ring, securing it as Joe had shown her. She gingerly picked it up. That was it. It was holding now.

He nodded towards the woman helping the couple at the tables next to them. 'We've just been shown.'

'Oh no, you don't. Don't fob me off with that.' Holly twisted on her stool and looked at him. 'You've done this before.'

He shrugged; his eyes fixed on the fir cone he was attaching to his wreath with wire. 'I might have had a wreath making lesson before.'

She knew it! 'When?'

Joe shifted on his stool, still wrapping the wire around his wreath. 'A couple of weeks ago.'

Holly opened and closed her mouth. 'And you didn't ask me? You, Susie and Lara made wreaths, and you didn't ask me.' She frowned. Of course, they wouldn't have asked her. She'd avoided anything to do with the festive season over the last few years. Why would they have asked her? It had only been a week ago that she'd made the decision that things had to change, that she had to face up to the one thing she had been using all her energy to avoid. 'Sorry, of course you didn't ask me.'

Pausing, fir cone in hand, Joe swivelled on his stool and turned to her. 'I didn't ask you because I didn't go with Susie and Lara. We always ask you to things, you know that.'

'True.' She nodded. They did. They had never left her out of any plans they made, they'd always given her the opportunity to come along and even if, at the time, she'd hated them asking her, she was grateful and she was also grateful they had never pushed her either. So who had he gone with then? Apart from the group from his old job, he sometimes went to the local snooker club with, he only ever hung around with her, Susie and Lara. She frowned. 'Who did you go with?'

Joe dropped the fir cone before bending to pick it up again, avoiding eye contact.

'You're hiding something, aren't you? Was it a date? Did you go on a date? And you didn't tell us?'

With his fir cone in hand, Joe turned his attention back to his wreath. 'Maybe.'

'Joe!' Feeling as though she were back at secondary school, Holly scooted her stool across to him and placed her elbows on his table. 'Who did you go on a date with? And more importantly, why didn't you tell us? You, me, Susie and Lara everything.'

Sighing, Joe placed the fir cone down and turned to her, holding his hands up, palms forward. 'Okay, you got me. Yes, it was a date. I went on a date.'

Holly leaned her chin in her hands. 'Who with?'

'My neighbour.'

Holly opened and closed her mouth. 'Your neighbour? You went on a date with your neighbour? The one you've been talking about for... oh, I don't know... the past seven months since she moved in? The one you'd told us you'd never ever ask on a date because if it didn't work out it would be super awkward being as she your neighbour and lives right next door?'

'That's the one.'

‘So?’

‘So?’

Holly rolled her eyes. He really didn’t want to talk about it did he? ‘How did it go?’

‘It was...’ He shifted on his stool. ‘Okay.’

‘Okay? Just okay? You thought she was amazing. What happened?’

Joe looked around the room before meeting her gaze. ‘She was nice. The date was nice. I made a pretty cool wreath, if I say so myself, and I’ve obviously retained the skills I learned.’

Why was he being so evasive with his answers? ‘She was nice, and the date was nice, so why do I have the distinct feeling you’re not going to see her again?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe I just realised she wasn’t the one for me.’

‘Oh.’ She looked down at his wreath. He clearly had his reasons. She scooted back her stool and picked up a fir cone and a piece of wire, trying to copy what Joe had done to fix his to his wreath.

‘That’s the end of the twenty questions?’

She shrugged and glanced at him quickly. ‘I guess. For now, anyway.’

Joe chuckled and shook his head. ‘And you wonder why I didn’t tell you?’

‘Oi! You normally tell me, Lara and Susie everything!’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘Or are you saying that you’ve been on a million other dates and kept those a secret, too?’

Joe shook his head. ‘No, just the one.’

‘Good, because I didn’t think we kept secrets.’ She wound the wire around her wreath ring, tucking beneath the ivy to hide it before attaching the fir cone. Ha, she’d done it.

‘Actually, I do have another question...’

Joe rolled his eyes and grinned. ‘And there was me thinking I’d got off pretty Scott-free.’

Ignoring his retort, she continued, ‘If you haven’t been on another date with your amazing neighbour because you know she’s not the one for you, you’re implying that you know someone who might be. Who is she?’

‘Well, I didn’t mean that, by saying she’s not the one for me it doesn’t imply I know who is, or who could be.’ Pulling his zip down on his coat, he tugged at the collar of his jumper.

Holly scrunched up her nose. ‘It kind of does. This is the woman you’ve literally been building the courage up to ask out on a date for near enough a whole seven months and then you just go on one date and suddenly know for sure she’s not the one for you? It sure sounds to me as though you like someone else.’

‘Holly, I...’

‘How are we getting on here, then?’ The teacher leaned over the table, inspecting their wreaths. ‘Now this one looks wonderful so far.’ She indicated Joe’s.

Joe grinned and leaned back on his stool. ‘Thank you.’

‘And this is a marvellous attempt.’ The teacher smoothed out an ivy leave as she perused Holly’s.

‘Umm... thanks.’ Holly mumbled, trying desperately to avoid eye contact with Joe, knowing if she did she’d laugh or he’d gloat. Or possibly both.

Chapter Nine



‘**Y**um, this is tasty.’ Holly took another bite of the puff pastry mince pie Joe had bought her from one of the stallholders.

‘You’re making a good go of showing you don’t like it.’ Joe chuckled as he bit into his.

‘Huh?’ Holly looked down at her coat and laughed as she brushed the pastry crumbs to the ground. Finishing it off, she picked up her takeaway cup of hot chocolate and leaned against the bench encircling the huge Christmas tree in the middle of the courtyard.

‘That was good fun and your wreath turned out well in the end, didn’t it?’ Joe looked down at the two large ones containing their wreaths by their feet.

‘Yes, I think so.’ She smiled. After struggling to get started, she was happy with the end result. ‘Of course you did have a little advantage over me.’

‘Ooh, not this again.’ Leaning forward, he put his head in his hands and groaned dramatically.

‘Oi!’ Holly gently shoved his shoulder and laughed. ‘But we never did get to finish our conversation.’

Joe chuckled. ‘No, I guess we didn’t.’ He leaned back again, looking up through the branches of the Christmas tree, the colourful flickers of the fairy lights peeking through the green needles. ‘But there really is nothing else to say.’

‘Ah, but I think there is.’ Holly grinned. She knew there was. His cheeks had a tint of red to them, just as they always did when he was embarrassed or self-conscious. It was something she loved about him, but she knew equally annoyed him.

‘Here, look at this.’ Putting his arm around her shoulders, he gently pulled her back and nodded upwards. ‘If you look hard enough, you can see right up through the branches to the stars in the sky.’

Relaxing next to him, Holly tilted her head back, blinking against the bright twinkling of the fairy lights. Joe was right. She could see the stars. Just. The branches of the tree were plentiful and bushy with the needles, but looking through the tiny gaps between the branches, she could make out the dark night sky and the brilliant white of the stars. ‘Oh yes.’

‘Please don’t make me answer your question.’ Joe’s voice was quiet, his breath tickling her ear as they looked up.

Glancing at him quickly, she frowned. It wasn’t like him not to divulge everything. The four of them had always been close and had always shared their crushes, their loves and their heartbreaks with each other. Most men she’d dated, including Mick, had always tried their hardest to cover up any emotions they might deem vulnerable, but not Joe. He’d always been very much willing and there to talk about anything from the annoyance of missing a bus to life’s serious problems, and he wasn’t afraid of showing his emotions. So it felt strange that he wouldn’t tell her, but she had to respect his wishes. ‘Okay.’

‘Thank you.’ Leaning over, he kissed the top of her head before relaxing back again.

It must be someone she knew. Susie or Lara perhaps. He’d been spending a lot of time with Lara recently. Ever since she’d begun to work from home, she and Joe had been meeting to go walks or to grab a bite to eat at lunchtimes. It must be Lara he liked. But why had he gone on a date with his neighbour instead of telling Lara how he felt?

Sitting up, Joe downed the rest of his hot chocolate and chuckled. ‘I can almost hear your brain working trying to figure out who I’m talking about.’

Holly straightened her back and took a sip of her drink. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Shall we head back? You’ll be able to give Elsie her wreath.’ Joe looked at her.

‘Yep, why not?’ He wasn’t about to tell her, was he? They might as well get back to the bakery and back into the warmth.



‘YOU OPEN UP, I’LL GRAB your wreath for you.’ As soon as Joe had pulled the handbrake up outside the bakery, he jumped out of the car and headed to the boot.

‘Thanks.’ Holly braced herself for the drop in temperature as she opened the car door and hurried to the bakery, pulling the keys out as she did. She peered through the glass of the door before pushing it open. Cheerful festive music seeped out into the street as she and Joe stepped inside. ‘Hello?’

‘Oh, evening, love.’ Elsie appeared at the other side of the door and held it open, ushering both Holly and Joe through. ‘Come on in, I was just about to make myself and Ian a nice hot choccie. Would you both like one?’

‘I should get going, but thank you.’ Joe indicated his car outside and pivoted on the spot, looking for somewhere to put the large wreath box. deciding on the table closest to the window, he lowered it before looking at Holly. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’

‘Yes, okay.’ Holly nodded.

‘Have we got company, Elsie, love?’ Ian’s voice called from the back of the bakery.

Turning, Holly frowned. She couldn’t see where Ian had called them from. Stepping forward, she realised that a small shed had been half-built towards the back of the bakery and one of the side panels was shuddering. Ian must be holding it up. Was that the grotto? Was he building Santa’s grotto?

‘Yes, Holly and Josh are here.’

‘Oh good. Can I ask one of you to give me a hand, please?’ Ian popped his head around the wooden panel just as it fell forward. Jumping back, he put his hands on his hips and shook

his head as it clattered against the floor. 'I don't know what I was thinking trying to build this on my own.'

'I did tell you to either wait until tomorrow or to let me finish my phone call and I'd help you.' Elsie tutted lovingly.

'I know, I know. I just wanted it up before the morning so that we had time to decorate it before the lantern parade.' bending down, Ian began hefting the wooden panel back up.

'Here, let me help.' Running across to him, Joe took the other end of the panel and they both positioned it in place.

'I can help too. I don't know anything about putting up sheds but I can do what you tell me to.' Holly placed her handbag next to the wreath box and hurried across.

'Great, thank you both.' Ian grinned as Elsie made her way over too. 'And thank you, Elsie, love, too.'

Elsie smiled as she shook her head at him. 'It'll be easier work with all of us.'

'It sure will. Have you all got that?' Ian back away and picked up a hammer and bag of screws.

Holly looked across at Joe. she was glad he was staying to help. It had felt odd, him trying to rush off like that as soon as they'd come through the door. He was normally one to come in and chat about the evening's events rather than rush off. She must have annoyed him by asking all the questions.

Catching her eye. Joe winked. 'I guess my bed can wait a while.'

Smiling, she nodded. 'Yep.'

'Here we are. Hold still now.' Bending down, Ian began attaching the panel to the wooden shed base. 'That's it, just a little bit longer.'

'Great. ready for the next one now, love?' Elsie looked down at him.

'I sure am.'

Holly stepped back and helped Joe and Elsie positions he next panel. 'How was Connor? Is he home now?'

‘Yes, he is, love. He’s fine. Chirpy as always, although I have a feeling he’s going to struggle on those crutches he’s been given.’ Elsie frowned.

‘Oh yes, he will. He doesn’t like sitting back and letting everyone else do the work. He’ll soon be feeling frustrated that he’s not as mobile as usual once the relief of getting home fades.’ Ian picked up the screwdriver again.

‘Just like someone else, hey, love?’ Elsie chuckled. ‘I think the getting everything done straightaway runs int he family.’

‘Ay, you’ve got that about right.’ Ian grinned. ‘But that’s a good thing, surely?’

‘Not when you almost drop a shed wall on yourself. It’s not, love.’ Elsie chuckled.

‘Point taken.’ Ian nodded before smiling at Elsie and turning back to the task in hand.

Chapter Ten



Gripping the edge of the shed panel, Holly shifted under the weight of it as her finger scrapped against something sharp. ‘Ouch.’

‘Are you okay?’ Joe looked across at her and frowned.

‘Yes, I’ve just caught myself on something. I’ll be fine.’ She focused on holding the panel steady rather than the pain in her finger. She’d likely caught it on a splinter or something.

‘There we go. Onto the next one.’ Standing up, Ian grinned.

‘You’re bleeding.’ Joe nodded towards Holly’s finger.

Stepping away from the half built shed, she looked down at her finger. She was. It wasn’t just a splinter; the cut was deeper. She must have caught it on an old nail or something.

‘Oh, love, what’s happened?’ Elsie touched Holly’s forearm, inspecting the cut. ‘Oh, I’m so sorry. You must have caught it on one of the nails we used to train the ivy over the shed walls last year. We’re normally so good at removing them to stop something like this from happening. One must have got left in.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s only a scratch.’ Holly pulled a tissue from her pocket and wrapped it around the cut, the red of blood quickly oozing through it.

‘No, that’s a deep one. Let me go and get the first aid kit love, we’ll have you as right as rain in a moment.’ Elsie hurried out into the kitchen.

‘I’ll go and pop the kettle on. I think that’s our cue for a break.’ Ian placed the hammer and bag of screws on the closest table and followed Elsie through to the kitchen.

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’ Stepping towards her, Joe gently held her wrist, looking down at her cut, concern etched

across his face.

‘Yes, of course I am. It’s just a small cut.’ Holly shrugged. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Here we go. Come and sit down, love, and I’ll get you all fixed up.’ Elsie hurried back into the bakery; the kitchen door swinging shut behind her.

Sitting down at the table Elsie had indicated, Holly unwrapped the tissue and winced. Elsie had been right, it was deep. Deeper than Holly had thought.

‘Are you okay with blood, love? You’re not going to faint on me or anything, are you?’ Sitting next to her at the table, Elsie pulled out antiseptic and plasters from the small green bag.

‘No, I’m fine.’ She glanced back at Joe, who was standing ashen faced behind her. ‘It’s Joe you need to worry about.’

‘Hey.’ Joe frowned.

‘Is it? Why don’t you go and help Ian with the coffees, then, love?’ Elsie nodded toward the kitchen door as she cleaned up Holly’s cut.

Holly watched as Joe did as Elsie had instructed.

‘He gets a bit queasy at the sight of blood, does he, love?’ Elsie nodded towards the kitchen door.

‘Yes.’ Holly shook her head. He always had. She remembered Susie had fallen off her horse when they’d gone horse riding and it had been Joe who had been the reason their riding trip had been cut short, not the large gash Susie had suffered. Not that Holly had minded particularly. After her horse bolting across a field, she didn’t think she’d ever be in a hurry to go horse riding again.

‘He seems a nice lad.’ Elsie wrapped a plaster around her finger. ‘There you re. As good as new. Almost.’

‘Thanks.’ Holly put her hands in her lap. ‘Yes, he is. He’s been there for me through thick and thin.’

‘A bit like my Ian and me. Would you believe it that we’ve known each other forty-odd years but only been together two?’ Elsie shook her head sadly. ‘When I think of all those wasted years when we could have been enjoying life together and instead, we were as silly as two teenagers with a crush. Neither one of us wanting to admit to the other how we felt in case it ruined the friendship.’

‘Oh really? I just assumed you’d been together for longer.’ Holly frowned.

‘Nope. We were good friends, though. The best.’ Elsie stood up. ‘I’ll go and pop this away and let Joe know the coast is clear.’



HOLLY WRAPPED HER HANDS around her hot mug and watched as Joe helped Ian and Elsie finish putting up the shed. Elsie and Ian were so good together, each one working completely in tandem with the other, almost as though they could read each other’s minds. She still couldn’t believe they’d only been together as a couple for a couple of years.

‘Oops, sorry. I think I’ve been holding this one wonky.’ Joe stood back and looked at the final panel, the end he’d been holding held at a slight angle.

‘Don’t worry, lad. We’ll soon fix that. I’ve not finished securing it in place yet, anyway.’ Looking up, Ian shifted it a few millimetres. ‘There you go. Hold it steady there, would you?’

‘Like this?’

‘That’s right. Thanks, lad.’

Holly smiled. Joe had always been one to help others. He was the one to throw money into a busker’s hat before any of the watching crowds, the one to rush ahead and hold the door open for a parent struggling to push their buggy through as well as propping the heavy door with their foot. Without fail, he always bought an extra tin of beans or box of cereal to slip into the supermarket collection for the local food bank.

‘Perfect.’ Ian stood up and stepped away, looking proudly at the work they had done.

‘Great.’ Joe began looking through the pile of wooden panels still left propping against the back wall. ‘Is it this one we need for the roof?’ He pulled one away.

‘Yes, love, that’s right.’ Elsie grinned as she helped Joe drag it across the floor. ‘Have you done this before?’

‘What build a shed?’ Joe shook his head. ‘My dad is into woodwork, though. He has been since I was a child, so I’ve picked up on one or two things.’

‘It certainly looks as though you have.’ Ian grinned as he set a stepladder up, positioning it next to the walls of the shed.

Holly sighed. Whoever this woman was that Joe was interested in, was a lucky girl. She felt the fierce heat of embarrassment flush across her face. She swallowed. Why did she feel embarrassed? Because she thought the person Joe ended up with was lucky? She always had. Joe was a great guy, so why was this any different?

Taking her hands away from her mug, she looked down at her plaster and smoothed the edges down. This was no different from any of his relationships in the past. She looked at him as he reached up, helping Ian position the shed roof correctly. Why was she suddenly feeling butterflies in her stomach when she looked at him?

It was because of what Elsie had said about her and Ian being best friends before they’d got together. It must be. But she and Joe were different. Their friendship wasn’t the same as the one Elsie and Ian had had. It couldn’t be. Their friendship and turned into a relationship. Hers and Joe’s wasn’t going to. Yes, they were close, the best of friends out of the small group of the four of them, but that didn’t mean we anything. and it meant even less now that he had admitted to liking someone else.

Shaking her thoughts away, she downed the rest of her coffee and stood up. ‘Here, let me help again.’

‘Are you sure, love? You don’t want to put any pressure on your finger. That was a deep cut that was.’ Elsie frowned.

‘No, it’s okay. It’s fine now.’ Holding up a piece of the roof, she turned away and winced as her finger scraped against the edge of the panel.

Chapter Eleven



‘Oh, that’s looking so good, isn’t it?’ Diane paused in front of the coffee and cake counter where Holly was serving and nodded towards the shed.

Holly followed her gaze and grinned. ‘Yes, it is. No one would have guessed it was just a plain old shed this morning.’

‘Nope.’ Diane turned and carried the two trays brimming with freshly cooked doughnuts over towards the bakery counter.

Holly picked up the bottle of table cleaner and a cloth before making her way over to begin tidying the tables. This was the first lull she’d had since she took over behind the coffee and cake counter so Teresa could go and help Brooke with the grotto. She’d asked if Holly had wanted to, but she’d been happy to decline and serve the coffees. It was nice to have that little bit more time chatting to the customers as she made their orders and getting to know the regulars a little more.

‘Are you sure you don’t fancy helping decorate instead of serving?’ Teresa looked up, a rope of tinsel was wrapped around her neck in a scarf like fashion and her hair covered in gold glitter from the numerous stars she and Brooke had been securing to the roof inside.

‘No, I’m good, thanks.’ Holly grinned as she wiped down a table. It did look fun, but she was happy watching rather than participating.

‘It’s just such a shame Wendy isn’t here.’ Brooke finished securing a string of fairy lights to the front of the grotto. ‘She looks forward to decorating the grotto all year.’

‘I know, but at least she’s at home with Conner. Knowing her, they’re probably watching Christmas movies so she’ll be

getting her Christmassy fix.’ Teresa smiled as she picked out a large red ribbon from one of the boxes lying on the floor.

‘Hey.’

Jumping, Holly turned around quickly and came face to face with Joe.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’ He held his hands up, palms forward.

‘Don’t worry. I was just in a world of my own.’ Smiling, Holly finished wiping the table before leading the way back to the coffee and cake counter. ‘Can I get you something?’

‘Umm, I’ll have a latte please?’ Joe shifted on his feet in front of the counter. ‘That’s not the reason I came by, though. I popped in to see you.’

Holly grinned. ‘Thanks.’

‘How’s your finger?’

‘Aw, it’s fine. Just a little scratch. It’ll heal in no time.’ She glanced down at her plaster before looking back at him.

‘How’s your morning been? busy with work?’

He shrugged. ‘Not really. I rang Lara earlier for a quick chat and ended up talking for a couple of hours.’

‘Oh, right.’ She nodded. It was definitely Lara he thought could be the one for him then. ‘That’s nice. How is she?’

‘Good, she’s good.’ Joe smiled. ‘She said to say hi to you.’

Holly turned and picked up a latte glass, before clicking on the machine. She could feel the warmth of a blush creeping up her neck and a lump forming in her throat. What was wrong with her? She quickly looked at Joe out of the corner of her eye. He was leaning against the counter, looking at the different cakes on offer. She shook her head. She was being silly, and she wasn’t about to let these weird feeling get in the way of her and Joe’s friendship. They’d been friends for years and that’s how he saw her, as a friend. That was how she saw him, too. They were friends. That was all.

‘I might treat myself to a slice of that carrot cake too, if that’s okay?’

‘Of course it is.’ Setting his latte on the counter, she picked out the biggest slice of cake for him.

‘Cheers.’

Holly crossed her arms as she watched him saunter over to the table by the window and sit down. She should never have pressed him to answer her questions about his date with his neighbour. If she hadn’t, she wouldn’t be beginning to see him in a different light. She wouldn’t be imagining what it would be like to date him.

‘Holly?’

Shaking herself from her thoughts, she focused on Teresa standing in front of her. ‘Sorry.’

‘Do you want to go for your break now?’

‘Umm, no, don’t worry. You go first. I’m okay here for a bit.’ She smiled. Yes, maybe it was better if she distanced herself a little from him. Every just for a few hours. Just while she tried to sort her mind out.



‘EEK! IT’S THE CHRISTMAS pub quiz tonight!’ Diane pulled her gloves on before clapping her hands. ‘I love this one. It’s literally the best one of the year.’

‘Oh, yes, and the pub will get super crowded. We’ll have to try to get there early.’ Brooke shrugged into her coat.

‘You’ll be coming, won’t you, Holly?’ Balancing her handbag on the counter, Molly buttoned up her coat.

‘Oh yes, you’ll have to come. We have a team with all the past volunteers and their partners, and we go every week. It’s a bakery family tradition.’ Diane grinned.

‘Oh right. Umm, yes, I guess I can come.’ Holly shrugged. After all, she’d already decided that she needed to put a little bit of space between her and Joe, give herself time to think. A

pub quiz would be the perfect excuse not to spend the evening with him.

‘Great. We’ll see you at seven then. Daisy and Ollie will be dropping their baby, Bonnie, off for Elsie and Ian to babysit so you can walk down with them if you like?’ Diane pulled open the bakery door, letting a blast of cold air into the bakery.

‘See you.’ Holly held the door open as the three of them walked outside before closing up and locking it. Who were Daisy and Ollie then? they must be close to Elsie and Ian if they were babysitting for them. Diane had said the pub quiz team was made up of previous volunteers. Maybe Daisy and Ollie had volunteered too.

‘Have they gone, love?’ Elsie walked into the bakery, her coat in her arms. ‘I’m just popping out with Ian for a little bit. We need to run to the suppliers. What with the lantern parade coming up, I don’t want to make sure I’m fully stocked with ingredients. Are you going to the pub quiz with the team later?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Lovely. You’ll meet Daisy and Ollie and their precious bundle when they drop by beforehand then.’ Elsie grinned, pride filling her face. ‘Daisy volunteered here a year or so ago and Ian brought Ollie up after his parents passed away, so Bonnie is our honorary grandchild.’

‘Aw.’ Holly nodded.

‘Right, I’ve found it. It had slipped behind the radiator where I’d put them to dry.’ Ian hurried into the bakery, waving a glove in the air.

‘Good, good, love. We can’t have you catching a cold.’ Elsie pecked him on the cheek before turning to the front door. ‘We’ll see you in a bit, love.’

‘Bye.’ After watching Elsie and Ian step outside and close the door, Holly made her way upstairs. She’d need to find something to wear to the pub later. What had she brought

down with her that was suitable for a festive night out? She wasn't sure if she'd packed anything.

Chapter Twelve



As they made their way up the hill, Holly could already hear the noise of excited chatter and laughter filling the air. The pub must be close.

‘How are you finding volunteering at the bakery?’ Daisy turned to Holly and smiled.

‘Great, thanks. I’m really enjoying it.’ Holly plunged her hands into her pockets. ‘It’s nothing like I imagined it would be, to be honest.’

‘It’s a lot bigger than I thought it would be when I came to volunteer.’ Diane pointed across the road, indicating that they needed to cross.

‘Yes, it is. It’s also a lot more, I don’t know how to put this, but welcoming and friendly, I guess. I work at a little craft shop back home and my boss is the complete opposite of Elsie.’

‘Ha, Elsie’s the best, isn’t she?’ Diane grinned.

‘She is. And everyone has made me feel right at home, too. There’s no awkwardness because I’m just volunteering there or anything. It’s as though we’re all in it together.’ Holly frowned. Had she described that right? She knew what she meant, but she wasn’t sure she’d said it correctly.

‘I know what you mean. It’s just like a big family, really. Elsie even calls us all her bakery family, and that’s how we view ourselves too. Isn’t that right, Ollie?’ Diane looked across at her husband.

Ollie turned and smiled. ‘It certainly is. That’s why we decided to make our home down here, wasn’t it?’

‘Yep, you can’t beat the bakery for the family feel or Penworth Bay either.’ Daisy nodded towards the pub a few feet away. ‘Here we are. Into the chaos we go.’

Ollie pulled the heavy wooden door open and stood back, letting Daisy and Holly through first.

‘Thanks.’ pausing, Holly let herself grow accustomed to the atmosphere. The familiar traditional pub aroma of stale beer mixed with perfume and aftershave. It was packed too. She didn’t think she’d ever seen her local back home so busy. Not even on New Year’s Eve. Groups of people were huddled around tables, whilst others sat on stools at the bar, or stood in groups nursing a glass of lager in their hands.

‘We’re over there.’ Touching Holly’s forearm, Daisy pointed to a couple of tables which had been rearranged together by the window.

Holly nodded and followed Daisy and Ollie towards the table. As they got closer, she frowned. Joe was sitting at the table, a spare chair to his right and Josh on the other side of him. What was he doing there? Hadn’t Diane said the team was made up of people who had volunteered at the bakery?

‘Hi, Holly.’ Standing up, Joe pulled out the chair next to him.

‘Hi. I wasn’t expecting to see you here.’ She slipped into the chair. ‘Thanks.’

‘No, well, I didn’t expect to be here either, but Diane incited me over.’ Joe grinned. ‘I’m not sure how much help I’ll be though, but I’ll try my best.’

Holly laughed. ‘I’m sure you’ll do better than me.’

A loud screech cut through the hubbub into the pub.

‘Oh, there’s Gerald, ready to start the quiz.’ Tammy passed Holly a drink.

‘Thanks.’ Holly smiled as she took the glass.

‘You’ll get used to him. He can be quite eccentric.’ Diane picked up an answer sheet from the middle of the table. ‘But he’s great, and he’s the one who organises the lantern parade.’

‘Okay my Christmas elves, I hope you’ve all been concentrating at Christmas school?’ Gerald repositioned the mic as he picked up a wedge of papers from the bar. ‘I have an

abundance of festive themed questions for you to answer tonight and being as I myself am in the Christmas spirit I shall not only be giving away free drinks to the winning team but I'll be throwing in a bag of cheese and onion crisps too!

A loud cheer rang through the pub before someone shouted out, 'Can I swap mine for salt and vinegar?'

Gerald tilted his head and placed his forefinger on his chin. 'Umm, I shall have to think about that request. The cheese and onion crisps go out of date at the end of the year, whereas the salt and vinegar have at least two more months left.'

Laughter erupted around the room, and Teresa stage-whispered across the table. 'That's Gerald, through and through, but we love him.'

'Oh yes, we do. Pub quiz night just wouldn't be the same if it was someone else.' Diane laughed.

'Okay, question number one. And it's a classic. Everyone should know this.' Gerald held his forefinger out, pointing at all the teams in turn. 'Name the reindeers who pull Santa's sleigh.'

'Ooh, we can do this! Easy!' Lauren, Diane's sister, leaned forward.

'Haha, yes, you should be able to. Knowing you, you probably test the kids in your class on it.' Diane laughed.

'Well, maybe I do...' Lauren grinned and shrugged before leaning forward. 'Okay, so there's Donner...'

'Or Donder. I thought that one was called Donder?' Teresa frowned.

'Oh, maybe this isn't going to be as easy as I thought then.' Lauren grimaced. 'I think it depends what book you're reading. Maybe Donder was the reindeer's name originally, and then it got changed to Donner.'

Ollie leaned forward. 'I think you're right. Maybe write both the different spellings down?'

'Okay.' scribbled on the answer sheet before looking back up. 'Then it's Blitzen.'

‘Cupid.’

‘Dancer and Prancer.’ Daisy tapped the table as she began humming ‘Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer’ song.

‘Vixen and Comet.’ Ollie leaned forward.

‘I knew you’d been studying that Christmas book.’ Daisy grinned as she looked at Ollie.

Ollie shrugged. ‘It’s all part and parcel of dad duty, sent it? To know the reindeer’s names.’

‘What’s the other one?’ Diane tapped the open against her chin.

‘Dasher,’ Lauren whispered across the table.

‘Great.’ Counting the names she’d written down, Diane gave the table a thumbs up.

‘How about Rudolph? Are we including him?’ Teresa took a sip of her drink.

‘Oh I don’t know, do you think we are?’ Freya looked around the pub.

‘Hey, Gerald, are we naming eight or nine reindeer?’ Danny called above the quiet chatter of their competitors.

‘Nine, of course!’ Gerald raised his eyebrows.

‘Cheers.’ Danny grinned back.

‘Brilliant, we’ve got them then.’ Diane laid the pen down.

‘Right, you lovely lot, you’ve had enough time to answer that one so onto the next. Question number two: Which fictional character created by Dr Suess stole Christmas?’ Gerald looked around the pub.

‘The Grinch!’ Ollie grinned.

‘Good one, Ollie. You’re on a roll tonight.’ Diane wrote the answer down quickly before turning the answer sheet over.

Holly looked across at Joe as he took a sip of his drink. Catching his eye, she smiled. He looked as though something was bothering him. Plus, he’d hardly said two words to her or

anyone else at the table and normally he was the first one to answer the pub quiz questions at their local.

‘Holly, do you fancy getting a bit of air?’ Putting his glass back down, he pulled at the collar of his jumper.

Holly shrugged. ‘Yes, okay.’ Standing up, she followed him outside and pulled her coat tighter around her as she closed the door behind them. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes. Sorry, I just wanted to speak to you.’

‘Oh, okay. What about?’ She searched his face. Was everything okay? He did look a little worried.

Sitting down on the picnic bench closest to them, Joe leaned forward, his hands clasped together on his knees.

Holly perched on the cold wood of the bench next to him and rested her hand on his arm. ‘Is everything okay? You’ve been really quiet this evening.’

‘Yes, it is.’ Joe leaned back and looked at her. ‘Or I hope it will be.’

‘What do you mean?’ She frowned. She had no idea what he was talking about.

‘I need to speak to you about something, but I’m not quite sure how you’re going to feel about what I have to say.’

‘Okay?’

He shifted on the bench to look at her. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t say anything, but Ian popped into the pub at lunchtime today and we got speaking.’ He shrugged. ‘What he had to say has made me think that maybe I need to be upfront with you.’

‘Right.’ She swallowed. Was he going to tell her that she wasn’t the only one who had started to view him as more than a friend? She shook her head. Of course he wasn’t. Yes, Ian might have told her what Elsie had spoken to her about. That she had felt she and Ian had wasted years by not owning up and speaking up about how they felt towards each other. But that could so easily describe Joe and Lara, too. And that was more likely, wasn’t it? It was Lara who he’d been speaking to

all morning, it was Lara who he'd been spending more and more time with.

He took a deep breath. 'I'm not really sure how to say this so I think I'm just going to blurt it out and I'll apologise in advance if it doesn't come out the way I intend.'

Tilting her head, she frowned. Why'd he just come out and say it?

'Do you remember our conversation at the Christmas Tree farm? I told you that I'd been on a date with my neighbour?'

Holly nodded slowly. 'Yes, you said it made you realise that she wasn't the right person for you after all.'

'That's right. It was during my date with her that I realised I'd been having all these feelings towards someone I'd previously viewed as a friend.' He rubbed the palm of his hand across his face.

It was Lara. She knew it was. If it was Holly he'd begun to have feelings for, he'd have blurted it out by now. 'I think I know what you're going to say.'

'You do?' He raised his eyebrows as his shoulder relaxed.

'Yes. You've realised that you have feelings for... Lara.'

'You.'

Holly shook her head. Had he really said her? Holly? 'What?'

'What? Why did you think I have feelings for Lara?'

'Because you've been spending a lot of time with her lately. And the long phone call this morning...' He'd actually said her? He had feelings for her? not Lara, or Susie, or anyone else, for that matter. He had said her, hadn't he? She wasn't just hearing what she wanted to hear, was she? She frowned.

'Yes, because she's been encouraging me to tell you how I feel.' He smiled, a quick, short half-smile.

Holly touched her necklace, fiddling with her parents' wedding bands hanging from the chain.

‘Say something. Please?’ He looked at her, meeting her gaze.

‘I don’t know what to say.’ She swallowed. This was what she’d wanted. This was what she’d been thinking about ever since they’d attended that wreath making workshop. She hadn’t thought about anything else, but now? She didn’t have a clue what to say or do. How did she treat him? Did he want to be a couple? Like a proper couple? Or was he just telling her how he felt with no expectation or want of anything else?

Straightening his back, Joe placed his hands on his knees and nodded. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything. I wasn’t going to, but after speaking with Ian earlier, I didn’t just want to sit back and keep how I feel about you to myself. Just in case...’

‘No, please don’t apologise. I’m glad you told me.’ She was. She was glad. She just didn’t know what to say.

‘I don’t want this to come between us. Just because I’ve told you how I feel, I don’t want things to become weird between us. I love you as my friend so much. I don’t want to jeopardise that. I shouldn’t have jeopardised that. Please don’t let this change anything between us.’

She bit down on her bottom lip. It was now or never. She needed to tell him how she felt, how her feelings towards him and been changing, strengthening too or she was going to lose him. He was going to think she didn’t want anything more than friendship between them. She cleared her throat. It was dry. Before she could talk herself out of it, she leaned forward and closed her eyes, her lips landing softly upon his. She felt him pause before realising what was happening and kissing her back. It felt natural. It felt as though it was meant to be. She pulled away. ‘What if I want it to change things between us?’

Joe chuckled and pulled her towards him again, his lips moving against hers as he spoke. ‘Then I’d be completely happy with it.’

Chapter Thirteen



Holly yawned as she tightened her scarf around her neck. ‘Are you tired already?’ Hugging her around the waist, Joe leaned into her, her back against his stomach.

‘I am.’ She tried and failed to stifle another yawn. ‘It’s been super busy at the bakery. Elsie and Teresa have been in the kitchen all day baking and getting ready for the lantern parade tomorrow and Brooke has been helping Molly as Wendy is still off with Connor so it’s just been me, Diane and Ian on the bakery floor and behind the coffee and cake counter.’

‘That does sound tiring.’ Joe placed his hand over his mouth.

‘Ha, you’re tired too!’

‘I am. Sorry.’ He kissed her cheek.

She smiled as she looked around the bus station. ‘What time did you say the bus was coming?’

‘Half past.’ He checked his watch. ‘It should be arriving any minute now, actually.’

‘And it’s an open topped one? Are our tickets for upstairs or downstairs?’

‘Upstairs.’ Joe squeezed her tighter. ‘It’ll be cold, but we should get the perfect view of the Christmas lights around Trestow.’

‘Yes.’ She nodded. When he’d suggested they go on a bus tour of Trestow’s Christmas lights, she’d felt sick and excited all at the same time. Her dad had always driven her and her mum around the centre of Manchester to see the Christmas lights, finishing the night off with the treat of dinner from the fish and chip shop. It was definitely going to stir up old memories, but they were good memories, ones she wanted to

remember and ones she needed to try to face. She wanted to remember the happy times as well as making new ones.

‘Here we are. I think that’s our bus.’ Joe pointed to the green open topped bus turning into the station.

‘Great.’ Stepping forward, she took Joe’s hand as they joined the short queue before making their way through the bus and upstairs. ‘is here okay?’ She pointed to two seats halfway down the bus.

‘Perfect.’ Standing back, he let her sit on the outside before sitting down next to her.

As they waited for the other passengers to take their seats, Holly leaned into Joe. ‘Isn’t it strange that this doesn’t feel weird?’

Joe chuckled. ‘You’re right, it doesn’t.’ He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

‘It feels so natural between us, but yesterday we were just friends and today...’ She pulled him towards her, her lips touching his.

‘I know.’ He grinned. ‘You’re right, it does feel natural. It feels as though we’ve been together forever.’

‘Yep.’ Settling back against the seat, holly grinned. they’d spent years searching for the right partner, suffered numerous heartbreaks between them and yet their perfect match and been beside them the whole time. She turned and looked at him. ‘How long have you wanted to tell me how you felt?’

He ran his fingers through his hair. ‘Now that’s a question. Umm, I guess I started to realise I wanted us to be more than friends at the beginning of the year.’

‘At the beginning of the year? Really? You’ve felt like this for that long?’ Holly widened her eyes.

‘Yes, yes, I have.’ He shifted in his seat.

‘Why didn’t you tell me? And why did you go on a date with your neighbour?’ She frowned. ‘And Lucy. You had a relationship with a woman called Lucy, your old colleague during the summer.’

‘Like I said yesterday, I dint want to jeopardise what we had. It was my chat with Ian which changed the way I thought, which helped me realise that it would be better to take the plunge, to be honest with you, than to always wonder what if.’

‘But you dated other women?’ Surely he couldn’t have liked her that much if he’d been happy to date other people?

‘I did. I guess I was just trying to surprise my feelings for you. I was trying to play it safe.’ He looked off into the distance, thinking, before meeting her gaze again. ‘I don’t want you to think that I was stringing them along or anything. I wasn’t. I just didn’t think we’d actually end up both feeling the same way towards each other. I was getting on with life, still coming to terms with how my feelings had changed. Doe that make sense?’

She scrunched up her nose. ‘I’m not sure. I think so. But what...?’

The crackle of a microphone broke through her question and a man with a goatee stood at the front of the upstairs floor of the bus. ‘Good evening, folks. I’m Hector and I’ll be your host tonight as we make our way around the spectacular Christmas lights of Trestow.’

turning slightly, she settled her back against Joe as the bus pulled out onto the roads of Trestow.

‘And the first lights we’ll see are the ones of Bridge Street, famous for, of course, the old bridge crossing the river but also for the old shoe factory which once breathed life into Trestow, offering the townspeople employment.’ Hector held his hands upwards, indicating the lights above them. ‘And the lights, first paid for and hung by the management of the shoe factory and which tradition still continues today.’

Holly looked up as the bus slowly made its way down the street. Huge yellow angels hung between the roofs of the buildings, a thousand small lights illuminating the sky. Yes, this was nice. With Joe beside her and the magic of Christmas lights surrounding her, she smiled as a million memories of happy times with her parents filled her mind. What would they think of her and Joe getting together? She laughed. She knew

the answer to that. They'd have been pleased, happy for her. Both of them had always thought highly of Joe. Ever since he'd brought him home with Susie and Lara for pizza after college, they'd fallen in love with him. Yes, they'd be happy. And quite possibly relieved that she'd moved on since Mick. now there was someone they'd never approved of.

'Look at the lights down there.' Joe tapped her shoulder and pointed to a side street to their right.

Holly grinned at the green, red and yellow bulb-shaped lights trailing across the sky. Simple and yet just as beautiful as the extravagant ones they were being shown.



HOLLY SHIVERED AS SHE bolted through the bakery door, pulling Joe in behind her before shutting the door. 'I don't think I'm ever going to warm up.' Hugging her middle, she tried to stop her teeth from chattering. 'I'm so cold.'

'It's got to be snow weather. actually, it's probably too cold for snow.' Joe walked across to her and took her in his arms, rubbing his hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her up.

'I think the people sitting downstairs on the bus had the right idea.' she spoke into his coat her voice muffled. She wasn't ready to step away from him yet, to step away from his warmth.

'Haha, I think you're right.'

'It was beautiful though, seeing all the lights and it was nice to learn more about the history of Trestow too.' She shuddered.

'It was.' He kissed the top of her head before bringing her in closer to him. 'Any warmer?'

She nodded. 'A little.'

'Next time we'll know to bring a blanket, and warmers and a hot water bottle.'

‘Yes.’ She closed her eyes. Despite the freezing weather, the evening had been perfect. She looked up at him. ‘I’m so glad you told me how you felt.’

A large grin spread across his face. ‘I am too.’

‘Elsie had much the same conversation with me when you were helping Ian put up the shed for the grotto.’

‘Really?’

‘Yep. She told me how she wished she and Ian had admitted how they felt about each other years before.’ She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath, the aroma of his familiar aftershave filling her lungs. ‘I wonder if they saw what we felt for each other.’

‘Huh, I wonder if they did.’ Joe kissed her forehead, his lips still cold from the bus tour. ‘I’m so grateful Ian came and spoke to me and gave me the courage to come clean with you.’

‘Me too.’

Chapter Fourteen



‘The next batch of cookies will be cool enough to ice now.’ Elsie nodded towards the cooling rack as she cut star shaped vanilla cookies from the dough she’d made.

‘Okay, I’ll make a start on them now.’ Holly grinned as she placed the last gingerbread Santa, complete with an iced red hat, on to the tray to her left.

‘Thank you so much for this, love. I know you had a late night on the bus tour last night, so I didn’t expect you to be up and helping out at this time.’ Elsie cut another star-shaped cookie.

‘I know, but I’m happy to be.’ She yawned into her elbow. She’d hardly slept last night. She’d been too busy going over her and Joe’s first ever date in her mind. Replaying it bit by bit.

‘Okay, well, just shout if you want to have a lie down later.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Right, that’s the bakery counter filled.’ Teresa waked into the kitchen, the door swinging closed behind her.

‘Thanks, love.’ Elsie glanced at the clock on the wall behind her. ‘You’d better be getting off and taking those lovely kids of yours to school now.’

‘Oh yes. I hadn’t erased what the time was.’ Teresa pulled her apron off and grabbed her coat. ‘I’ll see you alter.’

‘See you, love.’ Elsie held up a floury hand as Teresa stepped outside.

‘Elsie?’

‘Yes, love?’ Elsie looked across the stainless-steel table towards Holly.

‘I just wanted to say thank you for what you said the other night about being friends with Ian before you got together with him and wishing you hadn’t waited so long.’

‘Oh, that’s okay, love.’ Elsie smiled.

‘Ian spoke to Joe too. The day Joe admitted how he felt about me.’

Elsie nodded. ‘I thought he might.’

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Of course. Ask away.’

‘How did you know what me and Joe felt for each other before we’d even told the other?’ Holly finished the gingerbread Santa she was decorating with a small circle of white, a pom-pom for his hat.

‘Oh, you know... I guess we probably pick up on things like that a little more after living through it ourselves.’

‘Right. Well, thank you.’

‘Things are going well between you both, then?’

Holly grinned. ‘Yes, but the strange thing is, it doesn’t feel odd at all. It feels completely natural and normal.’ She shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I imagined it to feel a little weird to begin with. You know, seeing him as a partner rather than a friend.’

‘Ah, I remember thinking that way when me and Ian first got together. I think it’s because we were so close before anyway, as friends, I mean, that when our relationship progressed, we’d already got to that point emotionally.’

‘That makes sense.’ Holly nodded. It did. She and Joe had always spent a lot of time together, and shared everything, even more so since she’d split with Mick.

A tapping noise came from the door, getting louder and surer with each moment.

Elsie wiped her hands on her tea towel. ‘I wonder who that could be. Teresa has a key and would have only just got back home to get the kids ready for school and it’s too early for

anyone else.’ She walked across to the door, before pulling it open. ‘Harry! Whatever are you doing here at this time of the morning?’

‘Morning, Elsie. Sorry to just drop by like this.’ Harry rubbed his hands together, red from the cold.

‘Come on in, love. Come and get yourself warmed up a little.’ Elsie ushered him inside before closing the door behind him. ‘You must have met Holly at the pub quiz?’

‘Yes.’ Harry held his hand up towards Holly. ‘Hi, good to see you again.’

‘Is Diane okay?’ Elsie poured coffee from the cafetiere into a mug before handing it to him.

‘Thanks.’ Gratefully taking the mug, Harry wrapped his hands around it before holding it against his chest. ‘She’s fine. Absolutely fine. In fact, she was still in bed when I left.’

‘Right. Well, that’s a relief then.’ Elsie nodded and began shaping the cookie dough again. ‘What can I do for you then, love?’

‘I...’ Harry lowered the mug from his lips and spoke quickly, his words tumbling over each other. ‘I’m going to ask Diane to marry me.’

‘I... You’re what?’ Elsie dropped the lump of dough back into the bowl and stared at him. ‘Sorry, love, did I hear you right?’

Harry took a deep breath. ‘Yes. I said I’m going to ask Diane to marry me.’ He looked down into his coffee mug before looking back at Elsie. ‘If you give me your blessing, that is.’

Elsie blinked and wiped her hands on the tea towel again before breaking out into a grin. ‘Well, I rather think you need to be asking Diane’s parents that question, don’t you, love? But of course, I’ll give you my warmest blessings.’ She wiped a tear from her eye. ‘Oh Harry, love. That’s such wonderful wonderful news.’

Harry smiled. ‘Thank you.’

‘Ooh, you’re going to ask Diane to marry you.’ Else held her hands against her cheeks. ‘I can’t believe it! I’m so happy for you both.’

‘I’m just hoping she says yes.’ Harry grimaced.

‘Oh, she will, love. She will. I just know it.’ Elsie drew him in for a hug before stepping back again, still grinning. ‘You’re a perfect match. You are. How are you going to propose? When are you going to pop the question?’

‘Well, I was hoping you’d be able to help me with that.’ Harry looked into his mug again.

‘Ooh really?’ Elsie clapped her hands. ‘I’d love to. What are you planning?’

Harry looked across at Holly.

‘Would you rather I go so you two can talk?’ Holly smiled.

‘No, no, it’s fine. I’m happy you’re hearing my plans. In fact, it’s probably better having two people in on the plan anyway, just in case anything happens.’

‘Okay.’ Holly grinned and lowered the icing bag she’d been using.

‘I was going to put the ring in a cracker. Her cracker here, at Christmas dinner.’ Harry shifted on his feet and looked from Elsie to Holly and back again. ‘That’s a rubbish idea, isn’t it?’

‘I think it’s a wonderful idea.’ Elsie pulled out a stool for Harry.

‘Yes, it sounds really romantic.’ Holly grinned.

‘I just thought it would be nice to ask her in front of everyone.’ He perched on the stool. ‘Terrifying for me, of course, but nice for her. I know how highly she thinks of you and Ian and of all the bakery family. We both do.’

‘Oh, love.’ Elsie lowered herself to the stool next to him. ‘What a lovely way to propose.’

Harry nodded. ‘So, I need to get the ring into one of the crackers you use. I don’t want it to be different. I want the

cracker to be from the box you'll be putting in everyone's place. I don't want her to suspect a thing beforehand.'

'I see.' Elsie nodded. 'That's doable. Although it might be tricky to put the cracker in the correct table place. We normally have a free for all regarding where everyone sits.'

'Could you give out the crackers when everyone's sitting down?' Harry asked.

'Or you could have table place tags?' Holly smiled. 'That way, you'd know where she'd be sitting.'

'I like that idea. I could ask Pippa, Rueben and Toby to make some name cards.' Elsie nodded.

'Yes, yes. I think that could work.' Harry jumped as his ringtone filled the kitchen. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he grimaced and held it up. 'It's Diane. She's probably wondering where I am.'

'Right, off you go then, love. We don't want to give her any reason to make her suspicious. Are you working from home today?' Elsie stood up and held the door to the courtyard open.

'Yes.' Harry kicked his stool back under the table, his phone still ringing in his hand.

'Right, in that case, I'll pop by yours at lunchtime and we can finalise details.'

'Okay, thanks.' Harry held the phone to his ear as Elsie quietly clicked the door shut behind him, waiting until he was halfway up the path towards the back gate before she turned to Holly. 'Ooh, that's so exciting!'

Holly grinned. 'It is. They seem to make a really great couple.'

'Oh, they really do. They've done wonders for each other. When I think back to the Diane who came to volunteer here three years ago to the person she is today...' She shook her head. 'Well, they really have done wonders for each other.'

Holly nodded. What did Elsie mean? Diane was the happy, bubbly one of the staff members. Hadn't she always been

then?

Chapter Fifteen



‘Aw, here comes your three, Teresa.’ Diane called across the bakery counter towards Teresa, who was clearing pens from the floor and placing them back on the tables.

‘Oh, really?’ Straightening her back, Teresa grinned and made her way to the door as three children ran inside, each hugging her in turn.

‘Can we make the lanterns now, Mummy? Can I decorate my lantern?’ Pulling quickly away from her mum’s hug, Pippa jumped up and down, looking around the bakery.

‘Yes, yes, of course you can. You three go and find a table.’ Teresa watched as they sped across the bakery floor, settling at a table by the window before she turned to her partner, Gavin. ‘I’m so glad you managed to get this afternoon off work.’

‘I wouldn’t miss it for the world.’ Leaning forward, he pecked her on the lips before joining Pippa, Rueben, and Toby at their table.

‘Do you want to go over and decorate a lantern with them and I’ll take over at the coffee and cake counter?’ Holly walked out from behind the baker counter. ‘Diane and Brooke, you’ll be fine without me, won’t you?’

‘Yes, we will.’ Diane grinned. ‘We’re not that busy, anyway.’

‘Thank you.’ Teresa slipped her apron off and joined her family at the table by the window.

Stepping behind the coffee and cake counter, Holly watched as mums and dads sat at the tables helping their young children to decorate a paper lantern, whilst older children, even teenagers, happily sung along to the Christmas

music playing whilst they felt tipped baubles, Christmas trees and angels onto their lanterns.

It had surprised Holly that there had been a steady flow of people dropping in to decorate a lantern all day. During school hours, there had been the parents and grandparents of children too young to go to school relaxing with a coffee whilst decorating lanterns with their children. Of course, there had been a flurry of excited schoolchildren in straight after school, but now things had calmed down slightly and although the number of people coming and going was constant, there was no longer the excited urgency there had been earlier.

‘Huddy! Mummy, Hudson’s coming!’ Pippa followed her excited screams by jumping up from the table and rushing to the windows. Pushing her face against the glass, she waved as Wendy carried Hudson across the cobbles whilst Connor made his way on his crutches towards the bakery.

Standing up, Teresa held the door open for them. ‘Hi, you three. I bet you could hear Pippa’s excited screams from down the street.’

‘Haha, it’s lovely to see you too, Pippa.’ Wendy smiled as she turned to make sure Connor got up the step safely.

‘How are you doing, Connor?’ Diane leaned across the counter.

‘Okay, thanks. It’s still sore, but getting better each day.’ Connor grimaced. ‘It’s just frustrating not being able to do much and being ten times slower with the things I can do.’

‘Auntie Wendy, can I take Hudson over top our table and help him decorate a lantern please?’ Standing on her tiptoes, Pippa reached for Hudson’s hand.

‘Yes, of course.’ Lowering Hudson to the floor, Wendy ruffled his hair. ‘Go on then, Huddy, go and draw a picture on your lantern.’

Holly turned to the couple in front of her, who each held a decorated lantern in their hands. ‘Hi, what can I get you today?’

‘Two coffees, a cupcake and a flapjack, please?’

‘Coming right up.’ Holly smiled as she turned to the coffee machine. ‘I can bring them over if you like?’

‘Great, thanks.’ the couple turned and made their way back to the table they’d been sitting at.

Picking up the tray with the two coffees, cupcake and flapjack on, Holly weaved her way through the tables towards the counter again. Pausing, she held the tray against her chest as she watched two children skip out from Santa’s grotto gripping a present each under their arms. She smiled. Ian was a magical Santa. She’d had to do a double-take when he’d come down the stairs from the flat earlier, all donned up in his deep red Sonata suit. He’d reminded her of the Santa she’d visited as a child. Her mum had told her that since the age of three, they’d always gone to see the same Santa after finding ‘the real one’. Even when he’d moved to a different garden centre, her mum had tracked him down so they could continue their tradition of visiting just him.

Her mobile vibrated in her apron pocket, the screen lighting up against the fabric. Holding the tray in one hand, she answered. ‘Hello?’

‘Holly, it’s Mrs Hatton.’

Holly grimaced and checked the screen. She was ringing from a withheld number. She rolled her eyes, nothing like taking Holly by surprise. ‘Hello, Mrs Hatton.’

‘I think you know why I’m calling.’ It was a statement, not a question.

Holly nodded before clearing her throat. ‘Yes, I’m so sorry about the key. After locking up, I put it in my coat pocket for safekeeping just as I normally do so that it was to hand when I opened up the next day. I completely forgot that I was supposed to drop it through your letterbox.’ In Holly’s defence, Mrs Hatton hadn’t rung or even messaged her to ask her where the key was. Her boss had known Holly was travelling straight down to Cornwall after work. She could have checked where the key was. She could have reminded her. Of course, she didn’t dare utter her words of defence to her boss. It just wouldn’t be worth it.

‘I’ve lost three day’s worth of trading because of your little mistake.’ Mrs Hatton emphasised the phrase ‘little mistake’.

‘Four days? But I posted it straight away. When I got here, I posted it. it shouldn’t have taken that long to arrive.’

‘Remember, it is Christmas. Just because you no longer choose to celebrate, it doesn’t mean the rest of the world stops celebrating too.’ Her voice was low, clipped. She had known precisely what she’d been saying.

Holly opened and closed her mouth. Mrs Hatton knew why she’d stopped celebrating Christmas. That had been the only time Holly had realised she wasn’t quite as emotionless as she liked Holly and everyone else to believe. The week after the accident had been the only time Mrs Hatton had uttered more than five words to her, which didn’t involve barking orders at her. She let the tray clatter to the floor as she dragged the sleeve of her jumper across her eyes.

‘I’m assuming you are aware that I’m left with no choice but to terminate your contract without notice and without payment owed. I will be withholding this month’s wage for the loss of earnings due to being unable to open up for four days during the busiest time of the year.’ The line went dead. The conversation over.

Bending down, Holly picked up the tray, hiding her face behind it as a dad with three excitable children bounded up to wait their turn to see Santa. Hurrying to the door, she slid the tray onto the bakery counter and pulled the door open, the bell tinkling to announce her departure.

‘Holly, are you okay?’ Diane’s voice faded as the door closed.

Pausing, she looked around; the street was filled with people carrying their newly decorated lanterns home to get ready before coming back out for the parade. Knowing the lantern parade was a sign Santa would soon be visiting their homes to drop off presents, children danced excitedly around their parents as they walked. Turning towards the steps down to the beach, she froze. Local residents were busy readying campfires to roast marshmallows and warm jacket potatoes on

for tonight's festivities. Stalls were being laden with cups and supplies for hot chocolate and mulled wine. She couldn't get away from it. Christmas was everywhere, in the fairy lights strung above her, the families and couples walking hand in hand along the promenade or rushing from shop to shop, the beach crammed full of activities and food stalls for after the bay's lantern parade. She couldn't get away from it. She had nowhere to turn. Nowhere at all.

Chapter Sixteen



She spun around on the spot, coming face to face with Joe. ‘Holly? What on earth has happened?’ Stepping forward, he gently wiped the tears from her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs before wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close.

‘I need to get away, away from all of this.’ She waved her arm around, encompassing the bay, the people, Christmas.

‘Okay, okay. I know just the spot.’ Turning, he placed his arm around her waist and led her away from the busy promenade towards the hill. He didn’t speak, didn’t ask questions, he just let her be, let her be lost in her own thoughts as they walked quickly and quietly upwards, leaving the excited hubbub of joy behind them.

When they reached the pub, they walked through the small courtyard where people perched on the picnic tables and chatted over a drink despite the bitterness in the air. Joe led the way down the side of the pub, holding a gate open into a tiny garden separated from the pub garden at the back of the building by a row of mature evergreen hedge, a little piece of tranquillity. Sitting on the old metal bench beside a small pond, Joe held his arm open for her, inviting her to take a seat next to him.

Sinking onto the cold metal, Holly leaned forward, covering her eyes with the palms of her hands. ‘Sorry.’

‘You never have to apologise to me.’

She nodded. ‘I just...’ She shook her head. ‘Mrs Hatton called. I lost my job, and she’s keeping this month’s wages to cover the lost profit.’

‘The lost profit? Isn’t it only Mrs Potter who buys from her, anyway?’

‘Yep.’ She knew Mrs Hatton was taking advantage of her, but she didn’t have the will to fight that battle, nor the energy to even try to persuade her to be fair.

‘I’m sorry to hear that. I know you had assumed she would let you go, but it’s a completely different thing when it actually happens.’ He rubbed her back, his palm against her jumper moving in slow circular motions.

She shook her head. ‘It’s not that. Losing my job isn’t the reason I needed to get away. It was what she said.’

A deep furrow appeared between his eyebrows. ‘What was it then?’

‘It’s what she said.’ Her voice cracked. ‘She said just because I stopped celebrating Christmas, it didn’t mean the rest of the world has.’

Joe whistled under his breath.

She looked at the cracked slabs beneath her feet, a hardy tuft of grass clung between the cracks, determined to stay and thrive despite the odds. ‘I know that. I know life goes on, but it was the way she said it. It almost made me feel guilty for trying to enjoy this time of year again.’

‘Oh Holly.’ twisting on the bench, he faced her and took her hands in his. ‘You never have to feel guilty about wanting to celebrate Christmas. Your parents were the most Christmas mad people I’ve ever or am likely to meet. It’s only right that you learn to enjoy this time of year again. For their legacy, for you.’

She nodded. She knew he was right, so why had Mrs Hatton’s words hurt her so much? She leaned her forehead against his and closed her eyes. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re the strongest person I know.’ Joe’s voice was soft in the cold air.

‘Huh, I don’t feel it. I don’t think a strong person would have started crying in the middle of a bakery full of kids colouring lanterns and then ran through the street.’ She sighed. She didn’t think anyone had seen her cry. Diane had called

after her, though, so maybe they had seen. ‘I hope I didn’t scare any of them.’

‘You didn’t. I must have walked into the bakery to come and see you just after you’d left and Diane had been leaving to go after you, but everyone else was engrossed in what they were doing.’

‘Good.’ Holly opened her eyes. Diane had been coming to check she was okay? She didn’t think she’d ever had that in a colleague before, someone who actually cared enough about her to run after her and check on her. Of course, Mrs Hatton never would have not in a million years, but even her colleagues before her, at her old job, they had just been colleagues. Here, everyone was friends with each other. Elsie’s bakery family.

Leaning back, Joe shrugged out of his coat and laid it around her shoulders.

‘Thanks, but you have some too.’ Pulling the coat from her shoulders, she leaned against him and laid it over the both of them.

‘So, what’s next for you job wise? Are you going to come over to the dark side and give self-employment a go?’ Joe raised his eyebrows.

‘Maybe.’ She shrugged. She’d been thinking about it for a while now. Could she? ‘What would I do, though?’

‘What would you like to do?’ He held her hand under the coat.

‘I’d love to open my own craft shop one day. You know, make it a happy place to shop, the complete opposite to Mrs Hatton’s shop. I’d have a big table in the middle of the shop where people could sit and craft alongside each other. I’d serve coffee and tea and invite crafters to come and do demonstrations and talks.’ She smiled. Maybe forgetting to post Mrs Hatton’s key through her letterbox had been the best thing that had happened to her in a while. Now she’d have to change her life’s direction. She’d have the chance to follow her dreams. She straightened her back and looked at Joe.

‘Could I set up a craft shop online? Begin my business that way?’

Joe grinned. ‘I don’t see why not. I think that’s a great idea.’

‘Yes, it would give me a chance to build a following, make some money, establish my business name and then when I can open up a shop I could carry on with the internet shopping side of the business to make enough money to live on whilst I’m establishing my brick shop. Do you think that could work?’

‘Absolutely. Anything you choose to do will work and I think starting a craft business online would be the perfect stepping-stone to opening your own brick shop.’ Holly’s enthusiasm had ignited the same in Joe.

She nodded. She could actually do this. She could. And once the online business was drawing in enough money, then she could make the leap to a proper shop, a shop in a little village somewhere, maybe. Perhaps even somewhere by the beach. She took in a deep breath, filling her lungs. Even from halfway up the hill, as far way away from the sea, the air felt cleaner, healthier, crisper. ‘Perhaps I can even think about selling my home.’ Her words were quiet, each syllable catching in her throat.

‘Only when or if you’re ready. You don’t need to if you don’t want to. You could build enough profit from your website to rent a shop somewhere.’

‘Yes, I could, couldn’t I?’ She could think about the house another time. She had enough to think about just now. ‘I’m glad Mrs Hatton has fired me. I mean, it’s scary, but it’s exciting too.’

‘To be honest, I’m surprised you stuck your job out so long.’ Joe chuckled. ‘I wouldn’t have worked with Mrs Hatton breathing down my neck if she’d paid me a hundred thousand pounds a week.’

‘Haha, well, I can assure you the pay was most definitely wasn’t that, anywhere close. Try subtracting numerous zeros

from that figure.’ She shrugged. ‘It wasn’t so bad. She wasn’t there the majority of the time. She’d just leave me to it.’

‘And I can imagine what you did with all that free time between the smattering of customers.’ Joe held his hands out, mimicking holding a book and turning the pages.

‘Yep, you’re right. It was absolutely fab for zooming through my pile of books.’

‘Just think, if you’d stopped buying new books when you’d started working there, you might have just finished them all by now.’

‘I could never stop buying books.’ Holly held her hand against her chest in mock-shock. ‘It would be the same as you giving up coffee. Or more appropriately, air. It would be the same as you waking up one day and deciding you weren’t going to bother breathing air again.’

‘Fair enough.’ He squeezed her hand. ‘This is pretty perfect, dint it?’

‘What? Us or Penworth Bay?’

‘Both. All of it.’

She looked around the small private garden and smiled. ‘yes, it is. It feels a world away from real life. I almost feel as though I’ve walked right into a dream. I know how daft that sounds, but it’s lovely here. No hurrying down the street to avoid people you don’t want to run into, the beach on our doorstep, the sea air, the people. I don’t think I’ve met a grump customer yet.’

‘People you want to avoid, hey? They wouldn’t be anything to do with Mick by any chance?’

She shifted position and shrugged. ‘Yes. It’s just been freeing, not worrying about anything besides what’s down here.’

‘We could stay a little longer.’ Joe’s voice was soft, uncertain.

‘Down here?’ She frowned. Could they? She didn’t have a job to return to. She could set up her online business

anywhere, and Joe could, and did, work from anywhere. ‘What about my parents’ house? And your house?’

Joe frowned. ‘You’ve not got a mortgage to pay and I can cover the outgoings on my flat for a while.’

‘So it would be like an extended holiday?’

Joe twisted around to face her. ‘An extended holiday. We could always extend a little more if we both loved it as much as we do now.’

Holly opened and closed her mouth. ‘You mean move down here?’

‘Is there anything keeping us back home?’

She shrugged. ‘Lara, Susie.’

‘Yes, but they both have cars. They can travel to see us and we can travel to see them.’

‘But...’ She couldn’t think of another thing keeping her back home. Yes, she had her parents’ house there, but it hadn’t felt the same since her parents had passed away, and although she was now living there, she barely felt as though she was saying for the night. She hadn’t changed one thing about the house and how long could she continue sleeping beneath posters of bands which had split up decades ago? ‘I guess we don’t.’

‘It might be something to think about?’

‘Yes, you’re right. In fact, maybe we don’t have to think about it at all. In the short time we’ve been down here, we’ve been welcomed into friendship groups, into Elsie’s bakery family and we’ve both found each other. I mean, as in we’ve both discovered and admired how we feel about each other. I don’t even think there’s anything to think about.’ She grinned. ‘Let’s do it. Let’s extend this holiday and see how we feel in a few weeks or months.’

‘Are we really going to do this?’ Joe smiled, his eyes glistening with happiness.

‘Yes.’ Holly nodded decisively. ‘Yes, we are.’

Leaning forward, Joe touched his lips against Hollys.

Kissing him back, she laughed against his lips before pulling away and taking his hands in hers. 'We're doing this, right? A fresh start at life.'

'And a new job for you.'

'Yes. Eek, I'm going to be my own boss!'

'You sure are.'

Chapter Seventeen



With one hand gripping the stick leading to her paper lantern and the other holding Joe's hand, Holly felt herself surge forward with the crowd around her as Penworth Bay's brass band began to play and people began singing the first carol of the night. Ever since her and Joe's conversation about extending their stay down here, she'd been looking at the bay with fresh eyes, picking up on details she hadn't noticed before, like the A4 poster in the corner of the I's window assuring the customers that if they were short on money that day, Penny, the owner would accept a small donation instead of charging the full amount and the dog water bowls placed strategically outside each shop front, providing peoples' pets with a much needed drink after an afternoon running around on the beach.

She'd spent the rest of the time at the bakery assuring Diane and Elsie that she was fine before them, insisting that she took off early to decorate a lantern with Joe. People cared. Elsie cared, the people she was working with cared, the whole community cared about each other. Penworth Bay certainly wasn't the anonymous town she'd lived in with Mick, and it wasn't the village she'd grown up in, either. That had been lovely, too. Her parents had chosen the perfect place to bring her up in, but even around that village there were the curtain twitchers, the gossips, whereas here, she didn't get the feeling there were.

She joined in the chorus to 'Little Donkey'. She knew she was looking at the bay with rose-tinted glasses. She knew she was only focusing on the good. And she was aware that the longer they stayed she'd probably get to know who the gossips of the village were, who not to accidentally walk into down the street, but that was part and parcel of life and she was ready for it. She was ready to stay and immerse herself into

real bay life. And with Joe beside her, she knew it was going to be perfect.

Diane swapped places with Harry, so she was walking beside Holly. ‘I forgot to tell you that little Evie popped in when you were out with her mum, Hannah?’

Holly frowned. She recognised the names. Oh yes, from the Christmas artery she’d helped out Elsie with. Evie had come over looking for Lauren. ‘Oh yes? I remember them.’

‘Evie had been looking for you. She’d wanted to show you her lantern.’

‘Aw, that’s lovely.’ Holly smiled. She’d only met her and her mum briefly, so it was really lovely that she’d wanted to see her.

‘She is a little sweetie, that one.’ Diane grinned. ‘I hope everything’s okay now?’

‘Yes, it is.’ Holly glanced quickly towards Joe. ‘We’ve decided to stay on after my volunteering time is over.’

‘You’re moving down here?’ Diane’s voice rose, and she looked quickly around, checking she hadn’t interrupted anyone’s singing flow.

‘Maybe. Not yet. We’ve decided to stay on for a bit and see how it goes. Make a final decision in a few weeks or months or whenever we’re ready, really.’ She grinned. It felt good voicing their plans. It felt real.

‘That’s great news.’ Diane Linked arms with her. ‘Oh, I’m so pleased you’re going to be hanging atone.’

‘Thanks.’ She looked back down at her song sheet, trying to figure out where they were in the carol.



HOLLY WARMED HER HANDS on the takeaway cup in her hands and looked around the beach. Hundreds of people were drinking hot chocolate, eating mince pies, or just standing around chatting and enjoying the evening. The warmth from the campfires was keeping the bitter cold away, and at least a

handful of children were begging their parents to let them paddle in the ocean.

‘That was lovely, wasn’t it?’ She looked across to Joe, who passed her a mince pie.

‘It really was. I don’t think I’ve ever felt more Christmassy in my entire life, or sung so much too.’ Joe chuckled.

‘Haha, you should sing more. You have a lovely voice.’

‘Umm, I think my voice rather got drowned out by everyone else’, or else you have mulled wine in your cup rather than hot chlorate.’ Joe winked.

‘No, seriously. It was fun. I wonder if the church has a choir we could go along to? I’m sure I saw one at the top of the hill.’

‘Yes, there is.’ Joe finished the last of his mince pie. ‘I took a wonder up there earlier.’

Holly nodded. Were they really doing this? Making plans about their future? Here in Penworth Bay? She’d never be brave enough to join a choir back home, but here, well it was a fresh start, there wasn’t anyone from her past lurking the streets, ready to judge or mock her. Here, she could be who she wanted to, do what she wanted to. ‘I told Diane about our extended holiday.’

‘Oh, you did?’

‘Yes.’ She nodded. ‘It makes it feel more real, doesn’t it? Telling people.’

Joe grinned. ‘Yes, it really does.’

‘Holly?’ Harry walked quickly over to them before checking over his shoulder. ‘I need to be quick, but can I have a quick word with you and Elsie?’

‘Yes, of course.’ Holly looked across at Joe.

‘I’m going to grab another of those mince pies before they all go.’ He grinned.

‘Thanks, Sorry.’ Harry grimaced. ‘I’m happy to talk in front of you. I just don’t want Diane finding out.’

‘No problem. I’m going to wander over I mince pie stall, anyway.’ Joe held his takeaway cup up in acknowledgement of the invitations to stay before turning and joining the queue for the mince pie stall.

‘Right, where’s Elsie?’ Harry looked wildly around.

‘Over there.’ Holly pointed towards Elsie, who was watching Pippa and Rueben roast marshmallows over a campfire and led the way.

‘All right, loves?’ Elsie smiled as they walked across to her.

‘Yes, I just wanted to give you this. What with it being Christmas Eve in a couple of days and us having Diane’s parent’s over from tomorrow until Christmas morning, I don’t know if I’ll get another chance to pop by.’ Harry glanced around them before discreetly pulling a plush red ring box from his coat pocket and held it out towards Elsie.

‘Oh, right.’ Taking the ring box, Elsie tucked it into her coat pocket and tapped it. ‘No worries, love. I’ll keep it safe.’

‘Great, thank you. Thank you both so much for this.’ Harry looked from Elsie to Holly and back again.

‘You’re more than welcome, love.’ Elsie grinned.

‘Roth, I’d better get back over there before Diane realises I’ve wandered off.’ Harry hurried away.

Elsie grimaced. ‘Now I just need to make sure I told lose it.’

Holly laughed. ‘You won’t.’

‘No, you’re right. I don’t think I’ll guard anything more than I will this.’ She smiled. ‘I can’t wait to see Diane’s face at Christmas dinner.’

Chapter Eighteen



Holly stepped outside and closed the bakery door behind her, shutting out the hubbub of chatter as people queued to collect their treats for this evening, Christmas Eve. Elsie was closing up early, so the queue of people hadn't seemed to ease at all. Holly had offered not to take a lunch break. She'd have been more than happy to work through the whole day, but Elsie had insisted.

She took a deep breath as she walked down the steps to the beach below. It was almost deserted, a stark contrast to the evening of the lantern parade. Two dog walkers were walking in the opposite direction, towards the lighthouse. She'd soon have this section of the beach entirely to herself. She grinned. It was strange to think how much her life had changed within the couple of weeks she'd been here. She'd lost her job but had begun to form an idea of a new one. She and Joe had got together, and she'd possibly found a new home. Well, a new village to call home, anyway. She and Joe had decided they'd stay on at the pub for a while. Until they formed any longer-term plans, that was.

Yes, she could see a new, entirely different future for herself now. A future she felt excited about. A future which gave her butterflies in her stomach whenever she thought about it.

She checked her watch. She still had over half an hour. Maybe Joe would be able to take a break from his work, too. Knowing the bakery was going to be manically busy today, they hadn't arranged to meet for lunch, instead agreeing they'd go with the flow and catch each other after work, if nothing else.

Pausing, Holly pulled her mobile from her pocket and froze. That was strange. She had a missed call. From Mick. What was Mick doing ringing her? She frowned. Maybe he

just wanted to check in with her, make sure she was okay? After all, it was Christmas Eve, and he knew how difficult the past few Christmases had been for her.

But wouldn't he have rung last Christmas if that was the case? He hadn't contacted her at all. He'd finished with her two weeks before Christmas and that had been it. Silence ever since.

She shrugged. He hadn't left a voice message, so the only way she'd find out was if she rung him back. She clicked on his name and pressed Call before she talked herself out of it.

'Hello?' His voice was uncertain. As if he didn't know who was ringing him. Had he deleted her name from his contacts? No, he couldn't have, or he wouldn't have been able to ring her in the first place.

She cleared her throat. It felt odd speaking to him again. 'Hi, it's Holly. I'm just returning your call.'

'Holly? Oh, Holly.' He sounded surprised.

'Yes, you rang me. I'm just returning your call.' Why did he sound so shocked to hear from her? Hadn't he expected her to call him back?

'I didn't ring you.'

Pulling her mobile away from her ear, she double-checked her missed call list. 'Yes, you did. About half an hour ago.'

'Well, if I did, I certainly didn't mean to. Are you sure it was me and not another Mick?'

She shook her head. Why was he being so awkward? He'd been the one to reach out to her, not the other way around. 'I don't know any other Micks. Besides, I clicked on the number showing up in my missed call list.'

Silence.

'Are you still there?' She frowned. She shouldn't have called him back. She should have just ignored the missed call.

'Look, Holly. I don't know what you want from me but I have nothing to give you. I tried my best to support you after

your parents passed away and all you did was to push me away.' His voice was calm, authoritative.

Holly opened and closed her mouth. She didn't want anything from him. He'd been the one to ring her. 'I don't want anything from you, Mick. I was just returning your call. Forget about it.' Pulling her phone away from her ear, she paused, her thumb on the End Call button as he spoke again.

'You need to move on. Yes, we had a great time. We were good together but nothing lasts forever. You know that more than most of us.' the last phrase was clipped. Unkind.

Had he really said that? Had he meant it the way it had sounded? When had things become so strained between them? She stared out across the ocean. The waves were calm as they inched across the sand towards her. What was she doing still listening to him? She was on the phone. She was in charge of the situation. Taking a deep breath, she spoke again, trying her best to keep the upset from her vice, trying her most to keep her voice steady, calm. 'I don't have to listen to this. Please delete me from your contacts so you don't accidentally ring me again.'

Throwing her mobile on the sand, she sank down next to it. Why did she let him get to her? They were only words. And he was hundreds, if not thousands of miles away. She shouldn't have rung him back. She shouldn't have even thought for a millisecond that he might have been ringing to see if she was okay.

She dug her fingers into the sand as she stared out across the ocean; the tears falling hot against her cheeks. He'd begun distancing himself from her shortly after the accident. When she'd needed him the most, he'd pulled himself away, created an emotional barrier between them, all the time blaming her. Blaming her grief for the breakup of their relationship.

A light flickered on the horizon. A boat. From here it looked as though it were going impossibly slowing, moving a millimetre a minute across the waters, less than that even.

Had he been right, though? Did nothing last forever? They hadn't. She and Mick's relationship had ended, and she'd once

thought he might be the one for her. Pulling her hands from the sand, she watched as the tiny grains filtered through her fingers, finding their way home. Look how that relationship had turned out. Maybe he had a point.

Her phone vibrated across the sand. She hadn't turned the ringtone on yet, not since stepping outside the bakery. Leaning forward, she gingerly picked it up. Please don't be Mick again.

Relief flooded through her body as she realised it was Joe's name lighting up the screen. Joe. Her Joe. She frowned, Mick's words echoing in her mind, 'nothing lasts forever.'

What if she and Joe were to split up? Or should that be when they break up? Mick used to love her, be kind to her, care for her, tell her he wanted to be with her always, and look at how quickly that had changed.

If she and Joe split up, she wouldn't just be losing a boyfriend, a partner, she'd be losing her friend too, her best friend. They could tell each other that they'd revert to being friends again as much as they liked, but they wouldn't, not when it came to it. Nobody did. It was a false promise.empty words.

Things felt different with Joe, though. He felt like home.

She swiped at her tears. Was that simply because they'd known each other for years, that they had been able to bypass that awkward, first getting to know you part of a new relationship? Or was it because they knew each other so well that she felt this way? Was it because she knew him through and through and accepted and loved each little habit and quirk of his?

She didn't know what to think. But she knew she didn't want to lose him. She didn't want to lose his friendship. Had they made the wrong decision? Should they have just stayed friends?

Standing up, she pulled the sleeve of her coat across her face. She didn't know what to think anymore.



‘HAPPY CHRISTMAS EVE!’ Diane clapped her hands before throwing her arms around Elsie and hugging her tight. ‘I can’t wait for tomorrow.’

‘We can tell.’ Elsie chuckled as she hugged her back.

‘What time is Christmas dinner?’ Diane stepped back.

‘One o’clock.’ Elsie grinned.

‘Great.’ Diane licked her lips. ‘I can almost taste the turkey already.’

‘Go on, be off with you. Enjoy you evening with your parents.’ Elsie grinned and pulled open the door, holding it open.

‘Yes, I’d better get going. Oh, can I grab a few rolls? I forgot to get them earlier.’ Diane slapped her forehead.

‘Of course you can, love.’ Elsie began bagging up the rolls that were left over into the baskets on the counter.

‘Thanks, you’re a lifesaver. Merry Christmas!’ Diane hugged Holly before stepping outside and waiting for Molly.

‘Merry Christmas, love.’ Elsie wrapped her arms around Molly before waving her and Diane off and turning to Brooke. ‘Right, Brooke, love. You and Max will be over first thing, won’t you? Daisy, Ollie and little Bonnie will be coming too.’

‘Yes, I wouldn’t miss Christmas morning with you and Ian for the world.’ Brooke smiled as she hugged first Elsie and then Holly before joining Diane and Molly outside. ‘Merry Christmas.’

‘Merry Christmas and be careful getting here tomorrow. Snow is forecast.’ Standing at the door, Elsie waved until they’d disappeared up the hill. Closing the door, Elsie smiled at Holly. ‘Oh, tomorrow is going to be wonderful. Not only is it Bonnie’s first Christmas but with Harry proposing too...’

Holly nodded. When she'd arrived in Penworth Bay, she'd wanted to try to be okay with Christmas again. Or at least not cry at every little mention of the festive season, but she'd never imagine that she'd actually enjoy it. 'Yes, it will be.'

'Right, me and Ian are going to start prepping the veg for Christmas dinner tomorrow. Are you meeting Joe this evening?'

'Umm, I'm not sure. I don't think so, not tonight. I'm just going to have a nap and see how I feel, I think.'

'Oh, okay then, love.'

As she walked up the stairs to the flat, Holly focused on putting one foot in front of the other, trying their best to push away the nagging doubts she was having about her and Joe's relationship. She frowned. It wasn't even the relationship. That had been amazing so far. She'd never felt so close to anyone before, but that's what was still worrying her. She cared for Joe so much she didn't want to imagine life without him in it. If they split up and he disappeared or worse, hung around and found someone else, how would she feel then?

Devastated.

Sinking down onto the bed, she closed her eyes. What was she supposed to do? Give up the chance to be with him in a relationship or end it, hoping that they could salvage their friendship. Would that even be an option? And the damage already been done?

Chapter Nineteen



Holly opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. She must have fallen asleep. What time was it, anyway? The bakery was silent. The Christmas music Elsie and Ian had been listening to whilst preparing the vegetables turned off.

She blinked. She couldn't even hear the soft mumble of the TV from the living room. It was as though a blanket of silence had fallen over the bay. She rolled over and picked up her phone. It was 6am. she had needed the sleep. Laying back, she scrolled through her messages. Five from Joe and three missed calls as well.

Hey, do you fancy grabbing dinner tonight? Joe xxx

Everything okay? Joe xxx

Do you want me to come over? Joe xxx

Are you okay? Worried now. Here if you want to talk Joe xxx

Just popped by and Else said you were asleep. I'm here if you need to talk. I know this is a difficult day for you - whatever the time Joe xxx

She smiled. He was right; he was always there for her. And she knew that. He had been on numerous occasions since the accident. He'd never once complained if she'd rung him upset in the middle of the night. In fact, she had he'd turned up on her doorstep, usually with a takeaway in his hand ready and willing to listen.

Propping herself up on her elbows, she looked through his messages again. What had she been thinking earlier? Why had she doubted him, herself, them both? This relationship might not last forever, however much it felt like it could right now, but now she knew one thing, she knew that Joe wouldn't turn his back on her, he wouldn't suddenly treat her with the

disdain Mick had. Whatever happened in her and Joe's relationship, they'd always be friends. She was sure of that.

Feeling as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, she pulled the duvet down and stood up before making her way to the window. Pulling the curtains apart, she grinned. So, this was why it felt so quiet. Snow. She peered out across the cobbles below. At last two, maybe even three inches, had fallen, and it was still coming down heavily.

And it was Christmas Day. It was snowing on Christmas Day! Walking around the other side of the bed; she perched onto of the duvet and picked up the photograph of herself with her parents. For the first time since they'd passed away, she hadn't felt dread as she'd woken up. She felt sad that they couldn't be together, and she knew she always would, but the dark suffocating blanket of feeling as though she'd never be able to enjoy Christmas again had lifted. Something had changed, something had happened. Whether it was being in Penworth Bay surrounded by people she had only known a short time but cared deeply for and knew they cared for her to, or whether it was because she knew she had Joe to support her, their new relationship a light in the dark, she didn't know, but, yes, things felt different.

Kissing the pad of her forefinger, she placed it over the photograph of her mum before doing the same with that of her dad. 'Merry Christmas, Mum. Merry Christmas, Dad.'

Placing the photo down carefully, she picked up her phone again and sent Joe a message. He'd always been an early riser. She was sure he'd be awake by now.



'MERRY CHRISTMAS.' WALKING across to Joe, Holly wrapped her arms around him.

'Merry Christmas to you too.' Joe hugged her back before pulling away and kissing her on the lips, his skin warm against hers.

Stepping back, she laughed as a snowflake landed on her nose. 'I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to worry you.'

Joe smiled as they turned and began walking down the promenade. 'No need to apologise. I'm just glad you're okay.' He looked across at her as if trying to work out if she really was.

'Thanks. And I am just so you know.' She grinned. She was. She'd found her Christmas spark again. 'I think I've figured out why my parents loved Christmas so much.'

'Oh yes?' He raised an eyebrow.

'Yep.' pausing, she turned to face him, taking his hands in hers. 'Because each and every year they got to share it with the person they loved. And me, of course.'

He furrowed his brow. 'Are you saying that I think you're saying?'

She nodded, her hand automatically reaching to her necklace, her parents' wedding bands. Why had she just blurted that out? 'Just ignore me. I shouldn't have said anything. I know it's too soon. It's way too soon.'

'Heck, no, it's not. We've known each other for years, been through thick and thin together. I sure know how I feel about you, holly. I love you too.'

She grinned. It felt as though so much had happened in the past twenty-four hours -she'd spoken to Mick who had made her doubt whether she and Joe were doing the right thing by taking a chance on love together and then this morning, she'd woken up knowing she was exactly where she was supposed to be - in love with Joe. 'I spoke to Mick yesterday.'

'Mick?' Joe's face grew ashen.

'Yes, I had a missed call from him, so I rang him back.'

'What had he wanted?'

'Nothing. He swore that he hadn't rung me in the first place.' Turning, she took his hand, and they began walking along the promenade again. The thick snow covering the cobbles illuminated only by the fairy lights dancing above their heads. 'I let his words get to me and I began doubting that we'd done the right thing.'

‘Us? Do you mean getting together?’

She nodded. ‘Yes. I know how I feel about you and I love you, I really do.’ She glanced across at him. ‘But he’d said that everything came to an end. He wasn’t talking about me and you, but it got me thinking, worrying that if we broke up, would we have messed up a beautiful friendship? If we only stay together for a few months or, I don’t know even a couple of years, would we have jeopardised the friendship we had before?’

‘I know what I think.’ Joe paused again, turning to her.

‘That it wouldn’t? That we’d be able to go back to being just friends and being as close as we were?’ She frowned. Would that be possible?

‘Yes, I think we could. Depending on why we split up, it might take some work, but ultimately yes, but...’ He smiled. ‘I’d rather not think about that. I’d rather enjoy our journey together and live in the present than worrying about something which may, or may not happen.’

Holly grinned and placed her hands behind his neck, drawing him towards her. ‘Good. I feel the exact same.’

Joe wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her towards him, and closed the short distance between them.

Leaning forward, Holly touched his lips with hers just as the fairy lights above them flickered and they were plunged into the darkness of night.

Chapter Twenty



‘Oh dear, oh dear.’ Elsie opened the blinds in the kitchen before trying the light switch again.

‘It’s no use, love. The electricity is out all over the bay.’ Ian stepped inside and closed the door out into the courtyard behind him as a flurry of snow followed him in.

‘Everywhere?’ Elsie sank down onto a stool.

‘The pub’s out too. When the Christmas lights flickered out, Holly and I made our way back there to grab my portable charger.’ Joe held his mobile up, the battery light blinking as it charged.

‘But what about Christmas dinner?’ Elsie rung a tea towel in her hands. ‘I need to get the turkey in now and make a start.’

Ian stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. ‘Worst-case scenario, we postpone. We can have our big bakery family Christmas tomorrow.’

Elsie turned to look at him, worry etched across her face. ‘But we can’t.’

‘Why not?’ Ian shrugged. ‘As long as we get to celebrate altogether at some point, surely it doesn’t matter if it’s today or tomorrow?’

‘Oh, but it does.’ Standing up, Elsie cupped his face in her hands. ‘Harry is proposing to Diane today. At dinner.’

Ian widened his eyes. ‘Well, that changes everything, then. Hold on, I may just have a plan.’ Pecking her on the lips, he pulled his mobile from his back pocket and tapped it against the palm of his hand. ‘I’ve not much signal. I’m assuming the closest phone mast has gone out, but I do have a couple of bars of signal. Wish me luck.’

‘Good luck, love.’ Elsie turned to Holly and Joe. ‘Oh, I do hope he manages to do what he’s planning to.’

‘Let’s keep our fingers crossed.’ Sitting down on the stool opposite Elsie, Holly crossed her fingers. She knew how much this dinner meant to Elsie and especially to Harry this year, too.

‘I can’t believe how much snow has come down just since me and Holly went for a walk earlier.’ Joe peered out of the window across the bakery courtyard.

‘It sure is coming down thick and fast.’ Elsie joined him at the window. ‘It’s beautiful though and I wouldn’t mind any other day of the year, but poor Harry must be really worrying his plan is going to be ruined.’

‘All sorted, love.’ The kitchen door swung open as Ian hurried back through.

‘What? Really? How? what have you organised?’ Elsie turned and made her way across the kitchen towards him.

‘Chris and Freya are going to host Christmas dinner at the Fair Animal Sanctuary. The blackout hasn’t affected them.’ Ian grinned and pocketed his mobile.

‘It hasn’t? That’s wonderful.’ Elsie’s face fell.

‘Are you all right, love?’ Ian took Elsie’s hands in his.

‘We won’t be able to get everyone over there. The snow is too deep to drive in it and we won’t all be able to make the walk. Think of poor Connor on his crutches and the children.’

Ian smiled. ‘That’s already been taken care of. Chris is on his way over with his tractor as we speak to take us and all the food back there now and then when it’s time, he’ll drive back to collect everyone else. Of course, it’ll be a bit of a bumpy ride in the tractor trailer, but it’ll be an experience.’

Elsie chuckled. ‘It will definitely be a Christmas we’ll never forget, that’s for sure. Thank you for organising it all.’



‘MIND THIS ONE, JOE, it’s a heavy one.’ Ian held an orange crate up to Joe who was standing on the back of the tractor trailer, ready to take it from him.

‘Thanks.’ Taking it, Joe placed it down next to the other crates and bags of food they were taking to the sanctuary. ‘Anything else?’

‘Nope, that’s the last of them. Cheers.’ Ian waited for Elsie to lock the bakery door before holding out his hands and helping her into the trailer.

‘Okay, is everyone ready?’ Standing behind the trailer, Chris looked up at Holly, Joe, Elsie, and Ian.

‘We certainly are. Thank you so much for this, Chris.’ Elsie smiled at him.

‘My pleasure.’ Grinning, Chris secured the tailgate. ‘But I will apologise in advance for the bumpy ride.’

‘We’ll be just fine, thanks, Chris.’ Ian grinned as he settled onto the lower bench to the side of the trailer bed.

Holly watched the bay disappear as the tractor chugged slowly out of the bay. She could hear the freshly fallen snow crunching beneath the thick tires, the only sound surrounding them. Taking Joe’s hand, she grinned and leaned in towards him. ‘Does this count as making nee Christmas traditions?’

He squeezed her hand. ‘I think it most definitely does.’

‘Then box of crackers! I forgot to pack them. I’m sure I did.’ Gingerly standing up, Elsie slowly inched across towards the crates.

Holly widened her eyes. The engagement ring! Standing up, she carefully followed Elsie’s lead and began hunting through the crates.

‘Careful, you two, you don’t want to end up overboard. We’ll have a look when we get there. It’s not the end of the world if we don’t have crackers. we have everything else. The most important thing is that we’ll all be together and Harry will be able to propose to Diane.’

‘No, the ring is in the crackers.’

‘In the crackers?’ Ian rubbed his hand over his face.

‘Yes, Harry asked us to put the ring in a cracker so it’s a surprise for Diane when she pulls it.’ Elsie nodded.

‘Ah, I see.’ Ian slid from the bench and joined them as Joe did the same.

‘I’m sure I saw them in one of them.’ Joe carefully picked out tupperware boxes full of the vegetables Elsie and Ian had prepared last night before pulling out a couple of large boxes of red and green crackers. ‘Yep, here we are.’

‘Oh, thank goodness for that. I had visions of begging Chris to turn around.’ Elsie held her hand against her heart and grinned. ‘Thank you, Joe. thanks all of you.’

Chapter Twenty One



Holly looked up and down the long makeshift table and grinned. Everyone who had been at the pub quiz was here, as well as Wendy, Connor and all of the children. Plates were piled high and the tinsel in Pippa's hair kept catching the sunlight streaming in through the cracks in the wooden walls of the large barn. After arriving at the farm, Elsie and Ian had set to work cooking the delicious meal they were now enjoying whilst she, Joe, Chris and Freya had rushed around clearing the barn at the back of the sanctuary and propping large sheets of wood on top of logs. They'd made a good job of it, too.

It was cold, of course it was. But the barn roof was keeping the snow off them and with everyone wearing their coats and the general excitement of having Christmas dinner in a barn, no one seemed to notice the low temperatures.

'This is delicious.' Joe nodded toward his fork, heaped high with stuffing and bread sauce. 'I don't know how they do it, but Elsie and Ian have made the best Christmas dinner I've ever tasted.'

Holly grinned. 'It is good, isn't it?'

Leaning closer, he lowered his voice. 'I'm so glad you didn't send me packing when I first turned up in the bay.'

'Me too.' She looked at him. 'I can't believe how close I was to telling you to go home, though.'

'But you didn't.'

'Nope.' She met his gaze. Whatever the future held for them, she knew they'd get through it together. 'I meant what I said earlier. I do love you.'

'Me too.' Joe kissed her quickly.

‘Nana Elsie, Grampy Ian, can we pull our crackers now? Please?’ Pippa held her cracker above her head and waved it in the air, trying to get Elsie and Ian’s attention.

‘Umm...’ Elsie glanced at Ian before looking down the table, trying to catch Harry’s attention before answering Pippa.

‘Well? Can we? Please?’ Pippa waved the cracker above her head again. ‘I want to wear my party hat.’

‘I think that’s a great idea, Pippa.’ Harry called from the opposite end of the table before picking up the cracker in front of Diane and holding it out to her.

‘I really hope I put the right cracker in the right place.’ Holly leaned across to Joe and whispered. ‘The name cards for the table were left back at the bakery, so I just had to place the crackers down everyone had sat down. I just hope no one swapped places with Diane.’

Joe smiled. ‘I’m sure it’ll be fine. I don’t think they did.’

Grasping her fingers under the table, Holly watched as Diane took one end of the cracker. She looked across at Elsie, who caught her eye and smiled.

As people pulled their crackers, tiny snaps filled the air and party hats and small gifts rained down onto the table. Holly and Joe, Elsie and Ian waited, their crackers in their hands and their attention focused on Diane and Harry.

‘Eek!’ Diane squealed as everyone turned to look at her. ‘Are you being serious? Is this what I think it is?’ She held the engagement ring between her thumb and forefinger as the table silenced and Harry got down onto one knee.

‘Diane...’

‘No way!’ Covering her face, Diane laughed.

Chuckling, Harry reached up and gently pulled her hands from her face before kneeling down again. ‘Diane, I love you more than I thought it was ever possible to love someone, so would you do me the honour of marrying me?’

‘No, I can’t...’ Diane grinned. ‘I can’t believe this. Yes, of course I’ll marry you.’ Standing up, she pulled Harry to his

feet and flung her arms around him. 'I'm going to be your wife!'

A loud applause erupted around the table followed by shouts and screams of 'Congratulations'.

Lauren stood up and ran across to her sister and soon-to-be brother-in-law and pulled them both into a hug. 'Congratulations!'

'Thanks.' Diane grinned. 'I need to go and tell Mum and Dad.'

As Diane and Harry left the barn, the chatter resumed, the excitement in the barn a little higher than it had been earlier.

'What did Diane get in her cracker, Nana Elsie?' Pippa leaned across the table towards Elsie.

'She got a very special ring, Pippa, love. One which means she's going to marry Harry.'

Pippa's mouth fell open as she looked back down the table towards the happy couple. Diane was holding out her hand, showing everyone the ring Harry had chosen for her as they walked past, making their way outside to call her parents. 'Can I be their bridesmaid?'

'You'll have to ask them, Pippa. But not now. They've gone to make a phone call.' Teresa gently pulled Pippa back to her chair.

'Okay Mummy.'

'Phew, am I glad that went okay,' Holly whispered to Joe.

'I had every faith in you.' He smiled back.

'I learnt a new song in school last week.' Pippa shouted above the general chatter. 'For my contest, didn't I, Mummy?'

'Yes, for you concert.' Teresa smiled at her daughter.

'Yes, for my concert.' Pippa nodded in agreement.

'Did you, love? Which song is it?' Elsie lowered the napkin she'd been wiping her eyes with to the table.

'Quiet Night.' Pippa grinned.

‘It’s Silent Night, Pippa, and we knew that one. We sang it in the lantern parade this year and last year too.’ Rueben spoke quietly to his sister.

‘Well, I didn’t remember it, so that’s like learning it again.’ She crossed her and straightened the gold party hat sitting crookedly on her head.

‘Oh yes, you’re right, we did, Rueben.’ Elsie nodded at Rueben before turn gin to Pippa. ‘Shall we sing, Pippa, love? I think a nice little sing-song would be the perfect end to a perfect afternoon with our family and friends.’

‘Yes.’ Pippa nodded enthusiastically, her paper hat falling into her abandoned dessert bowl on the table.

‘Here, have mine.’ Teresa took hers from her head and placed it on Pippa’s, tugging it down gently.

As Pippa began singing and everyone around the table joined in, Holly took Joe’s hand in hers. Her parents had definitely been right. Christmas was about spending time with people you loved and cared for.

Epilogue



Holly took the fresh mug of coffee from Elsie and sat down at the large stainless-steel table. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re very welcome. It’s lovely for you to pop by. I know you must be busy what with your new website and everything.’ Perching on the stool opposite her, Elsie wrapped her hands around her mug.

‘Yes, I am, but I’m never too busy for a coffee and a catch-up.’ Holly smiled. ‘And I know I’ve said it so many times before, but thank you so much for taking me on as a volunteer. This trip has well and truly changed my life.’

‘Aw, now you’re just trying to make me cry.’ Elsie dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. ‘I’m so pleased that you and Joe have decided to stay down here.’

‘Me too.’ Holly grinned as she took a sip of her coffee, the bittersweet taste hitting the back of her throat.

‘And I’m very glad that you both didn’t make the same mistake that me and Ian did.’ She shook her head. ‘Now if I could turn back time and tell Ian how I felt about him years ago...’

‘Well, if it hadn’t been for you and Ian each having words with us, I think we probably would have.’ Holly laughed. It was true. If Elsie hadn’t spoken to her and Ian to Joe and told them of their own experiences and regrets, then they probably would still just be friends.

The kitchen door opened as Wendy, Molly and Diane walked through. Diane had a huge grin spread across her face whilst Molly and Wendy looked decidedly worried.

Elsie raised her eyebrows. ‘What’s going on here, then?’

‘I’ve got some exciting news!’ Diane clapped her hands.

‘Exciting...’ Wendy grimaced, ‘And terrifying.’

‘What? What could be exciting and terrifying all at the same time?’ Elsie lowered her coffee mug.

‘Go on, you tell her.’ Molly nudged Diane and grinned.

‘I’m getting married!’

Elsie chuckled. ‘I know, love.’

‘What she means to say is she’s getting married next month...’ Molly’s voice trailed off.

‘Next month? What?’ Elsie held her hands against her cheeks as she stood up. ‘No wonder these two look absolutely petrified. I’m assuming she’s asked you both to organise it?’ She looked from Molly to Wendy and back again.

‘Yes, she has.’ Wendy grimaced.

Walking across to them, Elsie shook her head and pointed at Diane, a huge smile spreading across her face. ‘Trust you.’

Diane shrugged. ‘Well, neither me nor Harry can see the point in waiting.’

Chuckling, Elsie pulled her in for a hug. ‘It sure is a good job that we love you around here, isn’t it, love?’

Hugging her back, Diane grinned. ‘I like to keep people on their toes.’

‘And don’t we know it.’ Stepping back, Elsie shook her head. ‘Well, if anyone can organise a wedding in a month, it’s these two.’

A knock sounded from the kitchen door, and Elsie frowned. Nobody ever knocked on the door from the bakery to the kitchen. Elsie pulled it open. ‘Hello, can I help you, love?’

‘Hi, this is The Cornish Bay Bakery, isn’t it?’ A woman lowered a heavy purple rucksack to her feet.

‘It sure is. How can I help you?’

‘I’ve come to volunteer.’

‘Oh, you must be Layla!’



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