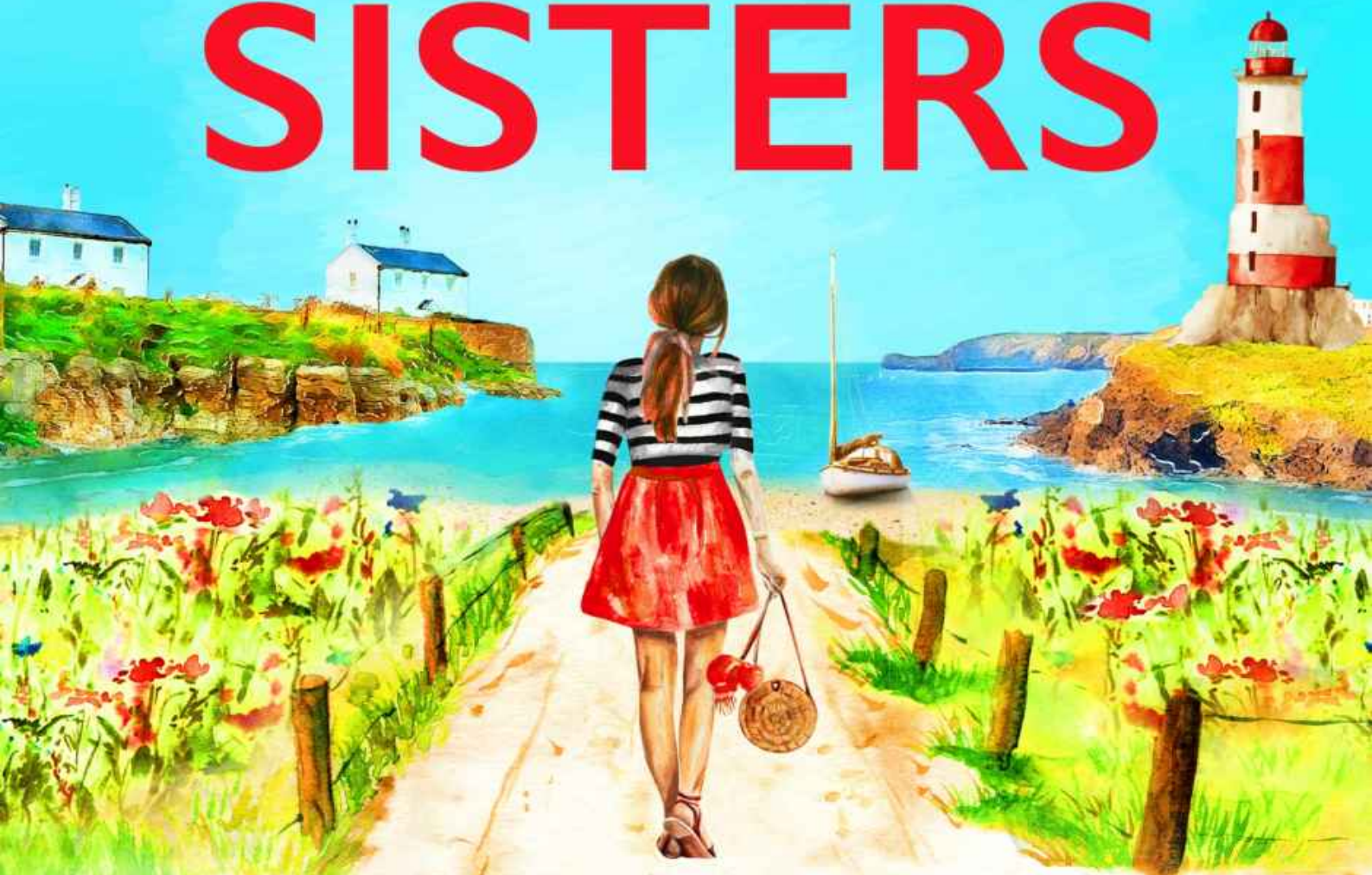


TILLY TENNANT

Second Chances

for the

**LIFEBOAT
SISTERS**



A heart-warming feel-good romance to fall in love with

SECOND CHANCES FOR THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS

A HEART-WARMING FEEL-GOOD ROMANCE
TO FALL IN LOVE WITH

THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS

BOOK 2

TILLY TENNANT

bookouture

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THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS SERIES

The Lifeboat Sisters

Second Chances for the Lifeboat Sisters

A Secret for the Lifeboat Sisters

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My Best Friend's Wedding

The Hotel at Honeymoon Station

The Little Orchard on the Lane

The Time of My Life

The Spring of Second Chances

Once Upon a Winter

Cathy's Christmas Kitchen

Worth Waiting For

The Waffle House on the Pier

The Break Up

The Garden on Sparrow Street

Hattie's Home for Broken Hearts

The Mill on Magnolia Lane

The Christmas Wish

The Summer Getaway

The Summer of Secrets

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Christmas in Paris (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

A Home at Cornflower Cottage (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Cafe at Marigold Marina (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

My Best Friend's Wedding (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Hotel at Honeymoon Station (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Little Orchard on the Lane (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

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Acknowledgements

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To the volunteers of the RNLI. Thank you for all you do.

CHAPTER ONE

There are places in the world that simply demand to be raced through on a bicycle, with the wind tangling your hair and air so sweet and clean your lungs can't get enough.

The tiny Cornish village of Port Promise was like that today. The bay was sheltered by dramatic cliffs, starred with yellow gorse and wild grasses, onto which tiny coloured houses clung. The cobbled streets were worn smooth from years of footfall, and there were more tiny houses, some of dove-grey stone and others rendered blues, greens, creams and pinks. Every road led, eventually, to the sea, with its strip of soft sand and pretty promenade. In the summer the sand was golden and sugary, and the shallows were aquamarine, and anyone could be forgiven for thinking they were in Barbados rather than Britain.

Clara Morrow let her bike freewheel down the hill that led from her mother's cottage, racing towards a sea that was no less beautiful today for being grey and sullen. Her auburn hair streamed behind her and she wore a broad smile. It had been a while since she'd felt this free and content – the previous year had been a tough one. Her beloved father had been lost at sea during a lifeboat rescue, and Clara's family and the other crew members had struggled for a long time to come to terms with that.

Safely tucked into the front basket of her bike were pots of herbs gifted by her mum, Jill. Clara had made a chicken casserole, and, as she often did, she'd made enough so that her mum could have some. It wasn't that her mum needed feeding,

but taking food over gave Clara a stealthy opportunity to check in and make sure she was coping. Jill would say she was fine, but her daughters all preferred to see for themselves.

Clara had been to deliver it that morning, and Jill had taken the herbs from her own garden to give in return, knowing that they'd probably end up in the next casserole Clara brought over. Whenever the bike slowed or the wind dropped, the scents of rosemary and woody thyme filled her head.

She rode past the harbour, where Robin Trelawney's fishing boat was anchored and he was sorting through a catch. He lifted a hand in a melancholy wave as she tore past. Melancholy was Robin's usual mood.

Then Clara's bike took her past the fish shack run by Cormac – Irish by birth and relatively new to the village, but he'd settled in so quickly and was so universally loved it was as if he'd always lived there. He was cleaning the front step and shouted a greeting, his deep voice and rich accent cutting across the dull boom of the waves crashing against the harbour walls.

'All right there, Clara?'

'Hi, Cormac! Keeping busy?'

'Always!' He sent a warm smile her way, and the one she gave in return was fixed to her face long after she left him.

Clara pedalled on, past a tiny row of shops, where her mum's best friend, Marina, was adding to the display outside her hardware store.

'Hey, Marina!' Clara called, slowing her bike.

Marina turned and waved, her long white hair fastened in a low ponytail that was being lifted up by the wind.

'Hello, my darlin'! I see you got the old bike out!'

'Well I've been so lazy recently I thought it was about time I got on it and did some exercise.'

'In that case, enjoy! Watch out the wind don't take you off it, though!'

‘Don’t worry, I will!’

Marina turned back to her display, and Clara rode on.

Ahead stood Betty’s Cafe, now owned and run by Clara’s best friend, the granddaughter of the original Betty. It was still reassuringly old-fashioned, with chintzy curtains in the windows and painted wooden tables dotted around the terrace. Betty had talked of updating it many times, but it would cost money that she didn’t really have, so Clara persuaded her that vintage was in, and the cafe’s retro look a feature rather than a fault.

Clara squeezed the brakes on her bike and hopped off, leaning it against a wall and taking the steps up to the terrace where the cafe sat, overlooking the promenade and beach. It also overlooked the lifeboat station, the place that was unarguably the lifeblood of the village. Port Promise without its lifeboat station was unthinkable – in fact, the village got its name from the very first man to pledge his life to rescuing others from the sea, Clara’s own ancestor, Iziah Morrow. Iziah had made his promise after losing his best friend in a storm as they fished one night, over two hundred years before an official lifeboat service was founded.

This morning, evidence was everywhere of autumn giving way to winter, and Betty had swapped her floral hanging baskets for potted evergreens that ran the length of her terrace walls. They’d been bought from Clara’s mum, who had an allotment as well as her garden and grew to supply garden centres. She mostly dealt in more exotic varieties, but she’d grow anything else she took a fancy to. Clara gave the shrubs an approving once-over. They were glossy leaved and dense and looked great in their simple terracotta pots.

As she went into the cafe, dragging a hand through the tangles in her hair, a gust of wind blew the door shut behind her. Beyond the vast windows, the sea clawed at the sand of the beach in heavy, white-topped waves.

‘Wow – we’ve got some weather!’

‘Hey!’ Betty was wiping down a table but put the cloth down and crossed the floor to give Clara a hug. ‘You look

happy. And rosy!’

Clara laughed. ‘That’s called exercise. I’ve been up to Seaspray Cottage on my old bike.’

‘Exercise...’ Betty pretended to be thoughtful. ‘I seem to recall that was a thing I used to do. So what’s new with you then? You look as if you’re bursting about something.’

‘I am! Remember that amazing wedding band I wanted but they were all booked up? Well they’ve just phoned me to say they’ve had a cancellation and they can fit us in! I was going to try to find someone else today too – talk about luck!’

‘Is that the band you showed me on YouTube? With the saxophones and everything?’

‘Yes!’

‘You’re in for a pretty cool reception then.’

‘I know! Of course, Logan’s parents will hate them, but as far as I can see, that’s all the more reason to book them!’

Betty laughed lightly as she pushed a curl the colour of copper from her face. ‘You do realise you’re going to be related to these people in a few months?’

‘I suppose we have to make sacrifices for love, don’t we?’

‘Speaking of... I have some news of my own. Hang on...’

Betty dug in the pocket of her apron and took out her phone. She unlocked it and showed the screen to Clara.

‘Wow, Hottie McTottie!’

‘I know!’

‘When are you meeting him?’

‘We’ve fixed a date for Saturday. He’s booked dinner and something at the theatre in Truro.’

‘Classy! Let’s hope this one vaguely resembles his profile picture,’ Clara said, taking another look.

‘I hope he resembles it a lot, or I’m going to be very disappointed.’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time someone sent a photo that looked like Brad Pitt and turned up looking like a cesspit.’

Betty laughed again. ‘God, I know! But he sounds nice, and from his bio we seem to have a lot in common, so I’m hopeful.’

Clara looked up. Betty’s indigo eyes were certainly bright with hope, but Clara had her misgivings. Her best friend hadn’t been blessed with luck in the dating game so far and had been single for far too long – at least, in her opinion. She’d had two what she’d call serious boyfriends over the years, but they hadn’t lasted, and Clara had always felt that neither of them had deserved her. Betty was someone with so much love to give that it didn’t seem fair. She wasn’t about to pour cold water on this one, though.

‘Let’s have a look at his bio,’ Clara said.

Betty handed her the phone and she swiped to the page. ‘He’s well travelled, I’ll give him that.’

‘Well that’s one thing we don’t have in common,’ Betty said with a wry smile. ‘But I’ll enjoy hearing about his adventures.’

‘You never know, it could be the start of an adventure of your own.’

Betty took the phone back. ‘I won’t hold my breath. I’ve got this place to run; it’s not so easy to take six months off to go slumming it round Nepal or whatever.’

The door to the cafe opened and a party of ten came in. It looked like they belonged to two different families, but it meant Betty was going to be busy for a while.

Betty always joked that her cafe existed in two different dimensions. There were the holiday months when she barely had time to draw breath and a constant stream of patrons hammered on her door to get in, and then there was the cafe that inhabited the winter months, where there were no holidaymakers and precious little business, where she could dance naked on the tables and there’d be nobody to see it. And as the previous seasonal rush had ended some weeks ago,

along with the last of an Indian summer and the wasps that bothered at pools of spilled cola and ice cream, Betty had to be grateful for any business that came her way.

‘Ah well, the break was nice while it lasted,’ Betty said in a low voice.

‘I should go anyway. I need to tell Logan about this booking, just in case he does something completely out of character and actually takes it upon himself to organise something towards the wedding and finds a band of his own. It’s about as likely as me being the next prime minister, but stranger things have happened, and we don’t want two bookings.’

‘His wouldn’t be half as good as yours anyway,’ Betty said.

‘Oh God, he’d book some up-and-coming indie band nobody had heard of, all earnest and tortured, and he’d think them so cool he wouldn’t care that everyone at the wedding was ready to throw themselves off Promise Rocks after the first song.’

‘Go on!’ Betty grinned. ‘Go and give him the good news then, save yourself and us from a fate worse than an emo wedding band!’

Clara kissed her briefly on the cheek and then left her to the new customers.

As she stepped out into the fierce wind again, her gaze fell on the lifeboat station. It was an unremarkable sight – after all, she’d grown up around it and most of her family had volunteered for the service in some way – but she never could pass it without stopping to take a look. Even more so since losing her dad. It was a moment in a hectic life to stop and think of him, to remember with fondness the days she’d stand in this very spot as a girl and watch him run to a launch, filled with pride and thankfully too young to fully understand the dangers.

Clara turned her bike to the path back up to the gallery and studio where she shared a flat with her fiancé Logan. The

going was a bit tougher than it had been coming down from Seaspray Cottage, where her mum lived on a hill that overlooked the village and the sea beyond, but Clara was enjoying the chance to be out on her bike. It didn't happen very often; she seemed to be far too busy lately for frivolities like bike rides. But as she pushed on the pedals she was filled with anticipation as she recalled the news she needed to tell him. Their wedding was getting closer and things were falling into place. This was especially satisfying as they'd had to put it off when her dad had died, and back then she hadn't felt as if getting married mattered at all. But as time had gone on those feelings had started to lessen, and now she was excited again, full of hope for her future – a future that included becoming Logan's wife.

She'd always thought it a strange thing he'd proposed – doing things by the book wasn't his style at all and he didn't do conventions like marriage – but she was glad he had because it meant he loved her enough to commit. Who would have thought, she mused as she walked the path, when he'd arrived in Port Promise from London on a painting holiday three years before, that she'd be rushing to their home to tell him about a band she'd booked for their wedding. He'd been smitten pretty quickly after they'd spent an idyllic couple of weeks together during a summer that now seemed almost too perfect to be true, and he'd relocated to Port Promise within months to be with her, but she'd still never seen marriage coming – not back then at least. Just went to show how wrong someone could be.

At the gallery, she pushed open the door and smoothed her hair down as she went in.

'Logan?'

There was no reply. That was nothing unusual – when he was working he got so distracted he sometimes went into his own reality. Things like his fiancée shouting at him didn't register at all when he was in 'the zone'.

'Logan...?'

Clara went into his painting studio. He had his back to her, looking at a canvas.

‘Hey! Here you are! I’ve got something to tell you!’

Logan turned to her. ‘Oh... you’re back already?’

‘Yes, I just opened my emails and there was one from last night... that amazing wedding band we wanted—’

‘*You* wanted,’ he said, smiling.

‘But I promise you’ll love them,’ Clara said. ‘Anyway, they had a cancellation so they can do our wedding after all! I’m so pleased – I didn’t know who else we were going to get!’

‘That’s great...’

Logan turned back to the canvas. Clara could tell he was still distracted by thoughts of it.

‘What’s that one?’ Clara asked, going to stand at his side. ‘It’s not like your usual stuff.’

‘What do you think? It’s a bit of a passion project, if I’m honest. Came to me all at once and I had to get it down. Do you like it?’

Clara studied the canvas, cocking her head slightly as if waiting for the painting on the easel to start talking to her. She could feel Logan’s eyes on her, the silence loaded with expectation as he rubbed a cloth over his paint-stained hands. The smell of turpentine and oil paints filled her head, the washed-out winter sun spilling in through the windows of the studio to slant across the floor where she stood. She had to say something soon or he’d be offended. Taking a breath, she opened her mouth to speak but then closed it again, unable to find the words she wanted.

‘You must have some opinion on it,’ he said finally.

‘I do,’ she said helplessly.

She did; she just didn’t know what it was yet. It made her feel something, but it was all muddled up.

Her gaze went back to the easel. It was unlike anything Logan had painted before – at least anything he'd done while they'd been together in Port Promise. It was... *angrier*, she decided after another moment of searching for the emotion. Aggressive... almost frustrated. It was dramatic but felt as if that drama had come from a dark place. Where was that? Was it a comment on where he felt his life was right now?

'You hate it.' He tossed the cloth onto his workbench and began to collect his brushes. 'I knew you would.'

'I don't. I think it's brilliant. It's just... different. But not bad different. It's... striking. Bold.'

'Bold?' Logan chanced a small smile. 'You think it's bold?'

'Yeah.' Clara nodded with new enthusiasm and not a little relief. 'I do.'

'Cool...' Logan's smile widened and brightened.

With his dark waves resting on his shoulder and gentle grey eyes suddenly crinkled in delight, he looked like the cheeky, boyish man with the irreverent humour and streak of rebellion that Clara had fallen for when she'd met him as a visitor to her tiny corner of Cornwall.

'Bold was what I was going for... sort of. I mean, there are only so many seascapes a man can paint before he starts to feel he might slip into a coma.'

'I like it,' Clara said, buoyed by his positive reaction.

Her gaze went back to the canvas again. It glistened in sections where the oil hadn't quite dried, the surface patterned and streaked in an almost musical cacophony of texture and colour.

'What am I supposed to get from it? I mean, apart from liking it and it being bold, what's *your* motivation? What are you trying to say with it?'

Logan gave an ineffectual shrug and suddenly looked troubled again. 'Don't be angry when I tell you.'

Clara shot him a silent question.

‘It’s grief,’ he said. ‘At least it’s meant to represent grief.’

‘Whose? You haven’t—’

‘Yours. When your dad died, that’s how I felt your soul would have looked if I could have seen it.’

Clara frowned as she turned her attention back to the painting. The shapes were dark and angular and a little bit confusing, spilling into one another in messy clashes where nothing was distinct. Now she understood why it felt angry. She’d felt angry at first. It was almost a year now since her dad had been lost at sea and that anger was less, but even now, sometimes it still crept up on her. But now she also got the other emotions: the despair, the loss and emptiness, the hopelessness that had engulfed her in the beginning.

‘If my soul looked like that, it’s probably a good thing nobody could see it.’

‘But we could,’ Logan said, looking vaguely confused. ‘Everyone could see it – at least they could see like...’ He frowned. ‘They couldn’t see *it*. But, you know, it was like standing in the sun with a huge monster behind you. You can’t see the monster because it’s behind you, but you can see the shadow and you know it’s there all the same.’

‘Oh...’

‘Now you hate it; now that I’ve told you what it is.’

‘Of course I don’t; I just don’t know what to say.’ She gave an encouraging smile. ‘I’m touched you gave my soul this much thought.’

‘Now you’re taking the piss.’

‘I promise I’m not. I really like it. So what are you going to do with it? Are you going to sell it?’

‘Not in the gallery here – it’s not exactly tourist fodder, is it?’ He rubbed at his neck. ‘I thought maybe I’d make a few calls to some places I know in London to see if there’s anyone who might be interested. Unless...’

‘Unless?’

‘You might want to keep it?’

‘Put it up in the flat?’

‘I suppose so.’

Clara shook her head slowly. ‘Now that I know what it is... I mean, I’m touched by the gesture and the thought that’s gone into it, but do I really want to be reminded of those months after Dad... Well, do I really want to think of that every time I look at your painting? Please don’t be offended, but we’re only now getting back to normal – at least as normal as things will ever be again. I’m not sure a daily reminder will help with that.’

‘Doesn’t living here remind you every day?’ Logan turned his back to dump his brushes into a bucket of cleaner, and from that small action Clara could tell he was offended.

‘Shit, Logan... you know what I mean.’

‘I don’t see how it’s any different,’ he said, his back still to her.

‘There are a lot of other things I associate with Port Promise too – not just Dad. Good things. My whole life has been here, and up until last year it was pretty bloody idyllic.’

‘Surely you’d associate the painting with other things too. Me, for instance. I painted it for you, after all.’

Clara held in a sigh as she turned back to the canvas. It was good and she wouldn’t have minded having it hang in the flat if she hadn’t known it had come from such a dark and traumatic place. But Logan had a point – he had created it for her and his intentions had been pure, even if she wasn’t quite so enthusiastic about exploring her pain as he seemed to think she might be.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘We should put it up. I’m sure it will be... I don’t know, cathartic or something... Is that the right word? But, you know, I’m sure there’s something good to take from it. And I do love that you painted it for me. I don’t imagine there are many women who get such personal gifts from their boyfriends – right?’

‘You don’t really want it up – you’re only saying it now because you think I’m upset.’

‘You are upset.’

‘I’m not.’

‘If you weren’t then you wouldn’t have settled on that as a reason to change my mind. I was taken aback at first, that’s all. But now I think about it, I do want it up in the flat, very much. It might remind me of that dreadful time, but it also reminds me that you were there, holding my hand, seeing my soul like nobody else did, and that you love me. So that’s good, right?’

He turned to face her, and his boyish smile had reappeared. ‘You’re sure you’re not just saying that? So I won’t be upset.’

Clara raised her eyebrows. ‘I thought you said you’re not upset.’

‘Only a little. I mean, I’d spent so long on it and then you didn’t like—’

‘Ah!’ Clara wagged a finger at him. ‘No, I never said I didn’t like it, so don’t even—’

‘You know what I mean. How would you feel if you’d spent hours making a perfect cake and then you gave it to me and I smashed a fist into it?’

‘My reaction wasn’t that bad!’ Clara’s small laugh was uncertain. ‘But I suppose I get your point. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you feel like that.’

‘I know, but it did.’

Clara stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. ‘I’m sorry. Can you forgive me?’

‘I guess... as it’s you, I could manage it just this once.’

‘Thank you.’ She reached to kiss him.

‘Does this mean we get to have make-up sex?’

Clara’s laugh was more genuine this time. ‘We haven’t had an argument.’

‘Felt like enough of one to me.’

‘Hmm. You would say that. Anything to get your way. Well...’ She pulled herself from his arms and smoothed a hand down her blouse. ‘You’re going to have to hold that thought because I have to go into work.’

‘Really? But there’s nothing going on there.’

‘I know but there are some bookings for next year to organise. Sorry.’

‘Story of my life...’ Logan grinned as he turned his attention back to clearing up his tools.

‘If you think about it that way, I’m doing you a favour,’ Clara said as she made her way to the studio doorway. ‘It would have been fun in the heat of the moment, but your crusty paintbrushes wouldn’t have been quite so much fun afterwards if you’d let them dry out.’

‘Oh, right... that’s it then, is it?’

Clara could hear Logan chuckling as she closed the studio behind her and went upstairs to the flat they shared above. It had been a close call, but she was glad she’d left him in a good mood. She couldn’t put her finger on what it was, but something had been off for the past few months. She couldn’t say when things began to change either; all she could say was that up until her father’s death a year before, things had seemed fine, and then after that, they weren’t. But Logan had been brilliant during the first few weeks, supporting her through the funeral and all the nights she’d cried herself to sleep. She’d been so lucky to have him then – something Ava, her then single sister, had mentioned more than once. And so she had to conclude that maybe she was the problem. Perhaps losing her dad had changed her, her grief making her more difficult to live with. It would explain the painting, she supposed. But knowing now how Logan saw that made her sad. Had her moods really been so dark? Maybe the painting was more than a gift, more than a study of her soul. Maybe it was also a wake-up call.

CHAPTER TWO

For a good chunk of the winter, the caravan park where Clara worked on reception was closed to all but a few residents with special permission to live there all year round. One of these was her free-spirited younger sister Ava, newest recruit to the Port Promise lifeboat crew and local swim instructor, amongst many other things, who owned about the coolest caravan Clara had ever seen. She'd spent months gutting it, so that what had been a dated beige nightmare was now cute and colourful, with new pastel upholstery and curtains, painted walls and bright kitchen units. Everyone else had to sit out the colder months somewhere other than the park, and so during these months it was deathly quiet.

Clara liked her job well enough during the summer when she was in charge of bookings, checking in and out, and general resident enquiries – it kept her busy enough that she didn't have time to dwell on the fact that it wasn't what she'd trained to do and not really what she wanted to do either. It paid the bills and allowed her to stay in Port Promise, and that was good enough. But in the winter, when the days were long and dull, the park in hibernation, and her work consisted of simply keeping things ticking over, it was a different story.

This was Clara's third winter at the park. All the seasonal workers had gone back to towns and cities that Clara had never been to. The only people left to hold the fort were a couple of groundskeepers and maintenance men, the boss, Mr Tatton, and Clara's reception colleague, Tanika.

This morning, Clara and Tanika were on shift together. Clara liked Tanika, but as was often the case with colleagues, had they not been thrown together by accident of their employment, they would probably have never been friends. Today, Tanika was taking every ounce of patience Clara had. As usual, she couldn't sit still. Clara was used to this, but today she'd taken her fidgeting to a whole new level.

Clara leaned on the old wooden counter of the reception, poring over bookings for the reopening of the park in the spring while Tanika cleaned down the walls with a bucket of pungent hot water and disinfectant. Nobody had asked her to clean the walls, but on a strange whim, Tanika had decided it had to be done.

'So I said...' she panted as she scrubbed. 'I said, if Tatton wants me to do extra hours he's going to have to pay me time and a half...'

Clara made a noise into the pause to indicate she was listening.

'I mean' – Tanika dumped her cloth into the bucket, sending hot water splashing over the side – 'I'm right, aren't I? He must take us for mugs! We don't all want to live here; some of us have actual homes to go to. And if he wants all this stuff doing, he ought to keep more of us on during the winter. Cheapskate. I'm right, aren't I?'

Clara looked up from the computer. 'Yes... of course you are.'

'I mean' – Tanika retrieved the cloth from the bucket and wrung it with a savage twist – 'giving us a list like that and knowing we'll have to work over to get it all done. It's a bloody liberty. I'm right, aren't I, Clara?'

'Hmm.' Clara went back to the spreadsheet in front of her. Then she frowned. 'I thought thirty-five was going to be out of commission after this year?'

'I don't know.' Tanika looked into her bucket with a grimace. 'This is filthy. Just goes to show how dirty... going to get some clean water... Bloody grotty place...'

She was still muttering as she went through a door at the back of the reception.

Clara held in a sigh. As Tanika had pointed out, they had a list of things to do, but it wasn't all that bad. The trouble with Tanika was that although she worked hard – harder perhaps than anyone else employed at the park – it was often by doing things that nobody had asked her to do, and at the expense of the tasks she'd been given. Logan had often said it was an authority thing, her way of quietly rebelling. She didn't like being told what to do but was too afraid to refuse outright, so she put in the work, but only on things she wanted to do. Clara was inclined to agree.

Once you knew Tanika and her upbringing it made a lot of sense. She was almost sixty and though born in England had grown up running wild and barefoot on a commune in rural France. Though she'd been in Port Promise for almost twenty years now, civilisation had never sat well with her. She'd had a daughter, Zinnia, with a man she'd grown up alongside during her years at the commune, but once she was old enough, Zinnia had rejected the hippy lifestyle her mum had loved and had moved back to England to marry and have a family of her own.

It was after the birth of the first of Tanika's grandchildren that she was forced to decide how much involvement she wanted in their life, and she'd eventually come back to England to knuckle down and play at granny. And though Tanika would never say so, Clara had the impression she hated living a normal life with a job and a mortgage and council tax and gas bills like everyone else did, but she also thought there were far less forgiving places to do that than Port Promise. People didn't live together here like in a commune, but there was a sense of community so strong that it was almost the same, and it was far stronger than one would find in most other towns and cities.

Clara was distracted from her musings by a notification on her phone. She scooped it from the drawer under the counter and unlocked it to check. It was a message from a commercial property site she'd subscribed to.

We have new properties for you!

Clara opened the link pasted into the email.

St Ives. Sea views. Food or retail premises in need of some modernisation. A fantastic opportunity...

Blah, blah... The advert contained all the usual hyperbole about how this was not to be missed, would be snapped up, etc.

She scrolled through the photos. They weren't kidding when they'd said it needed modernising. There were fryers and a fairly serviceable kitchen, but the stuff in Salty's Chips was probably newer, and Nigel, the owner, hadn't replaced his equipment since the sixties. The walls were grease spattered and the ceiling tiles looked like they might be asbestos, while the horrific orange wall tiles were mapped out in cracks. The actual seating area where customers would eat wasn't much better.

Despite her initial doubts, Clara read the details, sucking in a sharp breath as she noticed the figures.

Like all the others, it was too much money. If she couldn't afford a tip like this, what was she going to be able to afford? Her dream to run her own restaurant seemed as far away as ever.

She was beginning to think that, perhaps, constantly looking at every listing that came through was only piling more misery and frustration on her, because she couldn't honestly see when her financial situation might change.

Who was she kidding? She was never going to have her own restaurant, and maybe she was stupid for even considering the idea. But more and more these days, especially since the death of her dad, and especially now that her sisters, Ava and Gaby, were making their mark – Ava in the lifeboat service and Gaby as chief fundraiser for them – Clara felt she was the only Morrow girl who seemed to be running on the spot. She hadn't really achieved anything up until now – she

hadn't even made use of the qualifications she'd gained training as a chef. Something had to change.

'Out of sodding disinfectant now!' Tanika huffed as she came back in, making Clara jump. 'Had to improvise with some Vim!'

'Some what?'

'Exactly! I found it at the back of the cupboard but it looks ancient. God knows how long it's been there, but I'm sure they stopped making it in about 1980! It was a bit caked up, but I managed to get some out of the tube.'

'Right...'

Clara slipped her phone back into the drawer. She'd take another look at the email later, to see if there was anything else worthwhile newly listed.

'What time are you going to have your lunch?' Tanika asked as she hauled the fresh bucket of water across the room and started to wipe around the window frames. 'I'm so hungry I could eat mine right now and then do it all again at lunchtime.'

'I'm not fussed,' Clara said. 'You go ahead and eat whenever suits and I'll fit in around you.'

'OK, my love...'

Tanika paused, looking out of the window. 'Here's your sister.'

A moment later, a tap on the door was followed by Ava pushing it open and peering round it. 'Am I allowed in?' she asked with a grin.

'No, get lost before I let the hounds loose,' Clara said.

'I'll take that as a yes then.'

Ava stepped inside and let the door close behind her. 'Hey, Tanika. How's it going?'

'Not too bad,' Tanika replied briskly, rubbing at the window frames again. 'Don't mind me, just doing some spring cleaning. I'm amazed we haven't all caught legionnaires' disease or something sitting in this cesspit of an office.'

'It doesn't look that bad to me.'

‘Only because Tanika has been cleaning like someone possessed since nine,’ Clara said.

‘Well,’ Tanika cut in, ‘there’s nothing else to do, is there?’

Ava and Clara exchanged a look that said it all.

‘So’ – Clara got up and kissed her sister – ‘what brings you down here?’

Ava laughed. ‘I’ve hardly journeyed far and wide. I thought I’d see if you wanted to have your lunch break with me.’

‘Sounds nice. I might be an hour or so yet though.’

‘That’s fine, I can wait. By the way, did I tell you Cormac’s parents were coming over from Ireland to visit?’

‘Really?’

‘He’d like us all to meet them.’

‘That sounds nice.’

As everyone in Port Promise did, Clara liked Cormac. He’d arrived shortly after her dad had died to take over the fish shack on the seafront from an uncle who was retiring, and he’d been like a breath of fresh air in a village that was still mourning the loss of one of their own. Always cheerful, always ready to help anyone who needed it – not to mention handsome too, with an accent that Marina said could remove knickers at twenty paces. Once he’d discovered Clara was an enthusiastic cook they’d swapped the odd recipe, and he’d often seek out her opinion on an ingredient for something he was creating or her assistance in a taste test.

‘Do you know the date they’ll be here?’ Clara asked.

Ava shook her head. ‘The next few weeks, but I’m not sure exactly when yet. I think he wants to show them around a bit as well.’

‘Shouldn’t take long – Port Promise has, like, one street.’

Ava laughed again. ‘No, I think they’re going further than Port Promise! So I’ll see you at mine in an hour?’

‘Should I bring anything?’

‘Your culinary skills. Why else do you think I’m inviting you? Didn’t think I was going to cook it, did you?’

Clara smiled. ‘OK, I’ll see you shortly.’

As Ava only had a few measly slices of bread and cheese, they ended up with sandwiches. But it wasn’t so bad, sitting on the porch of Ava’s caravan looking out at the hills beyond as the wind whipped stripes of flattened grass up and down them.

‘Do you think Mum will be all right?’ Ava asked.

‘Why? What’s happening?’

‘Dad’s anniversary memorial. It’s coming up to a year since he died, isn’t it? You hadn’t forgotten, had you?’

‘Oh, I see. I hadn’t forgotten that, just wasn’t sure what you meant. I don’t know. It’s only been a year, but Mum’s stronger than you think. And there’ll be loads of support, won’t there? All the lifeboat guys will be there, so...’ Clara bit into her sandwich and chewed silently, her gaze on the hills. A bird soared above them, something with a wide wingspan. Too dark and too big to be a gull – a bird of prey maybe?

‘Logan will come, won’t he?’ Ava asked.

Clara glanced at her. ‘God, yes, of course.’

‘Because she wouldn’t say so, but I think Mum would be hurt if he didn’t and he sometimes...’ Ava shrugged. ‘Well, sometimes he’s not all that into the stuff that happens here.’

‘But this is different. He’ll come to this – he knows it’s important.’

‘Good. Any news on his grandma, by the way?’

‘No, she’s still about the same. I don’t suppose dementia goes backwards, though, does it? So it’s only a matter of time. How’s Sandy these days? Looking after his ticker?’

‘Harry watches him like a hawk; he wouldn’t dare do anything but look after it. I think it scared him to death,

though, the thought of losing his dad.'

Clara nodded slowly as she took another bite of her sandwich. It had been one oyster festival nobody would forget in a hurry. Harry's dad, Sandy had been rushed off in an ambulance after a heart attack; Ava and her mum had ended up running their cider stall while Harry went to the hospital with his dad. Ava would say it hadn't been a big deal, that it was what the community of Port Promise did, but still, considering Ava and Harry hadn't been a couple back then, she'd still given up her day to save their takings. But then, that was Ava all over – selfless and willing to help anyone, just as their dad had been. It was why she'd joined the lifeboat service in his honour after his death, and why she'd almost lost her own life the previous summer trying to rescue a young boy and his dad from Promise Rocks.

'In a weird way,' Ava continued, 'I quite enjoyed running Sandy's cider stall. Well, I'm not sure running was the right way to put it...'

'But you kept it going and you saved the day's takings.'

'Yeah.' Ava smiled. 'I suppose we did. Working for yourself is scary like that, I suppose – one day of lost takings and you're screwed. Are you still thinking about opening a restaurant?'

'I don't think I'll ever get the money.'

'Why not? I mean, I know it's early days and it's probably not very appropriate to think it, but Logan's grandma is worth a bit, right? And he's said before he thinks she'll leave him something when she dies. So would you be able to get your restaurant if he did?'

'I couldn't ask him for that sort of money even if he did inherit it. His family is wealthy, but that's not why I'm marrying him.'

'Nobody said that. But when you're married it wouldn't be his money; it would be both of your money. That's how it works, right?'

Clara stuffed the last corner of sandwich into her mouth and stood up. ‘I’d never ask him. If he offered, then of course that would be amazing, but I’d feel as if I was using him if I asked him for it. He’d find it hard to say no when he wanted to...’

She wiped crumbs from her hands. ‘No – I don’t think that’s the answer. Anyway, I’d better get back to work. Thanks for the sandwich. It was very... *rustic*.’

‘Sarcastic cow!’ Ava said with a grin.

Clara gave an airy wave as she left her, wearing a grin of her own.

CHAPTER THREE

When Clara went into Betty's Cafe the following morning, Betty herself was at the counter, leaning over an open book. It was quiet, save for a couple having coffee and cake at a table by the windows. She must have been engrossed, because the sound of the door opening hadn't disturbed her. Clara crept over until she was close enough to touch.

'What are you doing?'

Betty's head snapped up, a hand flying to her chest. 'God, Clara, don't do that!'

Clara giggled as she shrugged off her duffel coat. 'Sorry, couldn't resist! It's boiling in here!'

'Yes, it's a shame I have to keep the heating on for me and two customers, but what can I do?'

'Make 'em freeze.'

Betty smiled. 'If only. So is this a social call or did you want to order something?'

'I did tell you I'd pop in today.'

'Did you?' Betty frowned as she straightened.

'Yes. And you can't even blame being busy for forgetting today,' Clara said with a laugh. 'But seeing as you're asking, I'll have a pumpkin spiced latte while I'm here.'

'I'm sure I can manage that for my oldest friend,' Betty said warmly.

‘Best, not oldest. Makes us sound like we’re ancient otherwise.’

‘Some days I feel ancient,’ Betty said.

‘You’re not even thirty yet!’

‘I know. I think it’s the lack of any romance action. I can feel myself turning into one of those old tweed-wearing spinsters you see on comedy films. I wonder when the transformation actually completes? Maybe it’s already too late to stop it even if I do get a man.’

‘Oh...’ Clara grimaced. ‘So the online guy didn’t work out? And he looked so promising!’

‘Nope. Same as always – seemed nice online but turned out to be a total dick in real life.’

‘That’s rough...’ Clara leaned over the counter and turned the book to look at the front cover as Betty prepped the milk frother for her latte. ‘So what’s this about? *How to Have Your Cake and Eat It Whole...* since when did you start reading self-help books? Next you’ll be telling me about inspiring TED talks you’ve seen.’

Betty turned with a rueful smile that, for a moment, threw Clara. ‘Ever have one of those moments where you suddenly realise you’re going absolutely nowhere?’

‘All the time, but you don’t... do you? At least you’ve never said before. This isn’t because that date didn’t work out?’

‘No, I’m used to that by now. This is different. I never felt it so much as I do since my last birthday. I think it’s staring thirty in the face that was the epiphany. Here I am, running a business in the arse end of nowhere that was handed down by my gran to my mum and then to me, hardly been out of Port Promise, never seen anything of worth, never done anything of note, haven’t travelled, haven’t studied, haven’t built a career... haven’t even got a nice bloke.’ She sighed as she turned back to Clara’s latte. ‘I’m starting to think it’s high time I got a grip and made some changes.’

‘I get all that but it’s not like you haven’t got time on your side. You’re not that old.’

‘You know what really did it for me?’ Betty swirled some cream onto the top of Clara’s drink and pushed it across the counter to her.

‘What?’

‘Your little sister.’

Clara sipped at her drink, thick sweet cream clinging to her top lip. ‘Ava? What did she do?’

‘I watched her going for her dream of serving on the lifeboats and it got me thinking about whether I’d be able to do something like that, something that really mattered. And if I had to fight for it like she did, would I have that fight in me? I’m not sure I would, and I certainly don’t do anything that matters to anyone.’

‘Of course you do!’

‘No, but seriously, if Ava... well, if she left Port Promise for whatever reason it would be a big deal, but I doubt anyone would miss me. I say that not because I think nobody likes me, but because anyone could do what I do here, and nothing would change just because it was someone else and not me serving the teas. You see what I mean?’

‘Perhaps, but I still say others don’t see it that way. You *are* this place!’

‘No, this place is me. It’s all I am. But anyone could do it – if I left you could easily take over in the morning and have everything sussed by the afternoon and it would be no different to anyone who came in here.’

Clara wrapped her hands around her mug. ‘Well, I hadn’t expected this when I decided to pop in. I can’t lie, I feel a bit underprepared for an existential crisis.’

Betty smiled as she wiped a milk spill from the counter. ‘I know, but you did ask about the book.’

‘And has the book helped?’

‘I’m not sure yet; I’ve barely started it. I’ll let you know when I’ve done.’

‘If it’s good, then I might borrow it.’

‘You’ve already got everything figured out.’ Betty put a takeout menu in the book to mark her page and then closed it. ‘Lovely guy, nice flat above the studio, good job, most-loved family in the village...’

‘Let me tell you, feeling like the odd duck in the most-loved family in the village comes with its own challenges. Imagine for a minute having daredevil Ava and perfect Gaby as your sisters and then tell me whether you think I’ve really got it all. Don’t get me wrong, I love them dearly, but it’s hard, feeling like the boring one.’

‘OK, I see what you mean. Maybe I’m lucky to be an only child then. But still, you’re happy now, aren’t you? I mean, I know you haven’t had the easiest of years with losing your dad, but you’re doing OK now? At least you look as if you’re doing OK to me.’

‘I suppose I am,’ Clara said. ‘I suppose it all depends on how you measure OK.’

‘By my measurements you’re doing OK – better than me at any rate,’ Betty said.

Clara was thoughtful as she sipped at her drink. It was true she had all the things Betty had said she wanted and didn’t have, all the things that Betty had said would make her happy. She was doing better than some and no worse than most, she supposed.

Her musings were interrupted by an excited gasp from across the cafe. The couple with the hot chocolates were now on their feet at the window watching with some anticipation.

‘It’s going out!’ the man said. ‘Look!’

Betty and Clara exchanged knowing smiles. The lifeboat was heading out, it seemed.

‘There’s no drill scheduled for today as far as I know...’ Clara said. She wandered to the window herself for a better

view. ‘Must be a proper launch. Weather doesn’t look too bad at least. Hopefully it’ll be straightforward.’

Betty came from behind the counter to join her.

From their vantage point on a raised section of the promenade that overlooked the beach, they could see Clara’s younger sister, Ava, outside the lifeboat station in her uniform watching as the orange inshore lifeboat sped out to sea. Next to her stood a dark-haired man. They seemed relaxed, him throwing his head back in laughter as she said something, so perhaps Clara’s guess that it was a fairly routine launch wasn’t too far from the truth.

Betty aired the same view. ‘Can’t be too serious judging by the way Cormac and Ava are messing around.’

‘No,’ Clara agreed. ‘Ava gets jittery as hell since she started seeing Harry if he has to go out on a risky shout, but she doesn’t seem too stressed right now.’

Betty let out a theatrical sigh. ‘Must be nice to be so deliriously in love.’

‘I’m only surprised it took them so long to realise they were made for each other. It was like they were being deliberately stupid about it. Although, for a while, I actually wondered whether she might end up with Cormac.’

Betty turned to Clara and raised her eyebrows. ‘Really?’

‘I know. Now that I think back, it was obvious she just got on with him as a mate. I suppose we all wanted to see her with someone nice – she deserves to be happy after the year she’s had.’

‘You all deserve to be happy,’ Betty said.

‘But Gaby and I both had someone to lean on, whereas Ava... well, she had Mum, I suppose, but it’s not the same, is it?’

‘I wouldn’t have blamed her if she had wanted more with Cormac. He’s lovely... pretty much perfect, in fact.’

‘You should ask him out.’

Betty waved a dismissive hand. ‘Oh, he wouldn’t be interested in me.’

‘Why not?’

‘He’s way out of my league!’

‘Betty Bell – don’t you dare trot that one out! You’re gorgeous and kind and fun and he’d be lucky to have you. With that attitude you’ll never meet Mr Right.’

‘Well, I’m going to disagree with you on some of that, but thank you.’

‘Seriously, if you’re interested, tell him so. He can say no, but I bet he’d say yes.’

‘It’s the no I don’t fancy dealing with. Imagine having to talk to him every day after that.’

‘It wouldn’t be as bad as you think. Awkward for a week, maybe, then after that everyone would move on. I say you should go for it. Like you said, Ava saw what she wanted and went for it – and look at her now. There’s a lesson for us all to learn right there.’

‘You could be right about that.’ Betty was thoughtful now, her gaze on the sea again.

The lifeboat was a dot on the waves, making for a distant headland. Ava and Cormac were still chatting, though they both seemed to be watching the boat as they did.

‘She does seem happier than I’ve ever seen her these days.’

Clara nodded. ‘It’s like she’s finally the person she was always meant to be.’

‘That does sound nice.’

‘It does,’ Clara agreed.

‘I’m probably the person I was born to be,’ Betty continued. ‘Trouble is, I’m not sure that’s the person I think I ought to be. I suppose I’m better off than many. Sometimes I think I ought to shut up and get on with things and be thankful for what I’ve got, but then...’

‘We could all say that,’ Clara replied. ‘But there’s nothing to feel guilty for if you want something different.’

Betty turned and smiled at her. ‘Get us. Anyone would think we were both having a mid-life crisis or something.’

‘No, I’m definitely saving mine for a few years,’ Clara said. ‘Anyway, enough of that; I came to ask you what you had planned for later.’

‘Nothing much, why?’

‘I thought we might get a couple in the Spratt. Logan’s got stuff to finish so I’ll be kicking around on my own at home. Not that you’re second choice to him, of course...’

‘Don’t worry, I didn’t think that. A couple in the Spratt sounds nice. What time’s good for you?’

‘I don’t know... seven? Maybe seven thirty? I know you have an early start tomorrow and I do too so it wouldn’t have to be a late one.’

‘Sounds perfect. I’ll meet you up there, shall I? As long as Jared Baxter isn’t skulking around the bar, in which case we might have to do an emergency exit.’

Clara laughed lightly. ‘Poor Jared. It’s not his fault he’s not quite Cormac, but you’ve got to give the guy ten out of ten for tenacity. He doesn’t give up – must have been to the Ava Morrow school of getting what you want.’

‘Well, he’s failing that class if he did. I wish he’d stop – it’s just sad now and it makes me feel terrible saying no every time he asks. I mean, I’m a bit desperate I know, but not that desperate. Not yet, anyway. Maybe if he comes to me in another ten years and I’m still on my own I might feel differently.’

‘He’s a nice guy – there’s got to be someone out there for him.’

‘He is nice, but a bit misguided. I wish he’d find that someone and then he’d leave me alone. If he’s in the pub tonight I’m expecting you to be my first line of defence.’

‘First and last – you can count on me.’

‘So I’ll see you later... Unless you want to hang around for a bit longer? I’m not exactly rushed off my feet here.’

‘I’ve got a few things to do this afternoon, so if you don’t mind, I’ll head off.’

‘No worries.’

Clara kissed her briefly on the cheek, finished her latte and then placed the mug on the counter before heading out. She hesitated on the terrace, looking down at the beach. Perhaps she ought to go and say hello to her sister. Ava was still talking to Cormac, and as they didn’t seem too stressed by whatever the boat crew was doing, maybe it wouldn’t be too much of a distraction.

She changed course to make her way down to the beach.

There was a brisk wind and the hem of Clara’s coat flapped behind her as she strode across the sand. The sea was battleship grey, restless and moody, the kind of conditions that wouldn’t look too dangerous but could catch a sailor unawares if they didn’t have their wits about them. Clara had seen many different seas during her life in Port Promise. She’d probably seen it at least once a day for every day of her twenty-seven years, and yet she was often still surprised at how many different ways it could look.

Halfway across the beach she decided to stop and take off her boots and socks. As much as Ava was like their dad – an adventurer, bold and free-spirited – Clara was like their mum – a nurturer, attuned to nature and her surroundings. Where there was grass or sand she wanted to feel it beneath bare feet, and where there was a mountain stream or a gentle waterfall she’d have to bend down to let the cool water trickle through her fingers. It didn’t matter a bit that today’s weather was already making her toes tingle with numbness – the urge to have the damp sand between them was too strong to resist.

‘Hello, you two!’

Ava and Cormac both turned as she hailed them, socks tucked inside boots that swung from one hand.

Ava glanced at Clara's feet and gave a smile. 'Hello, yourself!'

'Clara...' Cormac nodded amiably, his blue eyes bright with the humour he seemed to take everywhere he went, the spray from the sea curling the ends of his dark hair. 'How are you doing?'

'Not too bad actually.' Clara nodded at the sea. 'Saw the boat go out. On a shout?'

'Pleasure cruiser...' Cormac stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Engine failed. Nothing to worry about.'

'Right...' Clara looked at Ava. 'Thought you seemed chilled.'

'I'm always chilled.'

'Yeah, right.'

Ava grinned as Clara continued. 'Harry out there?'

'Yes.'

'I tell you what, I wish it was me,' Cormac said. 'I can't wait to be ready. Feels like this training is taking forever and I just want to crack on and do some good.'

'You *are* doing good,' Ava said.

'You're both doing good,' Clara added. 'I'm sure you'll be there before you know it.'

She gave Ava a sideways look. 'I'm surprised you're being so patient. If anyone was going to be chomping at the bit, it would usually be you.'

'Oh, I am,' Ava said, laughing as she pulled her auburn hair free from its ponytail and shook it out. It was naturally darker, with more brown in it than Clara's own, though in the summer it would be bleached by the sheer amount of time Ava spent outdoors. 'But I'm better at hiding it than Cormac is.'

'That's not saying a lot,' Clara replied with a smile. 'If you don't mind me saying, Cormac.'

He shrugged. 'Only what I'm saying myself, right?'

Ava's gaze went to sea again. 'They're turning around by the looks of things.'

Clara looked to see that the boat was on its way back, towing another, far bigger, vessel, though it seemed to be coping very well with the extra load. 'The conquering heroes, eh?'

'Still gives me a thrill, every time I see it,' Ava said. 'I don't think it will ever get old and I can't quite believe I'm finally a proper part of it.'

'But then you always did get more excited than the rest of us whenever Dad was on a rescue,' Clara replied.

Ava turned to her. 'You got excited, didn't you?'

'I was proud, but you were like a kid at Christmas. Looking back, it's hard to believe that none of us realised you'd end up joining one day – it was obvious really. Anyway...' She kissed Ava lightly on the cheek. 'I should let you get on.'

'What's the rush? You want to say hello to Harry when he gets in, don't you?'

'Ah... You see, I would, but with Harry comes Killian.'

Ava and Cormac both grinned.

'Sunday lunch is enough Killian for one week, eh?' Ava said wryly.

'Exactly. Killian is fine in small doses.'

Cormac laughed. 'Aww, he's grand.'

'That's because you're not related to him,' Clara replied. 'The thing you clearly haven't yet learned about my brother-in-law is that he has an opinion on everything and is far too willing to share it.'

Cormac folded his broad arms across his chest and let out a chuckle. 'Fair enough. Family's always different. Speaking of...'

He paused, suddenly seeming a little more animated. In fact, had Clara not known better, she'd have said he seemed

anxious. 'Did I tell you that my ma and da are coming to visit?'

'Remind me again when they're due,' Ava said.

'Couple of weeks' time. I'll be putting on a bit of food and I'd love you all to come and meet them. They've heard so much about everyone here so it would be good for them to put faces to names... just so they know all my new friends aren't imaginary.'

'My God, try and stop me from coming!' Ava said.

Clara nodded. 'Me too.'

'And your Logan, of course,' Cormac added.

'I'll tell him,' she said. 'Let me know when it's going to be and I'm sure he'll do his best to be there.'

Clara's hair was whipped into her face by a gust of wind, and she pulled it back behind an ear. By now, despite loving her bare feet on the beach, the chill of the damp sand was beginning to spread through the rest of her body. She was fairly certain Logan wouldn't want to go but didn't know how she was going to explain that to Cormac. Some excuse would come to her, she supposed, some little white lie.

Since Logan had settled with her in Port Promise almost three years before, she'd got quite good at making up excuses to get him out of events he didn't want to attend. He'd go if he absolutely had to, of course, but sometimes he made such a fuss that when it was something less important it seemed easier to come up with some pretext to explain his absence than to persuade him to go. Cormac's get-together was probably going to be one of those occasions.

For some reason, Logan had a problem with Cormac that had started pretty much the day the Irishman had arrived in Port Promise. It wasn't exactly dislike, more an unexplained wariness. It was strange, because most people got on with Cormac, but, Clara supposed, everyone couldn't be friends with everyone. And while Logan was a thinker and a creator, Cormac was more of a doer. Maybe they simply didn't have that much in common.

‘How long are your parents staying?’ Ava asked Cormac.

‘A week here and then moving on.’ He looked at Clara. ‘So if you don’t make it to the get-together I’m sure there’ll be another day before they leave. I’d really like them to meet you. Both of you, I mean...’

‘I’m sure we’ll manage something. Also... Ava, don’t forget at the end of the week it’s—’

‘Dad’s anniversary,’ Ava cut in. ‘No one’s forgotten.’

‘We’ll all be raising a glass to him for sure,’ Cormac said. ‘We’re still meant to be meeting at the Spratt?’

Ava nodded. ‘Mum said anyone who wanted to could join us there for a quick drink and a moment of remembrance. It’s the way Dad would have wanted it.’

‘Well I wouldn’t miss that,’ Cormac said.

Clara gave him a grateful smile. By now she was aware that the lifeboat was close to shore. She glanced at Ava, who was suddenly alert and ready for action, and Clara didn’t need to be told that her presence would shortly be a nuisance.

Ava and Cormac started to march back to the station, but as Clara turned to leave, Ava turned back to her.

‘Don’t go anywhere! You said you’d wait to say hello to Harry!’

Clara rolled her eyes. ‘Harry can talk to me any time!’

‘Still...’

Clara pulled her scarf up around her chin as she watched the lifeboat crew secure the stricken vessel. By now her feet were numb and, much as she loved to feel the sand on them, there didn’t seem any point in getting colder when she couldn’t now feel anything much at all. So she bent to put her socks and boots back on.

She was tying the laces when she heard shouted banter and looked up to see Ava was now on the deck of the boat, goofing around with a laughing Harry. Ava pointed to the beach and Harry waved at Clara. She waved back and began to stroll

over. The crew of the vessel they'd rescued were talking to Vas, who'd been at the helm for the mission.

Clara supposed the work didn't end with the return of the boat – there would be reports and all sorts to do. She'd never fancied being a member of the boat crew, but she'd fancy the paperwork even less. She certainly couldn't imagine fidgety Ava sitting down to write a detailed report, but maybe she'd surprise everyone when the time came and she had to do it.

Harry went off – presumably to get out of his safety gear. Killian glanced over and gave Clara a nod of recognition. She returned it with a little wave, relieved that he didn't hang around to chat but followed Harry into the station.

A few minutes later Harry re-emerged but went straight to Cormac and Ava. They exchanged a few words and all began to laugh. Clara, standing on the beach at the edge of all the action as they went about their jobs, was beginning to feel like a spare part. Perhaps nobody would notice if she slipped away.

She hesitated, hung on for a minute more, then walked back across the beach and headed home.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘I mean’ – Clara gulped down the last of her vodka lemonade – ‘don’t get me wrong, I love Logan to bits, but sometimes I feel like he could try a bit harder, you know...?’

The bar of the Spratt, their local – and actually the only pub in Port Promise – was busy but was all the cosier for it. The low wooden beams and tiny windows cut into the rock it was built from made it too hot in the summer, but on a brisk night in November they were perfect for keeping the heat in.

The walls were lined with photos of Port Promise in years gone by – some black and white, some sepia and some grainy colour, showing people and places long gone. Many were of lifeboat crews – her dad as an eighteen-year-old in his uniform was amongst them, taken shortly after he’d joined the service. Clara had always stopped to give it a quick glance and a fond smile, but since his death it had taken on new significance for her.

In the photo his hair was thick and dark, his grin quick and full of mischief, a cigarette hanging from his lip. Leaning against the hull of the all-weather boat he looked cocky, but, Clara supposed, he was eighteen and he was Jack Morrow, one of a long line of Morrows who had served on the lifeboats. If anyone was born to be a hero, it was him. So if he was a bit cocky, Clara would hardly blame him for that. But the kindness she had known was in the young Jack’s eyes too; hidden in that irreverent smile were the first signs of the man he would become and the father she loved.

‘I know.’ Betty reached for her own drink. ‘You’ve told me you love Logan to bits about five times now and then followed it up with a complaint about him. So I’m going to take from that he’s annoying you quite a lot at the moment.’

‘Not *annoying* me, exactly... I just feel a bit...’ Clara picked up her glass to drink and then blinked at it, as if she’d forgotten she’d drained it dry. She turned to look at the bar and then held her empty glass up to Betty. ‘Want another?’

Betty drank the rest of hers and then pushed her empty over the table. ‘If you’re buying, then absolutely.’

‘Taken for granted,’ Clara concluded as she picked up Betty’s glass. ‘Like everything’s always about what he needs. Of course, he was great when Dad died, but since then...’

Clara’s sentence trailed off as she took the glasses to the bar and ordered new drinks. There was so much in her head, so much she needed to get out that her conversation with Betty must have sounded more like a stream of consciousness than anything that made sense. Poor Betty was probably wondering why she’d bothered coming tonight. No wonder she needed a steady supply of alcohol.

And though she couldn’t stop herself, she had to admit she felt bad for subjecting Betty to her tirade, when Betty had only minutes ago finished telling her how lonely she was and how much she wanted to find a good man to spend her life with. Here was Clara, engaged to be married to an amazing guy who was sensitive, intelligent and modern, with a great career ahead of him, and she was complaining like there was no tomorrow. It was a wonder Betty bothered with her at all when she looked at things that way.

As she paid for the drinks, Clara took a moment to focus. No more complaining to Betty; it wasn’t fair and it wasn’t pretty. Logan had given up so much to be with her and she knew how hard he’d found it to adjust to life in Port Promise. And so what if occasionally she’d had to compromise her ambitions for the sake of his career? He’d already made the biggest concession by moving across the country to be with her, so it was the least he deserved in return. There were plenty

of people who'd kill to have what she had with Logan and she ought to be thankful. From now on, she was going to start acting like someone who knew how lucky she was. So Clara took a deep breath, painted on a smile, and then almost bumped into Robin Trelawney as she turned to take her drinks from the bar back to her table.

'Oh, Robin! Sorry, I was miles away!'

Robin tugged at an imaginary hat brim. 'That's all right.'

He didn't smile. The owner and skipper of *The Deidre*, the fishing trawler that set out from Port Promise 364 days a year, rarely smiled. He'd always been a serious type (Eeyore, Clara and her sisters had called him when they were young), but since the night of her father's death, which had been as a result of rescuing Robin from his stricken vessel, he'd been sadder and more reserved than ever. Clara and her family understood that he carried a huge burden of guilt for what happened that night, but they also knew that their father would have hated to see his friend suffering. Had he been alive, he'd have told Robin there was no need to shoulder the blame and he'd have been the first to admit he'd made mistakes that night too, ones which had ultimately contributed to his death.

'How's the family?' Robin asked, though Clara got the impression that his courtesy was taking every ounce of his strength. Knowing Robin as she did, she knew he'd have preferred to scuttle off with his pint than make small talk.

'They're all good,' she replied, giving her most encouraging smile. 'How about you? Your boys OK?'

'Aye. They're with their grandparents at the moment... Deidre's parents, you know. In Truro. Early Christmas celebrations.'

'Very early,' Clara noted.

'Yes, I suppose it is.'

'So you'll be taking Christmas off this year then? I mean, if they're seeing their grandparents early, does that mean you're keeping them with you at Christmas?'

Robin rubbed at his neck and frowned, as if slightly confused by her question. ‘No, I’ll be out on the boat as usual. Can’t afford not to, you see. The boys are going to Spain with Deidre’s brother and his wife and kids.’

‘That sounds nice. So you didn’t fancy going with them, just this once?’

Clara knew he wouldn’t, but as Deidre, Robin’s wife, had died a few years ago leaving Robin and his two teenage sons, she’d hoped he might realise his boys needed him to be with them from time to time, rather than constantly at sea. He always told people it was because they needed the money, but she’d often wondered if it was the only way he could deal with his grief and the responsibilities of being a single dad. And she guessed that Christmas might be tough for him, as it would be for her family with the anniversary of her dad’s death coming shortly before and Robin still so cut up about it.

Robin ran his hand through his mop of white hair and gave a vague shrug. ‘Can’t see the attraction myself. What’s Spain got that we haven’t? I can’t fathom it.’

‘Well, I suppose it wouldn’t do for us all to be into the same things, eh?’

‘I suppose not. In here with Logan?’

‘Oh, no... he’s got... No, I’m here with Betty. Come and say hello if you like; she’s—’

Robin looked doubtfully across at the table by the window. Betty was bent over her phone. ‘Happen I will later.’

‘No worries – don’t forget, though.’

Robin nodded, but Clara half expected him to slip out of the pub unnoticed at the first opportunity rather than join her and Betty for a chat. She wouldn’t be the slightest bit offended if he did; even before the fateful night with her dad and the trauma that brought, Robin had been the sort of man who found social interactions of any description trying. Perhaps that was another reason he went out on his boat so often. Out on the waves there was nobody but the fish and the gulls to notice you.

‘You’ll give my best to your mother, won’t you?’ he said, confirming Clara’s suspicions.

‘I will, Robin. Take care.’

‘Aye...’

He took his empty glass to the bar while Clara took her full ones over to where Betty was still scrolling through social-media feeds on her phone.

‘How’s Sad Sack?’ she asked, looking up as Clara placed a glass in front of her.

‘You saw him then?’

‘I saw you almost knock him flat.’

‘I know; that could have been awkward. He’s OK – the usual, really. The boys are away with their grandparents, which probably isn’t helping to cheer him up any.’

‘God no.’ Betty looked across to where Robin was searching his wallet to pay the barkeeper. ‘Poor thing.’

‘You’re not wrong. Sometimes I complain, but life could be a lot worse. I could be Robin.’

‘He’s not had the easiest few years, has he?’ Betty reached for her drink. But then, midway, she halted, her hand hovering in the air as her gaze went to the door of the pub. And then, instead of continuing the journey to her glass, she reached to fluff her gingernut curls and sat a little straighter.

Clara twisted to look and saw Cormac walk in with Maxine and Vas from the lifeboat crew. Clara had to admit Cormac was looking good in a soft denim shirt, the sleeves rolled back to reveal his toned arms, his dark hair still damp from, she presumed, a recent shower, and the usual impish humour in his blue eyes. She turned back to Betty and grinned. ‘Ah. I’m going to assume it’s not the appearance of Vas or Max that has you so excited.’

‘I’m not excited!’ Betty said hastily.

‘No, of course not. Do you need to borrow my lippy?’

‘Shut up!’

Clara took a sip of her vodka. ‘So, are you going to sit there mooning all night or are you actually going to talk to him this time?’

‘I *do* talk to him... all the time.’ Betty’s gaze followed the trio to the bar, where they greeted Robin.

‘I mean *really* talk to him. Like get his number talk to him.’

‘I don’t need to get his number – everyone knows where to find him.’

‘You know what I mean.’

Betty looked back at her. ‘I will... when the moment is right.’

‘Like tonight.’

‘He’s with people.’

‘It’s only Vas and Maxine.’

‘Still...’

Clara clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. ‘Honestly. With you the moment’s never right. While you’re wasting your time chasing men online the perfect guy is right under your nose. You’ll both be old and grey before anything happens unless someone gives you a nudge.’

As she said this, Clara got up and Betty looked suddenly horrified.

‘Where are you going?’ She wafted her hand to make Clara sit down again. ‘Don’t you dare!’

‘Chill.’ Clara grinned. ‘I’m only getting a packet of nuts.’

‘Nuts, my arse!’ Betty scowled. ‘I know you well enough, Clara Morrow, to know when you’re up to something. I don’t need your help.’

Clara’s expression was one of mock innocence. ‘I don’t know what you mean, I’m sure.’

Without waiting for a reply, she went to the bar. She could imagine the look on Betty’s face, and it made her grin spread

wider. One day her friend would thank her for this. Who wouldn't? she thought, looking at Cormac.

His rich voice and gorgeous accent reached her, like music on the breeze, his warm laughter echoing around the snug, his muscular frame and dark hair making him stand out, a god amongst all the other men in here tonight. Who wouldn't thank the person who engineered a date or two... or maybe a lifetime of dates with that man for them?

'Hey...' she greeted the three lifeboat crew members as she got to the bar.

'Hi, Clara!' Maxine smiled broadly. 'How are you, my love?'

'Good,' Clara said. 'I'm having a drink with Betty. We saw you come in and wondered if you all wanted to sit with us.'

'That'd be grand,' Cormac said. 'Can I get you two anything to drink while I'm ordering?'

'We've just got a round in,' Clara said. 'But thanks.'

'Ah. Maybe next time then.'

Clara smiled. 'Oh, you can definitely get the next lot in.'

'We'll be over shortly,' Vas said. 'Where are you...?'

Clara turned and pointed to Betty. 'We're over there, on the table by the window.' She waved at her friend, who looked as if she couldn't decide whether to be mortified or excited at what Clara was obviously up to.

'Brilliant,' Vas said.

Clara left them to order their drinks and went back to her table.

'Didn't you want nuts?' Betty asked, giving a pointed look at Clara's empty hands.

'So I did,' Clara said airily. 'Clean forgot all about them.'

'Hmmm... Sneaky cow.'

'I have no clue what you mean.' Clara sat down and reached for her drink. 'But you can thank me in your wedding

speech.'

The others soon joined them.

'Budge up,' Maxine said to Betty as she settled on the bench seat next to her.

Betty moved to give her more room and then Vas joined them, leaving Cormac to sit on the opposite seat next to Clara. It wasn't how Clara would have configured the seating if she'd had a choice, but perhaps it might actually work out better, since Cormac and Betty could look at each other across the table instead of sitting next to one another and looking at someone else. That was a good thing, because Betty looked very pretty tonight; Clara only hoped Cormac would think so too. If she managed to fix up her lovely and very deserving friend with a decent man, she'd consider it a good night's work.

'So, the boat went out today,' Betty said. 'We saw it go.'

Vas gulped down a mouthful of beer and nodded.

'Nothing too hectic,' Maxine said. 'Pleasure cruiser got stuck on a sandbank.'

'Oh, I thought it was engine failure,' Betty said.

'A bit of both,' Maxine replied.

Cormac smiled at her. 'How's business at the cafe?'

Clara resisted the urge to roll her eyes. *How's business?* Was that the best he could do?

'Good,' Betty said. 'I mean, quiet right now, of course. You know, being out of season and everything. I'm not complaining – gives me a rest actually, because the summer gets insanely busy. How about you?'

Seriously? She'd given them both the perfect opportunity to flirt and they were asking the least sexy questions ever. No wonder they were both single.

'A bit the same,' Cormac said. 'But I have plans for a winter menu and I'm thinking of changing my opening times so I can try to encourage a bit of business to come back.'

‘Maybe I should look at something like that,’ Betty said. ‘I suppose it wouldn’t hurt.’

‘Although, the upside to being less busy is I have time to train,’ Cormac added.

‘I hear it’s going well,’ Clara said. ‘I mean, Ava tells me so. She thinks you’re a natural. Brilliant, in fact. Not as brilliant as Harry, obviously, but then...’ She shrugged and Cormac let out a low chuckle.

‘I’m sure nobody’s as brilliant as Harry.’

‘Love’s young dream,’ Maxine said.

Vas grinned at her and she gave a knowing smile back.

Clara didn’t ask, but knowing Ava, she and Harry had probably been caught doing something they shouldn’t be somewhere they shouldn’t be doing it. Not that Vas or Maxine would ever tell, of course. Whatever it was, Cormac seemed oblivious.

‘But they’re both great,’ he continued. ‘Always got my back.’

‘I’m sure you always have theirs,’ Clara said.

‘He does,’ Vas agreed. ‘A welcome addition to the team. We can all count ourselves lucky for the day Cormac arrived in Port Promise.’

Clara glanced at Betty, hoping to catch her eye and impart some secret signal, but Betty looked straight ahead, probably knowing that Clara would do just that at the mention of lucky people benefiting from Cormac’s arrival.

‘So how long do you think your training is going to take?’ she asked Cormac.

‘I’d like to be ready for the seagoing crew next year, but I suppose only the boss here’ – Cormac nodded towards Vas – ‘will tell me when I am.’

‘I think that’s doable,’ Vas said. ‘You’re picking it up quickly. Ava too, for that matter. You’re both flying through your competencies. And, believe me, it’s in all our interests to

have you both ready, so I won't be standing in your way if you want to race through your training.'

'I'd have put money on Ava being good,' Betty said.

Clara nodded agreement. 'It's hardly surprising when you think about it. She's always been obsessed with the boats.'

'Well, she was practically born into the service, wasn't she?' Betty said. 'A Morrow is a Morrow and will always end up on a boat somewhere eventually.'

'Well,' Clara replied, 'I, for one, am happy to let my sister take that one for the team. I'd be rubbish at it.'

'We're all meant for different things.' Maxine pulled at her fluffy ponytail to tighten it. 'And not necessarily what we're born into.'

'That's true,' Betty said, suddenly pensive.

Clara gave her a sharp look, but if she was hoping for instant elaboration, she was to be disappointed. But she totally got where Maxine was coming from. Her sisters, Ava and Gaby, were brave, strong and focused – like her mum and dad they got things done. Clara had always been quieter, more reserved and cautious, and somehow, she always felt she was letting the Morrow name down by not being like them.

'It really is,' Cormac agreed. 'Both my parents work in medical equipment, and I think they always assumed I'd end up doing something medical too. In fact, I'm sure they're very disappointed in me... It's lucky I'm not there to hear them complaining.'

Maxine gave him a gentle kick under the table. 'Cormac... how could any parent be disappointed in a son like you? How could you even think that?'

'I'm running my great uncle's fish shack for a start,' he replied. 'It's not exactly open-heart surgery.'

'You're *transforming* it,' Clara said. 'You're turning it into a business, which was definitely not a word anyone would have used to describe it when your uncle ran it. And you're an *actual* hero.'

Cormac gave an adorably shy grin.

‘Seriously, you are,’ Betty agreed. ‘You should give yourself more credit.’

‘And when your parents come to visit,’ Clara added, ‘we’ll all tell them the same.’

Vas turned to Cormac. ‘Your parents are coming over? You never said!’

‘Didn’t I?’ Cormac picked up his pint. ‘Must have forgotten.’

Maxine folded her arms and gave Cormac a stern look. ‘We’re going to meet them, right? I have to see what sort of people made you.’

Cormac laughed. ‘I expect so. I’d like them to see the station for themselves.’

‘Absolutely!’ Maxine said. ‘VIP tour for Mr and Mrs Cormac!’

He beamed. ‘They’d love that.’

‘How are your wedding plans going?’ Maxine asked Clara. ‘I saw your Logan the other day; I swear he looks better fed every time I see him. You must be looking after him well – he was like a stick when he first arrived here.’

‘I know,’ Clara said. ‘I think he was always too busy to eat when he lived in London and someone has to taste my cooking experiments. Plus,’ she added darkly, ‘if you had his parents you wouldn’t want to sit down to dinner with them either. He works out a bit now too – think he’s trying to get a six-pack.’

‘Will anyone see it beneath his suit?’ Betty asked.

‘I’m sure someone will see it when the suit comes off on the wedding night!’ Maxine winked at Clara, who couldn’t control the blush that suddenly sprang to her cheeks.

Vas laughed. ‘Max! Say it like it is!’

‘I’m not wrong, am I?’ Maxine said. ‘And why should it only be the women making the effort to look nice?’

The muffled sounds of bleeping came from each of them. As one, they pulled pagers from their pockets, looked at them, and then at each other.

‘Might as well go down there,’ Vas said, as if there had ever been any doubt over his response.

He got up, Cormac and Maxine doing the same. All three of them ran from the pub. There were no goodbyes, no apologies, no excuses, and their drinks were virtually untouched. That was life on the boats, and everyone in Port Promise understood how it was.

‘And we were having such a nice time,’ Clara said drily.

Betty shrugged and looked at the abandoned drinks. ‘Seems a shame to waste these.’

Clara grinned. ‘You read my mind. If they come back before last orders,’ she added, gathering the glasses towards her, ‘we’ll buy them some more.’

‘And if they don’t, then free drinks for us!’ Betty said, laughing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Clara had woken early even though she hadn't needed to. No work today and nothing pressing to do at home, but at seven she'd been wide awake. She'd taken a seat in the kitchen with a herbal tea, feeling odd and lost and sad. This time a year ago, her family had been complete. It had been a normal day, with all the normal, boring predictability that most days brought, and nobody could have seen how it would end. She'd called at her parents' house mid-morning. Her mum had been out at her allotment, and so she'd had a quick word with her dad over a coffee, had listened to him complain about some 'idiot visitor' who'd blocked the parking spaces at the lifeboat station the day before, promised to make him one of her soufflés for dinner the following day and left him with a brief kiss.

Though she hadn't known it then, it would be the last time she'd ever see her dad. Everyone knew the lifeboat had gone out that night, but her dad wasn't meant to be on the seagoing crew – he'd retired that year and had become the operations manager; his job was to direct things from the station – and so Clara hadn't been worried, even when her mum sent a text to say he'd gone to rescue Robin Trelawney. Her sister, Gaby, would have been more nervous, given that her husband Killian was on the seagoing crew. Yet even she'd seemed calm when Clara had phoned her, because Killian had been out so many times and nobody doubted his abilities.

So the news, when it finally came, that Clara's father was lost at sea, had destroyed her. It had come so unexpectedly that for a time the entire family had refused to believe it.

As the memories of that night ran through her mind like scenes from a movie montage, the sounds of Logan getting out of bed distracted her. Perhaps that was a good thing. There would be time enough to dwell on those events later when she and her family gathered to remember her dad. Perhaps the time she had until then might be better spent more positively.

Logan came into the kitchen and kissed her. 'I wondered where you were.'

'I wouldn't have gone far. Want some toast?'

Logan nodded as he filled the kettle and set it to boil. 'If you're making some. What got you up so early?'

'I don't really know. I suppose it's because... well, you know... today being today.'

'What's today?'

Clara dropped some bread into the slots of the toaster and turned to him. 'You've surely not forgotten already? I only mentioned it to you last night.'

'Oh God, yes... sorry. Your dad.'

Clara could have made more of a fuss about the fact he'd so easily forgotten, but he'd had worries of his own lately, so she gave him the benefit of the doubt.

'What have you got on today? Are you opening the gallery?'

'Not sure if it's worth it.' Logan slumped onto a chair. 'It's been pretty quiet the last couple of weeks. I could do some painting, get a few canvases ready for the spring. Might be a better use of my time than twiddling my thumbs waiting for non-existent customers.'

'You could call the wedding venue for me if you're not busy.'

'What for?'

'I need to check wheelchair access for Betty's grandma.'

Logan held back a frown. 'You could email them.'

‘I know, but you could email them too. I don’t want it to seem as if I’m taking over – I thought you might want to get a bit more involved.’

‘Trust me, I’m happy for you to take over. I feel totally out of my depth with all this wedding stuff. Not that I’m not looking forward to it,’ he added hastily. ‘It’s just that it’s not my natural state – being organised. That’s your thing, and thank God for you, that’s what I say.’

Clara smiled. ‘You’re more capable than you think. And you’ve managed to book all the suit hire and cars – so not totally useless.’

‘I got my mum to do that.’

‘Did you?’ Clara’s heart sank. ‘Oh...’

Logan laughed. ‘Don’t worry, we’re not going to turn up in purple velvet or anything. She’s found perfectly normal stuff.’

‘But I thought we’d agreed not to involve parents with the organising.’

‘I know, but she insisted and you know what she’s like. So what’s the plan for today – after emailing the venue, of course?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe we should go out?’

Logan rested his elbows on the table and looked at her. ‘Where?’

‘I don’t know... the beach or something.’

‘The beach? Seriously?’

‘Why not?’

‘For one, the novelty of that beach wore off about six weeks after I moved here, and for two, it’s freezing.’

‘It’s not that cold.’

‘It’s November. Why do you think the tourists have stopped coming?’

‘Oh, come on, it’ll be nice to spend a bit of time together, just you and me with nothing in particular to do. I’ve almost

forgotten what it's like.'

The toast popped up and Clara put it on a plate before taking it over to the table with a block of butter and a jar of strawberry jam. She put it in front of Logan. 'Please... pretty please...'

For a moment Logan looked as if he might argue, but then he pulled the plate towards him with a heavy sigh. 'All right. If you really want to go to the beach – though I don't know what we can do there in the middle of winter.'

'Take a walk, look at the ocean, maybe see some winter wildlife...' She paused, and then her face lit with a smile. 'You can teach me to draw!'

'You want to draw?'

'Why not? It's something that we'd both enjoy doing, and what better subject than the beach?'

'Why do I get the feeling this is going to end badly?'

'Why would it end badly?'

'Because you'll get the hump whenever I try to correct your technique.'

'Then don't correct my technique. Let me have my own technique. Just give me a few pointers and then try not to look at what I'm doing if you think I'm going to be that crap.'

'I didn't say—'

Clara gave a wry smile. 'I'm joking – calm down. It'll be fine. In fact, let's go as soon as we've had this toast and a quick shower.'

'OK...' Logan looked up with an impish grin. 'As long as I can get in the shower with you and maybe it's not so quick?'

'Deal!' Clara said, laughing, glad to see she'd talked him round. They didn't get enough quality time together these days and she really didn't want to be sad all day despite the significance of it – she didn't think her dad would want that either. With those things in mind, she was going to seize this opportunity with both hands.

Logan was bent over his sketchbook while Clara sat on the sand with hers balanced on her knee. She was gazing out to sea, her page a lot barer than his. She peered over at what he was doing.

‘You don’t usually do much pencil stuff, do you?’

While it was still obviously in the preliminary stages, she could easily see the outlines of the lifeboat station, the shoreline curving away into the distance and the line of the horizon, straight and true across the centre of the page.

‘It’s good to leave your comfort zone once in a while,’ he said without looking up. ‘And it was your suggestion that we sketch.’

‘I only meant I’d sketch because I can’t paint. You could have brought your paints down.’

‘It was a good call. The light’s weird today; needs firmer strokes. I don’t think paint would have cut it.’

‘Oh...’ Clara wriggled her bare toes and then reached for a nearby shell and dusted the sand from it, holding it close to her face to study the pink and biscuit furrows on its surface. ‘Maybe I should draw this. I might take up sketching properly. I wouldn’t be as good as you, obviously, but it would give us something... a hobby, you know – something we have in common that we can do together.’

Logan glanced up. ‘You don’t think we have anything in common?’

‘I didn’t mean it like that. Obviously we have loads in common. I only meant we’d have a shared interest. I feel like I ought to take more of an active interest in your art. I mean, we both like food and you watch when I cook, or I sometimes show you how to make something, but I don’t do any art. You could teach me properly – good technique and everything. It would be something for us to do together.’

‘I don’t really have time for that. I have to do it for a living; it’s not some idle hobby to share with you.’

‘I know that. But sometimes you could do it for fun. With me. Like we are now.’

‘I’m sorry but there’s nothing fun about my art – not as far as I’m concerned. Not even this one...’ He went back to his sketch, stroking the pencil across the page. ‘I’ll probably sell this. We need the money.’

‘We get by, though. We don’t need it that badly, do we?’

‘We do right now. Weddings don’t come cheap.’

‘I know that; I only meant...’ Clara let the shell drop to the sand. ‘Doesn’t matter. You’re right.’

He glanced up again. There were droplets of mist and sea spray in his hair. The sky was dull and heavy and she could see why he’d think the light was weird. There was a strange glow, like when the clouds were too close to the earth and it was almost like the sun had never existed. Clara didn’t mind it – it was just another one of the sea’s moods. Tomorrow would be different again. It was what had first brought Logan to Cornwall to paint, back when she’d met him as a fresh-faced and hopeful artist who hadn’t planned beyond spending a lazy summer there and certainly hadn’t planned to fall in love. She could see some of that man in his eyes as he looked at her now, though sometimes it felt as if she saw less and less of him every day he spent in Port Promise as a resident rather than a visitor.

‘Don’t be like that,’ he said.

‘Like what?’

‘Giving it that sad little voice.’

‘I don’t have a sad little voice.’

‘Not now. You *did* have a sad little voice a minute ago. Now you have that prickly voice that tells me I’m on thin ice.’

‘I don’t! I was... well, I felt like I was being a bit... dismissed, that was all.’

‘You’re right, I’m sorry, I was probably being a dick. You know what I’m like when I’m in the zone...’

‘I know, but I thought we’d agreed this wouldn’t be a work thing for you. It was supposed to be about us being together. And I suggested the beach because it was outside, and I feel like you never leave that studio lately. I swear you’ll get a vitamin D deficiency.’

‘Doesn’t everyone in the winter? There’s not much of it about.’ He hooked a thumb at the low clouds. ‘Doesn’t it have to be sunny?’

‘You know what I mean. You’re indoors so much these days you’re practically transparent. Like a weird fish that lives at the bottom of the sea. You’ll get a little light growing on your forehead before long.’

‘Funny. I quite like that idea.’

‘If it appeals that much, hold still, I’ll go home and get a torch and some glue.’

Logan gave a low chuckle. ‘You forget, I’m not used to the outdoor life like you are. I grew up in London; I’m used to getting no daylight. We don’t all hatch from eggs like a wild thing on the beach.’

Clara turned to him. ‘Is that how you see me?’

‘It’s not a bad thing; I like it.’ He put down his sketchbook and pencil and wove his fingers into hers. ‘It’s all bohemian and sexy. I like the idea of you skinny-dipping like a mermaid, all wet hair and golden skin.’

Clara giggled. ‘The truth is more likely to be goosebumps, jellyfish stings and seaweed caught in my hair.’

‘Sounds delightful,’ he said, his voice dropping as he edged closer to kiss her. He pushed her gently back onto the blanket they were sitting on. Even with that barrier and her clothes, Clara was aware of the damp sand beneath her.

‘Logan!’ She giggled. ‘Everyone can see!’

He smiled down at her. ‘Who? Who’s looking? There’s nobody here!’

‘The lifeboat station is literally right there! What if Ava is knocking around?’

‘Why? Do you think she’s under the impression you’re a virgin?’

‘We are not having sex on this beach!’ she squeaked.

‘No?’

‘No!’

‘Relax...’ He laughed. ‘I wouldn’t dream of it – far too bloody cold! But God, you’re so easy to wind up, I can hardly resist it.’

‘I’m not.’

‘Yes you are. And I love it.’

‘You love me?’

‘Of course I do.’

‘OK, you can kiss me then.’

‘Bad idea.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m not sure I can stop at a kiss, now that you’ve put sex in my head.’

‘Hmm, is that all you think I’m good for?’

‘No, but you *are* very good for it.’

‘Logan!’

‘I love you as well as sex with you.’

‘You have to say that now.’

‘No I don’t. I’m saying it now because I mean it. In three months’ time you’ll be mine for real, forever, and I can’t wait.’

‘You mean that?’

‘Of course I do!’

‘I’m excited too.’ She frowned slightly. ‘You don’t mind, still? What we talked about the other day? That I want to keep my surname when we get married instead of taking yours?’

‘Why should I mind?’

‘Some men would.’

‘You should know by now that I’m not some men.’

‘True. I’m glad about that. I’d hate you to be some men – that would be rubbish.’

‘I think so too.’

‘And your parents... well they didn’t seem all that pleased about it.’

‘They’re a bit old school, you know that. They want everything done properly, like the vows to obey and all that rubbish. I daren’t even tell them we’re paying for the wedding and not your mum. I’m actually surprised they haven’t asked for a dowry yet.’ He sat up again. ‘So if we’re not having sex here I ought to finish my sketch.’

‘On second thoughts... sex may be the only thing I have that can compete with your art.’ Clara grinned.

Logan returned it.

Clara sat up and spotted two figures standing on the terrace of Betty’s Cafe. One was Betty – Clara would know that mass of copper curls anywhere. The other looked like Cormac, judging by his build. They were chatting, looking quite pally as far as Clara could see.

‘That reminds me,’ Clara said. ‘Cormac’s parents are coming over to visit him from Ireland. He’s having a drinks thing so they can meet his friends. He’s invited us.’

Logan’s head was bent over his sketchbook again. ‘Are we his friends?’

‘Of course we are!’

‘You might be – I barely speak two words to him most weeks.’

‘Yes, and I don’t know why that would be. You must be the only person in Port Promise who doesn’t talk to him.’

‘Why are you giving me such a hard time over this? Does it matter if we’re not best mates?’

‘I’m not saying you ought to be best mates, just that you ought to be a bit nicer to him.’

‘What’s so special about him that I need to be nice to him?’

‘Because he’s here alone.’

‘So am I, apart from you. You don’t go around telling everyone they have to be nice to me.’

‘But you’re part of my family.’

‘You could try telling your family that from time to time.’

‘My family are lovely to you!’

‘Some of them are.’

‘Who’s not?’

Logan glanced up. ‘Do you really want to get into this now?’

‘No, but as we’re going to be seeing them all later, I’d like to know what the problem is. Or *who* the problem is. Just so I’m ready.’

‘You know who it is.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Your mum’s not keen for a start. I get the same vibe from Gaby and Killian too.’

‘They’re always polite to you.’

‘My point exactly. Polite is hardly welcoming me to the family.’

‘Well it’s better than you do for Cormac. At least they try.’

‘I don’t see why I should have to try – I’d rather be honest about it. I’m sure even your big Irishman would appreciate a dose of honesty.’

‘He’s not *my* Irishman.’

‘Could have fooled me. He’s your pet project. Ever since he got here you’ve been obsessed with him.’

‘That’s ridiculous! Do you have any idea how stupid you sound when you say things like that?’

‘Maybe, but it’s obvious he fancies you. No man should look at another man’s fiancée like he looks at you, and if you really want the truth, that’s why I don’t want to talk to him.’

Clara’s mouth fell open. ‘That’s mental! We’re friends... we get along! You’re jealous? That’s what all this is about?’

‘Of him? Of course I am! Christ, have you seen the guy? Chris Hemsworth would be jealous!’

‘Well, you needn’t be. And for your information, it’s not me he likes, it’s Betty.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘I just know it. Why wouldn’t he like Betty? She’s adorable, she’s single and she’s perfect for him.’

Logan was silent for a moment, his gaze now following Clara’s as she looked to Betty’s terrace. Cormac was mimicking somebody swimming madly and Betty was laughing at him.

‘Maybe they are quite suited,’ he said finally.

‘Thank you!’ Clara huffed. ‘So maybe you’ll stop being such an idiot about it and come to his thing with me. Everyone will be there.’

‘Yippee,’ Logan said in a dull voice. ‘An evening with Killian, can’t wait.’

‘He’s not that bad.’

‘Him and Cormac in the same room. I’d better take my machete to cut through the testosterone.’

Clara frowned. ‘Funny.’

‘Oh God,’ Logan said. ‘Not the hard stare.’

‘Then stop being so mean!’

‘OK, I’ll come to the stupid thing, but I’m not going to pretend to be happy about it.’

‘You know, it’s not true that nobody here likes you, but have you ever considered that it might make your life a lot easier if you stopped pretending you’re too cool for everyone and tried to become a proper part of the community? You might even like it one day.’

‘I don’t pretend to be too cool.’

‘Yes you do. You think if you give in and settle into life properly here you’ll become a bumpkin – you’ve said so yourself before now.’

‘I’m happy as I am and I don’t see why I should change. This is who you met when I came on holiday, and you weren’t complaining back then that I wasn’t singing sea shanties and calling the tourists emmets.’

‘That’s a bit out of order.’

‘Look, I’m sorry I’m not Cornish, but I can’t do anything about it. So please stop trying to make me Cornish.’

‘You don’t have to be Cornish to make an effort to fit in. Cormac’s not but—’

‘And you wonder why I’ve got a complex about him.’

Clara’s mouth pressed into a thin line. ‘You know you can be bloody infuriating at times?’

‘Thank you. I work hard at it.’

‘And facetious too! Ugh!’ Clara folded her arms tight over her chest and turned her face to the sea. Then she heard Logan chuckle and turned back to him.

‘So easy to wind up,’ he said.

‘Don’t,’ Clara warned. ‘Please don’t. I don’t like it when I don’t know where I am with you. Don’t do it, not today of all days; I don’t think I’m strong enough to take it.’

‘I’m not doing anything, just having a bit of fun.’

‘You’re mocking me. You think I’m uncomplicated and a bit simple and you can say whatever you like because I won’t get it.’

‘I’ve never said that! I don’t think anything of the sort!’

‘You say it plenty about everyone else here – yokels, bumpkins... I’ve lived in this village my whole life too, so surely that makes me the same.’

‘I don’t... I love you! I would never think that of you!’

‘Then please don’t treat me like you do think it – that’s all I ask.’

‘Sometimes you ask for a foot rub too.’

Clara slapped his arm. ‘I’m not joking!’

‘OK, I’m sorry.’

‘Are you though?’

‘Yes, of course I am! I didn’t want to upset you.’

‘Could have fooled me.’

‘Look, can we drop it now? You’re right – today of all days we shouldn’t be at odds. I should have been more sensitive, and I’m sorry you felt the way you did about it. It wasn’t my intention to make you feel stupid.’

‘Well you did.’

Logan sighed. ‘If you want me to go and make small talk with Cormac, I will. Is that enough to make you happy?’

She hugged her knees to her chest. ‘Yes.’

‘Thank you. Now can I draw?’

‘I’m not stopping you.’

‘What about you? Are you going to draw something?’

She was silent for a moment, her eyes fixed on the waves as they drew in and out, clawing at sand and seashells with every thunderous roll. ‘Maybe I’ll go for a swim.’

‘What? In this weather?’

Clara nodded. ‘I used to, all the time before I met you. Everyone here does.’

‘Everyone goes sea swimming in the winter?’

‘Haven’t you ever noticed?’

‘Can’t say I have.’

‘I said you spent too much time indoors – there’s my proof. You could come with me. I could run home and get our wetsuits.’

‘Not likely. Get yours if you want to, but leave me out of your madness.’

‘Hmm... I bet Cormac would love to go swimming out there today.’

Logan raised his eyebrows. ‘Nice try. I don’t feel *that* threatened by him.’

The moment of danger had passed and Clara was glad. Logan’s banter meant he’d moved on too. They bickered a lot these days and she couldn’t really say why. She wished she could rise above his jibes, as Gaby had once advised her to, but she couldn’t. When he joked about Port Promise and its residents, it was hard not to take it personally. He did think he was better than everyone – that much was obvious no matter how he denied it.

At first, she’d assumed that would pass and as he settled into life there he’d stop feeling that way. But as time went by, it almost seemed as if his sense of superiority became stronger and more entrenched. Now, even though she hoped that one day he’d start to feel as if he belonged and that he’d view his home differently, she certainly didn’t assume it would happen. But hope was all she had, and she clung on to it – she was going to be married to him after all and, despite the obstacles, she wanted to be his wife more than anything.

‘I’ll swim another day,’ she said, picking up her sketchbook. ‘Show me how to get my perspectives right on this landscape, if you don’t mind.’

After the beach, Logan was struck by inspiration. He’d rushed into the studio clutching his sketchbook and muttering about transferring his scene onto canvas with oils, and shortly

afterwards the door had slammed shut. Clara hadn't seen him for the rest of that afternoon – not even for lunch, though that was nothing new. When the muse struck, Logan didn't stop for anything, not even food. She'd been alarmed when she'd first witnessed it, but now she was used to it. He'd emerge at some point when he'd got what he needed to get out of his system and then he'd Hoover out the fridge, eating everything in sight. It was quite comical really.

As the sun was setting she called through the door to remind him that they'd need to be ready to meet her family so they could all walk down to the harbour to leave candles at her dad's memorial plaque. There was a vague, muffled reply, and she had to assume that meant he'd understood and would do the necessary. An hour later she'd knocked and reminded him again and got a slightly terser, more impatient-sounding acknowledgement. Clara was less content to leave him to it this time, but she had to trust that he'd be ready to go when the others arrived, and so she took herself to the kitchen to bake a lemon drizzle cake, mostly to take her mind off how frustrated with him she was beginning to feel again.

At seven, he finally came out of the studio looking as if he'd been held captive for ten years in solitary confinement. His hair was sticking up and streaked with paint and there were many new coloured blobs on his overalls. By this point Clara's mum, Gaby, Killian and their children, Elijah and Fern, had arrived along with Ava and Harry. Clara assumed it was the knock at the front door that had disturbed Logan enough to make him emerge.

'What's...?' He glanced at them all and then back at Clara. 'What time is it?'

'Time we were going,' Clara said. 'I did knock a couple of times to remind you.'

'Oh, right...?' Logan smeared his hands down his overalls, adding new streaks of blue. 'You did, I'm sorry; I totally lost track of the time.'

'It's OK,' Jill said. 'There's no set time really – we'll just go down to the harbour when everyone is ready. So take your

time to clean up; we'll wait.'

'Yeah, of course...' Logan muttered as he rushed to the stairs that led to the flat above the studio. 'I'll be right with you.'

Clara turned to her family with a look of apology.

'Honestly,' Jill said, 'it's fine. As I've just told Logan, we don't have a schedule as such. It's only a quiet thing, us and a few close friends. I doubt most of the village have remembered what the day is and I'm certainly not going to make a fuss – that's not what your dad would have wanted.'

'I know but we're holding everyone up.'

'We could go there now and wait for you?' Ava suggested. She turned to Jill. 'Clara and Logan could come when they're ready.'

Jill shook her head. 'We go together, as a family.'

'I'll go and see how Logan's getting on up there,' Clara said. 'Get him some clean clothes out, hurry things along a bit...'

Killian took a seat behind Logan's desk and got his phone out, while Elijah and Fern wandered the room looking at the finished paintings Logan had up for sale, while a sombre Harry reached for Ava's hand to give it a reassuring squeeze. With no opposition to her suggestion, Clara left them and hurried upstairs.

Logan was in the bathroom washing paint from his forearms, the water azure as it drained away. He looked at Clara via his reflection in the mirror. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all right,' Clara said patiently.

'I had a call from my dad this afternoon.'

'Oh... you never said.'

'I didn't want to break my concentration any more than it had been broken by his call, so I thought I'd wait until we had time to talk properly. But now we're probably going to be out most of the night so...'

Clara leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms. 'This sounds a bit serious. Should I be worried?'

'It's just my grandmother...' He reached for a towel. 'Not *just*, of course, but you know what I mean. It's sort of old news I suppose, things have been dragging on so long.'

'Right. So she's got worse?'

'Much worse,' he said. 'The doctors are moving her to end-of-life care.'

'Oh, Logan, I'm so sorry.' She went to him, rubbing a gentle hand over his bare back. 'Are you OK? Do you need to go to London? I could get time off work if you want me to... Do you need to cry off the memorial tonight? Mum would understand if you—'

'No, it's OK. I don't think any of that's necessary – not yet anyway. I really hope she has more time than that. I will probably go and see her as soon as I can, though.'

'Of course you should. On your own?'

He dried himself and tossed the towel into the bath. Even though he'd soaped his arms, the faded traces of blue and gunmetal paint were still evident, and there was more on the towel. Clara was used to it – they had special work towels reserved for his use.

'You don't want to drop everything here to go sit with my grandma. She barely knew you before and she certainly won't remember who you are now – she hardly remembers who I am these days. I appreciate the gesture but, much as I'd love you to come, it seems like a bit of a waste of time.'

'I wouldn't be coming for her, though. I'd be coming for you. I want to support you, like you supported me when I lost my dad.'

'I know, but our families are very different in that way, aren't they? Yours welcomes support wherever they can get it and they're big on all that solidarity thing. Mine are... well, they tend to shut it down, close ranks. They like it to be just family.'

‘I *am* family,’ Clara said, a hint of reproach in her voice that she was finding it difficult to hide. ‘Almost.’

‘I know that, but...’

What he wanted to say, Clara was sure, was that his mother had never really forgiven Clara for taking her son away from London. It hadn’t been like that, of course, but Clara had certainly been painted as the bewitching siren who’d brainwashed her poor boy into leaving a brilliant city life for a place that had nothing but mediocrity to offer him. Vetiver viewed everything about Port Promise with the deepest of contempt, and perhaps her feelings had some influence on Logan’s own – either way, she’d never let the facts of the matter get in the way of a juicy grudge, and Clara was at the sharp end of her biggest resentment.

Vetiver hadn’t tried very hard to hide her dislike either. Where Jill might have had reservations about Logan and his suitability for Clara, she at least made an effort to welcome him to the family. Clara had been given no such courtesy. Logan told her she was taking it too personally and that his mum was like that with everyone, but Clara was hurt, and it hurt all the more that Logan didn’t see how hard it was to take. She’d tried so hard to be agreeable, mindful of the fact they missed him, but they placed all the blame on her when it had been *his* choice. Clara had never pressured or cajoled or threatened or had any kind of expectations of him. Sometimes, Clara sensed regrets in him about that choice, but he never aired them, and at the end of the day, they were for him to deal with. She certainly had no control over any of that either. All she could do was try to make his life there as happy as she could so that any regrets, in time, would fade.

‘I’d like to see her at some point before...’ she continued.

‘I get that. But I think it’s better if I go up myself and see how things are beforehand. And then maybe you can come up after that. That’s OK? Isn’t it?’

Clara nodded.

He gave her a soapy kiss. ‘Thank you.’

‘For what?’

‘For understanding.’

‘I’m not sure I do understand but I respect your decision. You have to do what you think is best; I’m hardly going to make a fuss about it.’ She stroked a hand along his arm. ‘I’ll go and get you some clean clothes while you finish up here.’

‘Ah... dressing me now? That’s a slippery slope.’

‘Don’t be daft!’ Clara smiled. ‘Just trying to hurry you up.’

‘At least you’re honest about it. Yep, that’s fine, go ahead. Pick something warm – I’m not used to your Atlantic winds yet.’

CHAPTER SIX

The mood was a subdued sort of good nature as they all walked from the studio. Family solidarity, Logan often called it, and there had been quite a lot of family solidarity over the past year – there had been so many occasions that had urgently demanded it.

The village was quiet as they walked through it, which surprised Clara. Usually they'd see someone they knew, even on winter evenings when people were more inclined to be inside with their log burners and a good book, but today, there were very few signs of life. Salty's Chips was lit up and open for business, but Nigel, the owner, was standing behind the counter of an empty shop with the newspaper spread out in front of him. Betty's Cafe was in darkness, but she never opened past six. The strings of yellow bulbs that stretched along the line of the promenade swung in a brisk wind that was more wet than cold, even though it wasn't raining, and the sound of the sea breathing in and out was the only accompaniment to their echoing footsteps.

They spoke in hushed tones, and although their task was a serious one, there was a sense of optimism too. Life went on – Jack Morrow would have been the first to remind them of that – but life had also changed in the year since his death. They'd never stop missing him, of course, but that all-encompassing black hole of despair was finally losing its grip. The Morrow family were looking to the future again; a different one than any of them had expected, but there was a tentative hope that things would be good again.

Ava had made the biggest changes – nobody could argue with that. She'd turned her despair into a positive, powerful force for good, training to be a lifeboat crew member, like her dad. Jill was gradually adjusting to life without her husband, finding new people to rely on, to confide in, to fill the gap Jack had left. Nobody would ever replace him, but perhaps every little helped. Gaby had taken charge of the local fundraising committee for the lifeboats and for other little charities around the area; a far more active role than she'd had before as a casual collector, and, of course, Killian still served on the lifeboats, as did Harry.

Clara held Logan's hand as she reflected on all this. What had she done differently since she'd lost her dad? What had she done to honour his memory? She'd taken Ava's side when everyone else had forbidden her to try for the boat crew. She'd done her best to support her mum. But did either of those things really amount to anything meaningful?

They had stuff of their own going on, her and Logan, and everyone knew that. Nobody thought any less of Clara for being too preoccupied to contribute in any real way to the lifeboats or to make big changes in her life off the back of their shared tragedy. Logan's grandmother had been ill for some time now. Even though he no longer lived nearby he'd once been close to her – the only grandson, doted on, and a crutch when his grandfather died, someone to occupy his grandmother's thoughts and lessen her pain.

Clara had been helping Logan to build up his art business too, alongside her own job at the caravan park. She took on practical things for him so he could concentrate on the creative side, and she supported him as best she could, mindful of the stresses and pressures he was under. These were all the sorts of contributions that nobody really saw, but they were valid, weren't they? And if so, then why did Clara still feel so unfulfilled? Why did she often feel that her value was less than that of her sisters?

Jill's voice cut into her thoughts. 'You've got the candles, haven't you, Gaby?'

‘Yes,’ Gaby said. ‘And some matches. Not sure how long before they’re blown out, but...’

‘Even if they’re only lit for a few minutes,’ Jill replied, ‘that will be enough. It’s the lighting that counts.’

‘I wonder if anyone—’ Ava began, but as they rounded a gentle bend and the open space of the harbour came into view she had her answer. There was the bronze plaque celebrating and remembering the life of Jack Morrow set into the wall, all at once important, part of the harbour and village, but at the same time unassuming, as if it had always been there. And running along that wall was a shimmering stream of lights.

Everyone stopped.

‘Oh my...!’ Jill gasped. ‘We didn’t tell...’

In front of the wall of tiny flickering flames stood most of the village. They all turned and smiled at the family’s approach, their features lit gold by the candles.

Marina, Jill’s oldest and best friend, stepped forward to hug her. ‘I happened to mention to one or two people that today was a year since Jack died, and that you were coming to light candles in his memory... and maybe one or two of them wanted to do the same.’

Jill’s eyes filled with tears, but she was smiling. ‘One or two? Everyone’s here.’

‘Well, he meant a lot to everyone,’ Marina said. ‘As do you. What did you expect? That we’d all leave you to it and give the impression we didn’t care? As if!’

‘Come on...’ Gaby started to hand candles out to everyone from a bag. Clara took two and went to a burning candle to light them. She handed one to Logan and set hers on the wall, a few almost silent words of love falling from her lips. Then she stepped back and watched as everyone else did the same. Once the task was done they stood together in quiet contemplation, the people Jack loved most in the world with the whole of Port Promise at their side.

After a few moments a lone voice rose from the cold of the night and into the air; a high, soaring voice singing the first

lines of an old sea hymn, the same hymn that had played at Jack's funeral and at the first memorial.

Eternal Father, strong to save...

And then everyone joined in, a chorus of love and loss that rolled out from the harbour and across the sea, as if the echoes would wrap themselves around the entire world.

Clara tried to sing but her throat was so tight no sound would come out. And as she looked through her tears she could see that her sisters and her mum were the same. While Harry hung his head, mouthing the words, and Killian sang out proudly, Logan's gaze was everywhere, self-conscious and awkward, and in the midst of all the profound emotion, Clara saw clearly just how much he felt like an outsider. The sight of him, not knowing the words to a song they'd all heard since birth, a song that bound them to each other and to the sea, made her heart ache for him. On top of her grief for her dad, there was that. There was Logan, doing his best, knowing he'd never really belong, and he did that for her.

She reached for his hand and smiled up at him. And then she let her gaze travel to the faces of her community. She'd known most of them her whole life, and they meant the world to her. Could she give this up if she had to, as Logan had given up London for her?

When the song ended, there was silence. Nobody had asked for it, but somehow everyone seemed to know that it was needed. Clara bowed her head, letting her tears fall freely, almost revelling in the opportunity. For once, she wasn't telling herself to buck up or be strong or keep a lid on it. For once, she could simply be a bereaved daughter, expressing the grief that was still potent in the most natural way.

She looked up as small murmurings began to creep into her consciousness. Some people had started to speak to each other in hushed tones. Betty and Cormac made their way over. Betty pulled Clara into a hug and then turned to a surprised-looking Logan to do the same. Cormac simply looked

awkward, as if he wanted to express something more than the brief condolences he spoke but didn't know how far he was allowed to go. Then Betty went to Ava, Gaby and Jill and hugged them too.

'It looks grand,' Cormac said to Clara, angling his head at the river of candles lighting the harbour wall.

'It does,' she agreed. 'Dad would have been pleased to see all his friends here.'

'There's a lot of them.'

'There is. I know people don't like to speak ill of the dead and all that, but I think, genuinely, everyone loved him. I can't think of anyone he ever fell out with in this whole place.'

'It's quite a legacy he's left. I'm sure if I'd met him I'd have liked him too.'

'I know you would, and he'd have liked you. You'd have had a great time on the boats together.'

Cormac smiled. And then he turned to Logan. 'And how are you? Are you well?'

'I'm good,' Logan said, perhaps a little stiffly, though Cormac didn't seem to notice it as Clara did. 'Thanks. And business at the shack is good?'

'Good enough, thanks. You'll both be able to make it next week when my parents visit? Ava's told you the details? It's not going to be much of a party but—'

'It's a party now?' Clara smiled. 'I thought we were all just going to queue up to shake your mum and dad's hand like they're royalty. Which I'm sure they are.'

Cormac laughed. 'I'm sure they think they are too. So you're good to come? I'd love you to meet them – I've told them so much about you.'

'Well, we don't have a lot on at the moment so hopefully it will be fine.'

'I was thinking the Thursday or Friday of next week. It shouldn't be a late one.'

‘Sounds good.’ Clara looked uncertainly at Logan. She couldn’t say for certain he’d be back from London, but there didn’t seem any point in complicating matters right now by mentioning it.

She turned back to Cormac. ‘Do you want us to bring anything?’

‘Just yourselves is grand.’

‘Great,’ Clara said. ‘We’re looking forward to it, aren’t we, Logan?’

Before Logan could add anything, Betty returned.

‘I’m so glad everyone could come down here tonight,’ she said. ‘It’s been lovely. I mean, sad, of course, but, you know, nice sad. If that makes sense... probably doesn’t... Tell me to shut up if I’m talking out of my arse.’

Clara gave her a broad smile. ‘Of course you’re not. I know exactly what you mean, and it has been lovely. It’s lovely to know everyone cared for my dad so much.’

‘And for you,’ Betty said. ‘Everyone cares about all of you.’

‘Thanks. I know that.’ Clara swept a hand at the crowd. ‘How could I not know it when everyone has braved the cold to be here? I feel very lucky to belong to such an amazing community.’

‘It *is* amazing here,’ Cormac agreed warmly. ‘I’ve only just arrived and yet I feel as if I’ve been here forever. Everyone has been so welcoming. I have to confess, I was worried before I came about whether I’d fit in, but there was no need at all. Not a day’s passed where it’s felt like coming here was a mistake.’

‘And we’re glad to have you,’ Betty said.

Cormac dug his hands in his pockets and gave her a pleased but slightly embarrassed grin.

At that moment, Ava and Harry came over.

‘Cormac,’ Harry said, ‘can we borrow you for a minute? Vas has some news you might want to hear.’

Cormac raised his eyebrows, but Harry simply gave a secret smile.

‘You’re definitely going to like it,’ he said.

‘Am I...?’

The others watched as Cormac followed Ava and Harry to where the rest of the lifeboat crew were standing in a huddle.

‘That all sounds very mysterious,’ Betty said.

‘Yes, unlike you and Cormac,’ Clara replied.

Betty frowned.

‘He likes you!’ Clara said.

‘Does he?’

‘Yes! You saw how cute and flustered he got when you said how happy you were he’d come to Port Promise!’

‘I’m not sure that was anything to do with me,’ Betty said doubtfully.

‘It was,’ Clara replied. ‘Trust me.’

Betty looked at Logan, but he simply raised his hands in defence. ‘Don’t get me involved! I’m not qualified to give an opinion either way.’

‘You said you thought so too,’ Clara said.

‘I never!’ Logan backed off a step. ‘Don’t be putting words into my mouth!’

‘But you did, when we were on the beach!’

‘Only because you made me say it!’

Betty gave an awkward laugh. ‘Hey, I don’t want to be the cause of a domestic! Let’s just see what happens, eh?’

‘I know what’s going to happen if you ask him out,’ Clara said, her voice lowered as her gaze went to where Cormac was listening intently to something Vas was telling him.

‘I’d rather wait until he asks me. What if he’s not interested? If I ask him and he says no that’s going to be horrible for both of us.’

‘He’s probably thinking the same thing. One of you has to make the first move, and why should we always leave it to the men?’

‘Now that’s something I agree with,’ Logan said. ‘You women always make us take the risks and look like tools when it backfires. I love it when the woman makes the first move; there’s no confusion then.’

‘Is it confusing?’ Betty asked. ‘Asking women out, I mean.’

‘It is when you don’t know if they’re interested. And then there’s the ones who say yes when they don’t really mean it and aren’t really into you – what’s that all about?’

Clara rolled her eyes. ‘Well, if one of you doesn’t get your finger out soon I’m going to have to do it for you.’

‘Oh God.’ Betty grimaced. ‘Please don’t. That would be like school all over again, and I really don’t need any reminders of those days.’

Clara shrugged. ‘I’m only saying. You say you want to settle down, well Cormac’s a far better bet than all these losers you’re meeting online.’

‘Yes, but it’s easier to meet them online because you know they’re already interested in you, so there’s none of that mortifying risk of asking them out and then being rejected.’

‘No, there’s just the mortifying meetups when you realise they’re all perverts, crooks, liars or dickheads.’

‘Plenty of people get together through online dating apps,’ Betty said with a hint of reproach in her voice.

‘Yes, but why bother with all that when there’s someone perfect for you right on your doorstep?’ Clara nodded at Cormac and gave Betty a meaningful look.

Betty let out a sigh. ‘I’ll think about it. Don’t rush me – it takes time to build that sort of courage.’

‘You don’t need courage; just ask him. If he says no, he says no. Pretend you didn’t care anyway and it’ll be forgotten in a week or so.’

The discussion was halted by the return of Cormac, grinning madly. Ava and Harry were with him, looking quite pleased themselves.

‘What’s all this?’ Clara asked.

‘You’re looking at the new poster boy and girl for the recruitment campaign!’ Ava cried.

‘Who?’

‘Me and Cormac! What do you think of that?’

Clara looked between the two of them. ‘That’s brilliant.’ Then she looked at Harry. ‘So why are you looking so happy?’

Harry grinned. ‘Because I don’t have to do it! Cormac’s welcome to it; I couldn’t be doing with all the fuss.’

‘So you’ll be doing photographs and stuff?’ Betty asked.

‘Yes,’ Ava said. ‘At first I didn’t want to do it, but then Cormac persuaded me.’

‘It’s just as important to attract new volunteers as it is to volunteer yourself, as far as I can see,’ Cormac said. ‘So I don’t mind a bit of standing still for a few photos if it helps.’

‘Where will they be?’ Betty asked.

‘On the website, posters, maybe some online magazines... who knows, maybe even television?’

‘So you’ll be famous?’ Clara asked.

‘Women will be flocking to Port Promise to ask you out!’ Ava nudged Cormac and laughed. ‘We’ll be fighting them off – might have to barricade the station!’

Cormac looked less comfortable about this prospect, which made Ava laugh even more. Clara gave Betty a significant look that said: *Don’t mess about – ask him soon if you don’t want someone else to get their claws in.*

‘Um...’ Betty cast around, clearly pretending to look for someone. ‘If you don’t mind, I just need to catch Shari about the cafe’s newspaper order...’ She scurried off.

Clara watched her go. It was beginning to look as if she was going to have to intervene, because it was plain Betty was never going to ask Cormac out.

‘Are you OK?’ Clara slipped her hand into Logan’s as they began to walk back to the studio.

‘I should be asking you the same thing.’

She squeezed his hand gently. Marina had brought a flask down to the harbour filled with brandy-laced coffee. There was quite a strong brandy-to-coffee ratio, as it turned out. Clara had accepted a cup, and now was warmed from the inside out and on the edge of tipsiness. ‘I know, but... well, sometimes I forget that Port Promise can be a bit overwhelming for you. I mean, everyone knows everyone else and all that. I suppose it takes some getting used to. And the news about your grandma...’

‘Oh, that. I suppose it is what it is.’

‘Port Promise or your grandma?’

‘Both really. There’s not a lot I can do about either except wait for time to move things on one way or the other. What about that modelling thing then?’

‘Cormac and Ava? I hardly think they’d see it as modelling. Ava will think it’s idiotic, but she’ll be happy to do it for the service.’

‘I get the feeling Cormac’s pretty chuffed.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Logan shrugged. ‘He’s that kind of guy.’

‘What kind of guy?’

‘You know... likes to be admired.’

Clara held back a frown. ‘I don’t think he’s like that. Just because someone’s good-looking doesn’t make them automatically vain.’

‘I didn’t say he was vain. And you admit you think he’s good-looking?’

‘You said it yourself! Let’s not start this again.’

Logan was silent for a moment. ‘No, you’re right, I’m sorry. I don’t know what it is about him that rubs me up the wrong way.’

‘Neither do I. He was nice to you earlier.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘He’s always nice to you.’

‘I know. Let’s not keep going on about my random insecurities, eh? I get it – the problem is with me.’

‘I didn’t say that. I just wish I could get to the bottom of it. Life would be easier for all of us if you could get along with him. Especially if Betty ends up going out with him.’

‘Betty will never ask him, and to be honest, I think she might have a point. I can’t see that he’s all that into her.’

‘Of course he is! They were talking loads tonight.’

‘Everyone was talking loads so that means nothing.’

‘Hmm, well, anyway...’

They left the harbour and the promenade behind them. The others had gone to the Spratt, but Logan and Clara had made their excuses to go home. Clara had given her family a brief explanation of the developments in Logan’s grandma’s condition and they’d been nothing but understanding. Still, Clara was plagued with doubts and guilt. She wanted to support Logan, of course, and she understood why he might not want to go to the pub, but she couldn’t help feeling guilty that she was abandoning her family, tonight of all nights.

‘Thank you,’ she said into their silence.

‘For what?’

‘For coming tonight. I appreciate it wasn’t easy for you.’

‘I could hardly stay away, not when everyone else would be here. How would that have looked? Even Harry came, and he’s only been dating Ava for a couple of months.’

‘But Harry was on the crew with Dad. And he’s known my family his whole life, so... I want you to know it means a lot to me that you came, that’s all.’

‘Then I’m glad I did.’

‘Especially as you must be worried about your grandma.’

‘There’s no point in worrying, is there? It’s a done deal. I wouldn’t say I’m worried, more... well, it’s just a waiting game now. I feel in limbo. Like I want to mourn but I can’t, not yet, even though I know that time is soon. It’s a weird feeling that I can’t explain. Like being at the starting blocks for the worst, most horrible race of your life but knowing that you’ll have to run it no matter how much you complain. I don’t know what to do with myself right now.’

‘I suppose it’s different from when I lost Dad, which was a huge shock nobody saw coming.’

‘I suppose so. In a way perhaps I ought to feel lucky I’ve had time to prepare.’

‘I don’t think either situation is ideal.’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘Well, whatever you need, I’m here for you – you know that, right?’

‘I do.’

‘Good...’

They stopped at the darkened frontage of Logan’s gallery-cum-shop-cum-studio, the place they also called home, and Logan searched his pocket for his keys. Clara stood and watched him. Even though he’d told her he wasn’t worrying about his grandma’s health, she suspected he was. She wished she could do something to make it better for him, but when she

really thought about it, there probably wasn't anything to be done.

CHAPTER SEVEN

‘Have you seen my...?’ Logan scratched his head and ran his gaze over the mountain of clothes he’d pulled out from the wardrobe, a mountain that was currently obscuring most of the bed.

Clara glanced up from her jewellery box. ‘What?’ she asked.

‘My navy jumper.’

‘Which navy jumper? You have about ten of them.’

‘I don’t.’

‘And I’m not surprised you can’t find anything in this mess...’ She fastened the clasp of her necklace and then came over to the bed. Taking an item from the open suitcase, she held it up. ‘You mean this navy jumper?’

‘Shit...’

Logan sat heavily onto the mound of clothes. ‘My brain is nowhere today.’

‘It’s bound to be.’ Clara moved some of his shirts aside so she could sit next to him. ‘Are you sure I shouldn’t be coming with you?’

‘There’s no point yet. I know you have stuff going on here; I don’t want to keep dragging you back and forth to London.’

‘You wouldn’t be dragging me – I want to come. It would only be for a couple of days, of course, because I’d be needed at work, but wouldn’t a couple of days be better than nothing?’

He shook his head. 'Best I go alone for now. I'm sure there'll be a time I'll need you more, and I don't think it's that far away.'

They were silent for a moment. Clara could see a slice of their reflection in the mirror opposite the bed. She reached for his hand and her reflection did the same. There was another reason Logan didn't want her in London, though he wouldn't say it. Clara's presence would add tension to an already fraught situation, especially given how disliked by his mother she was.

'How long do you think you'll be away?' she asked into the gap.

Logan balled a pair of socks and tossed them into the case. 'I don't know. Three, maybe four days. A week tops, though I can hardly spare the time. It all depends on what happens when I get there.'

'I'll miss you.'

'You'll hardly notice I've gone. I bet your mum and your sisters will keep you busy, make sure you don't have time to dwell on the fact I'm missing. You're hardly ever home these days as it is.'

'I wouldn't say that.'

'Seems like it to me. Always doing something for someone, always sorting someone out... I think Port Promise ought to be marrying you.'

On a different day, his words might have offended her, but knowing how stressed he was, she let it slide. Instead, she nodded to the suitcase. 'You want some help finishing that?'

'Don't you have to get to work?'

'Tanika can hold the fort; I'll make it up to her if I'm an hour or so late, and it's not like we're rushed off our feet now the park's closed.'

'You go; I'll be fine. Might be better if I finish up alone; I'm no company today.'

‘But, apart from the obvious, you’re OK? There’s nothing else I ought to know about that’s bothering you?’

‘Apart from the deep sense of dread every time I think about having to sit down to dinner with my parents, you mean?’

‘I’m sure that will be fine. They adore you – it’s me they’re not so keen on. I still say when we do the seating plan for the wedding breakfast we ought to put a special table outside the venue, just for them. And when I say outside the venue, I mean outside Port Promise. Actually, outside Cornwall if we can get away with it.’

He gave her the bleakest of smiles and it was so pained she almost wished he hadn’t tried. ‘Go to work. I’ll call you when I get there.’

She kissed him on the forehead and got up. ‘Drive carefully, won’t you? I’m still not convinced you ought to be driving all that way when you’re so preoccupied.’

‘I’ll be fine. Once I get on the road I’ll whack on a podcast and it’ll take my mind off all the other shit going on.’

‘Promise me?’

‘I promise I’ll be careful.’

‘You’d better.’

Grabbing a coat from the half-empty wardrobe, Clara left him and went downstairs to collect the rest of her things for work. She hated this. She felt in limbo as much as he did, and there was nothing she could do about it.

‘Hey...’

Ava smiled as Clara unlocked the office door to let her in.

‘Bored?’ Clara asked as she glanced at the clock to see it wasn’t yet midday.

‘Yeah. Out of season’s rubbish, isn’t it?’

‘I thought you’d got some temping work at that indoor pool in Truro?’

‘I did, but the boiler broke down, so they had to cancel all the swimming lessons. Hence’ – she wafted a hand down herself – ‘I’m here to bug you... and to see if you’re OK.’

‘I’m OK. As for the bugging bit, I’m kind of busy. Tanika’s on one of her white elephant jobs.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Means she’s doing something in the kitchen... cleaning filters or something. So I’m holding the fort on my own. You might have to go and bug someone else for a while.’

‘I would, but everyone’s at work – apart from Gaby, of course, but I know she said she had some fundraising plans to type up or something. Harry’s on cider deliveries for his dad; they’ve got absolutely loads of orders, which is great but makes me tagging along a bit of a hindrance, and Mum’s at her allotment. Anyway...’ Ava hauled herself to sit on the counter, despite Clara’s insistence she had no time for her, legs dangling and a grin. ‘You ought to be flattered I’m here – it means you’re my favourite.’

‘It means I’m the closest to your caravan.’

‘That too. What are you doing for lunch?’

‘I’ve got sandwiches.’

‘Stuff that. Don’t you want to go out with me and get a lovely hot bowl of bouillabaisse and tell me all your troubles?’

‘Where are we going to get that? Surely you’re not making it? I’m impressed you even know what it is.’

‘Cormac’s put it on his winter menu at the fish shack. I think he’s changed the fish to more local stuff, but Maxine had some and she said it was amazing.’

‘Cormac’s got a winter menu? I’m surprised he’s planning to stay open all winter – his uncle would have shut up shop.’

‘Yes, but we all know his uncle was a lazy arse. Cormac’s got big plans – he told me so. He’s going to start opening later

too. He wants to expand eventually.'

'Does he?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Well, intrigued as I am, the thought of sitting outside Cormac's shack freezing my knackers off isn't really doing it for me, even if he is serving amazing fish stew.'

'Ah, but he's also just had a delivery of heaters, so we'll be toasty. Blankets too. Come on, it'll be good. It's me... and Cormac! The two coolest people you know!'

'Don't let Logan or Harry hear you say that.'

'I've already told Harry that Cormac is way cooler than him, but he's too in love to argue with me at this stage in our relationship.'

Clara shook her head with a wry smile. 'I'm sure that's true. He's got his work cut out, that's for sure. OK, you've convinced me. I'll see if Tanika wants my sandwiches so they don't go to waste; pretty sure she hasn't got anything with her.'

'She can come if she wants to.'

'One of us has to stay here to man the phones – even though they're unlikely to be ringing off the hook.'

'Fair enough. When do you want to go?'

'When Tanika's done whatever it is she's messing around with. I swear if she sat still for more than a minute the earth would spin off its axis or something.'

'Can you go and see? I'm kind of hungry now.'

'Of course you are. Can you give me half an hour? I've got some spreadsheets open and if I don't finish inputting this stuff I won't remember where I am with it.'

Ava crossed her legs and got out her phone. 'No problem. I can sit here and send dirty texts to Harry. With a bit of luck, I'll get him proper worked up for later.'

‘Ugh, enough!’ Clara went back to her seat. ‘Serves you right if that backfires and you both get called out on a rescue later.’

Ava grinned. ‘It’s a risk I’m willing to take.’

Cormac had painted his shack. Gone was the drab, weather-beaten creosote, replaced by a vibrant blue. It popped against a landscape of winter greys.

‘Wow!’ Clara stopped on the path. ‘When did he do this?’

‘Yesterday. It’s a bit mad, isn’t it?’

‘A bit, but I like it.’

‘It’ll look great in the summer when everything else is brighter.’

‘That’s true. Probably less mad too.’

As they spoke, to reinforce just how far away summer was, it started to snow. Only stuttering flakes, the first of the season, but Clara watched as it began to bead in Ava’s hair.

‘I didn’t see this in the forecast,’ Clara said, holding out a hand to catch a flake, watching as it settled on her palm to instantly melt.

‘Me neither.’

‘And we’re going for an alfresco lunch. We must be mad.’

‘We’re rebels – always do the opposite to what we ought to be doing; it’s way more fun.’

Clara gave her sister a sideways look. ‘We’ll be cold rebels.’

‘I told you – he’s got heaters and blankets now.’

‘They’d better be good.’

As Ava had promised, when they arrived they could see that the seating area had been fitted with glowing patio heaters, while the benches had new cushions and fleecy blankets of different shades of blue to go with the new paint

job. Perhaps more surprisingly, despite the unkind weather, the seating area was almost full. Clara couldn't remember ever seeing it like that out of season. Cormac had told Betty he had plans to pull in more business, and it looked as if they were working.

'Afternoon!' he greeted as they approached the serving hatch. He was at the far end of the tiny kitchen area, ladling hot soup into bowls.

'Is that the famous bouillabaisse?' Clara asked. 'Smells good!'

'Actually, I've put chowder on today,' he said. 'Thought I'd mix it up a bit. Sorry if you wanted the bouillabaisse. I'll probably have that on tomorrow. I thought people might want something that sticks to their ribs a bit today with it being so cold and all.'

'No complaints from me!' Ava said. 'I'll have a bowl of that when you're ready.'

Clara could see now, as he brought the bowls over, that his soup had the thicker, creamier texture of chowder rather than the lighter stock of a bouillabaisse. It still looked pretty good though, and her mouth started to water at the thought of it. 'Me too,' she said.

'Be right with you,' he replied.

Clara watched as he dashed around. It was a sign of how busy he was that he'd barely looked up as they'd talked; usually he'd always take a moment to stop whatever he was doing to say hello properly. He was still amiable, of course – Clara couldn't imagine Cormac ever being anything else – but perhaps a bit more preoccupied than normal. She wouldn't have expected him to get this much business at this time of the year and in such terrible weather, and perhaps Cormac hadn't either, even though it had been his intention. It looked as though his winter menu was going down a storm. In fact, as if to reinforce that, Maxine from the lifeboat station arrived to queue behind them.

‘Hello, Max.’ Ava smiled at her. ‘After some of Cormac’s soup?’

‘I’ve come to get a couple of takeaway pots. I said I’d pick one up for Vas while I was here, to keep us going while we do some station admin.’

‘Admin...’ Ava was thoughtful for a minute. ‘I could come and help with that, if you like.’

Maxine grinned. ‘You? Sit still in an office for longer than ten seconds? This I’ve got to see!’

‘I can when I have to.’

Clara laughed. ‘Yep. Like when the moon is in Aquarius and it’s a leap year?’

‘All I’m saying is I have no classes on today,’ Ava continued, ignoring her sister’s jibe. ‘I could pop in after I’ve had lunch here.’

‘Seriously, you know we’d never turn down help,’ Maxine said. ‘That sounds good.’

‘Great. So I’ll be down in a bit.’

The side door of the shack opened and Cormac dashed out, dropping two bowls onto a table occupied by two young men before retrieving some empties from another table, rushing back inside and dumping them into a sink that contained a sizeable stack already. Rubbing sanitiser into his hands, he came to the hatch.

‘Sorry about the wait... what was it you ordered again? Takeouts?’

‘No, but Max wants takeouts for her and Vas, so do those first,’ Ava said. ‘We’ve got time to wait.’

‘Thanks, my love,’ Maxine said. ‘Two bowls, Cormac. Don’t care what’s in them – sure they’ll be good.’

He grinned. ‘Coming up.’

‘Could we get a clean spoon?’

They all looked round to see one of the young men from the eating area at the hatch, holding up a spoon.

‘Sorry, my friend dropped this one on the floor.’

Sure...’ Cormac dashed to a cutlery tray, took one out and dashed back to hand it to him.

‘You’re really busy today,’ Clara said as the customer went back to his table.

‘I can’t believe it – I wasn’t this busy even in the summer,’ Cormac said as he filled two cartons with soup and secured lids on to them. ‘It’s gone crazy.’

‘Word’s getting round about how good your food is,’ Ava said. ‘That’ll be it.’

‘And I expect the hot food is going down well in this weather,’ Clara added. ‘Seems to be anyway.’

‘Aye...’ He took the note Maxine offered and went to his till to count out some change. ‘Not that I’m complaining, but I don’t get a minute to breathe when it’s like this, let alone keep on top of everything. I could do with a part-timer really, someone a bit ad hoc. Know anyone who wants a little job like that? It wouldn’t pay much, but the views are great and there’s as much free food as they could eat – as long as you like fish, that is.’

‘If I hear of anyone looking, I’ll be sure to point them in your direction,’ Ava said. ‘I’d pitch in now but I promised Maxine I’d go to the station to help with some office stuff.’

‘That’s OK,’ Cormac said. ‘I appreciate the offer, but I’d probably have to show you the ropes and by the time I’d done that I might as well do the thing myself. If I’m honest, I could do with someone who has some experience, someone who can hit the ground running, so to speak.’

‘I might be able to help,’ Clara said. ‘Obviously it would only be a few hours here and there because I have my other job, but until you get someone else... I’ve done it before after all.’

‘Really?’ Cormac broke into a broad smile. ‘That would be amazing! Are you sure you have the time?’

‘I’d always help, you know that.’ She gave a slight frown. ‘I would have looked after the place when you went to Poole for your training; you didn’t have to close. I told you that.’

‘I know you did, but in the end it seemed simpler. I didn’t want to bother you... besides, it was a whole week – it was a big ask.’

‘This time I won’t take no for an answer. Logan’s had to go back to London for a while – not sure how long yet – so I’ll only be bored at home when I’m not in at the park anyway. It’ll do me good to have something to take my mind off what might be going on in London.’

‘Oh?’ Cormac put his hands in his apron pocket. ‘That doesn’t sound good.’

‘It’s Logan’s grandma... she’s really not well. They think she might die soon.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. If you want someone to talk to, I’m always happy to lend an ear. We went through something a bit like that with my grandma, so I have an idea what it’s like.’

‘Thanks, Cormac.’

Further conversation was cut short by the arrival of a group of cyclists. Cormac watched as they got off their bikes and, after securing them against the harbour wall, queued up behind Clara and Ava.

‘Why don’t you just put the soups up,’ Clara said, glancing at the cyclists. ‘We’ll take them with us to the table, save you the bother.’

‘You’re an angel – you know that? And if you’re sure about that offer of help, I’ll gladly take it, even if it’s only a few hours here and there while Logan’s away. I can’t pay a lot —’

‘Don’t worry,’ Clara cut in. ‘We’ll figure that out later.’

Cormac nodded and filled two bowls for them. Pushing them over the counter, he lowered his voice. ‘On the house for

the two best women in Port Promise.’

‘Awww, thanks, Cormac,’ Ava said. She made a show of looking around. ‘Where are they then?’

Cormac burst into laughter while Clara took her bowl and sniffed. It was herby, rich and comforting. Sea medicine, her father used to call dishes like this, full of goodness that would stave off any winter ailment. On rare mornings when he wasn’t too busy, he’d walk down to meet Robin’s trawler from a fishing trip and pick up some of his catch. The fish was so fresh you could still smell the sea on it. Then he’d make a fish pie, all creamy filling and golden potato crust. As kids, they’d complain and ask why they couldn’t go out for burgers in the next biggest town, like their friends did, but Clara would give anything these days to have her dad make her one more of those fish pies.

‘It smells *so* good,’ she said. ‘You’ll have to show me how you make it when I come to help.’

‘I will, although I think you could probably show me a thing or two.’

Clara and Ava took their bowls to the seating area and found a table while Cormac turned his attention to the waiting cyclists.

Ava dug her spoon into the soup and swirled it around. ‘So Logan’s gone a matter of hours and you’ve already found yourself a second job.’

Clara pulled one of the fleece blankets over her knees and got comfortable. ‘I know, but as I told Cormac, it will do me good to think about something other than what’s going on in London.’

‘What do you think that might be?’

‘God knows – I dread to think.’

Ava took a couple of spoonfuls of her soup, deep in thought as Clara began to eat hers. ‘Do you think he really will get his grandma’s house?’ she asked finally. ‘I know you said before he might.’

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure who else she could leave it to. His parents have said they don’t want it and they want to set Logan up, so...’

Ava shook her head slowly. ‘That’s mental. I can’t imagine coming into that sort of money. Not at our age.’

‘Well, it would be Logan’s money, not mine, so I suppose it depends on what he wants to do with it. Like I said to you the other day, I don’t feel I have any rights where that’s concerned.’

‘But surely he’ll sell the house?’ Ava dunked her spoon into her bowl and slurped. ‘Surely he won’t ask you to go and live in it with him? He knows how you feel about living there, doesn’t he? You have told him?’

‘Not in so many words...’ Clara shook her head. ‘His grandma hasn’t even died yet. It might be months, years... just because she’s taken a turn for the worse, doesn’t mean she won’t get better again and cling on longer. And we don’t even know what he might inherit, if anything.’

‘I’m surprised you didn’t go with him this week,’ Ava said.

‘I offered but he said I didn’t need to. I got the impression he didn’t want me there.’

‘I can’t imagine why that would be; he thinks the world of you.’

‘I don’t know either. I said more than once I’d get time off work.’ Clara gazed down at her soup. ‘He said I was better off here; didn’t want to drag me back and forth to London.’

‘I suppose he was trying to be nice.’

‘I suppose he was. It still worries me.’

‘I wouldn’t let it. It’s a family thing. Maybe he sees it as a non-event for you because it’s not your family. I mean we’d never see it that way, but not all families are like ours. Everyone deals with this stuff differently. He probably doesn’t see the point in putting you through all that stress. Did you explain how you feel?’

‘I didn’t want to be a nuisance. He’s got enough to worry about.’

‘Maybe you should.’

Clara swirled her spoon. ‘It’s too late now, isn’t it? He’s already gone.’

‘You’ve heard of these new things called phones, right?’

Clara looked up to see Ava wearing a wry smile. ‘It’s just... it kind of scares me.’ She put her spoon down to give her sister her full attention. ‘What if I’ve got this all wrong? What if the fact that he chooses to do this without me is a bad sign?’

‘A bad sign of what?’

‘That we shouldn’t be together? That maybe I’m not the one for him.’

‘Jesus, Clara!’ Ava let her own spoon fall into the bowl. ‘Where has this come from?’

‘I don’t know...’ Clara let out a sigh. ‘We bicker all the time lately – since the summer at least. This is our first real test and I feel as if we’re failing it already. I feel as if I’m losing him.’

‘Losing our dad was your first real test and you passed it with flying colours.’

‘But that didn’t require either of us to change... we didn’t have to change our lives. Neither of us had to give anything up.’

‘You don’t have to give anything up now, do you?’

‘We might have to... if this inheritance business goes how Logan thinks it will. I’m scared he’s going to want to go back to London to live in his grandma’s house and it will be the end of us, because I don’t know if I can do that. I don’t know that I...’ Clara shook her head and went back to her soup. ‘I’m not going to say it.’

‘You don’t know how any of this is going to go, but once you do you need to talk to each other and you need to be open

and honest no matter how scared you are.’

‘Hmm...’ There was a smile around Clara’s lips now. ‘Like you did with Harry? I seem to recall you handled that business so well...’

‘OK – you’re right. We were a pair of dicks. I know that, which is how I can say this to you now. It’s always easier to see where someone else is going wrong than to see where you’re making a pig’s ear of something, isn’t it? But me and Harry got there in the end. You and Logan will too.’

‘I hope so. It feels like we’ve come so far. We have so much to lose if we stuff this up.’

‘He loves you. He’ll see reason.’

‘Sometimes love isn’t enough.’

‘I don’t buy that. If it’s strong enough, it should be.’

‘Well now I feel more worried than ever. What if ours isn’t strong enough?’

‘Oh my God, Clara! I’ve seen how he looks at you! He came to Port Promise for you and he’s always complaining about it – he must love you!’

‘But that’s one more reason to go back to London if he does get this house. He’s never been happy here.’

‘He might gripe about it, but he’s still chosen to stay. If he hates it that much then it only goes to prove he loves you enough to get past it.’

‘Yes, but it also gives him cause to resent me one day when he sees that he’s spent half his life in a place he hates because I asked him to.’

Ava reached across the table and gave Clara’s hand a squeeze. ‘You’re bound to feel nervous about all this, but I really think it will be fine.’

‘Hmm... do you think I should just go to him now? Jump on a train, ignore what he said and assume he’s making an effort not to put me out but really would like me there? Is this

one of those situations where he says one thing but means another and I'm supposed to get that?'

'I don't think that's Logan's style.'

'It really doesn't seem right, leaving him to cope alone.'

'But he's not alone – he's got his family there.'

'Oh yeah, the Addams family. Fat lot of good they are – I'd rather have no one than them.'

'His mother especially does sound like a total nightmare.'

'She's another reason I could never move to London. Mars is too close to any city where she is. I suppose I could stick her for a few days for Logan's sake, though.'

'Haven't you just told Cormac you'd help him while Logan is away?'

'I know, but he'd understand, and maybe I wouldn't be that long. I could still help him when I get back. If I explained it all... or I could try to find someone who can give him a hand while I'm missing.'

'I suppose I could do it if someone shows me the ropes. The only problem with that is if there's a shout and we both have to go – there'd be nobody to look after the shack... though I suppose that's sort of already an issue.'

'But he doesn't have to report at the station – you only go if you can.'

'Right... but if Cormac sees me run to the station, he's not going to be able to help himself.' Ava lowered her voice. 'If I ever saw a man with a saviour complex, it's him. Not that it's a bad thing,' she continued in her normal tone again. 'Just... well, it's good for us, but I wonder if it's a good thing for him to be so hung up on saving people.'

'Surely that's what you're meant to be about.'

'Yes, but he takes it to a whole new level. He has to be involved no matter what.'

'Hmm. Remind you of someone?'

‘Dad.’ Ava smiled. ‘I know. But Dad had good reason.’

‘Maybe Cormac does too.’

‘Maybe. He’s certainly desperate to complete his training. There’s more to it than wanting to be a good volunteer.’

Clara leaned across the table, her turn to lower her voice. ‘What have you heard?’

She couldn’t deny she found the notion of Cormac having a secret past intriguing. Aside from what everyone else in Port Promise knew – which was mostly what Cormac wanted them to know – she had very little information about him. She’d always felt there was more to him than what they knew – a lot more. She didn’t have any evidence for this, only that people didn’t move to a place like Port Promise without good reason. It was quiet and remote and hardly the centre of the universe. Cormac had come to take on his great uncle’s dilapidated old fish shack, a business that was worth next to nothing, and though he was turning it around, it could hardly have been an enticing prospect when he’d first looked at it and made the decision to come. So if not that, what had brought him to this tiny speck on the map of Cornwall? It certainly wasn’t to make his fortune, and he already had a lovely, picturesque hometown in Ireland, so it wasn’t for the seascapes or sunsets. And it wasn’t for love, as it had been for Logan. There didn’t seem an obvious draw, and not being able to work it out bugged Clara, even if it was none of her business.

Ava shrugged. ‘I haven’t heard anything. Call it a hunch.’

Clara nodded slowly. So she wasn’t the only one who’d given his secret past some thought. ‘Not that we’d have it any other way, but I must admit I’ve always found it a bit strange that of all the places he could have come to live, he chose here.’

‘It’s nice here.’

‘Yes, but it’s not a very obvious place, when you consider all the other places in the world he could have gone to. He’d have been better off in a bigger town, I’m sure – from a business point of view.’

‘I suppose when the shack became available it was a no-brainer. Perhaps he got it at mates’ rates or something, being family.’

‘He was hardly close to his uncle, as far as I can tell, and he’d never even been here. In fact, we’d never heard of Ted having a family in Ireland in all the time he owned this place.’

‘Maybe we didn’t ask the right questions. Ted was hardly known for socialising. Even Dad said he was a miserable so and so, and Dad had time for everyone. It’s no wonder the family never came over to visit him.’

‘I suppose so,’ Clara said. ‘Lucky for us, Cormac doesn’t get his personality from his uncle.’

She glanced up at the shack. The queue had gone – for now at least. ‘Do you think he gets lonely?’

‘I’ve often wondered that. He’s got plenty of friends but that’s not the same as family, is it?’

‘I was thinking about romance actually.’

‘There’s a queue around here, but he gives the impression he’s not really in the market right now, doesn’t he? I think he’s too focused on settling in and making this place a success to give time to romance right now.’

‘Did he say that?’

‘Not in so many words, but that’s what I think.’

Clara scooped some chowder onto her spoon. It was salty and rich and creamy. The man could cook. ‘What do you think about Betty?’

Ava blinked. ‘Should I think anything in particular about her?’

‘For him...’ Clara nodded at the shack.

‘Oh. I’ve never really thought about it. I suppose they could talk about food if nothing else.’

‘I think they’d be a good match.’

‘Do you?’ Ava asked doubtfully.

‘They’re both single and I think they’re both a bit lonely.’

‘That’s it?’

‘There are loads of other things they’d have in common; I just can’t think of them right now. Anyway, sometimes opposites attract, don’t they? I think there’s chemistry there and that’s more important than anything.’

‘If you say so. So you’re planning to play Cupid?’

‘There’s no harm in a little nudge, is there?’

‘You’ve seen that film *Clueless*, right?’

‘Years ago – what’s that got to do with anything?’

‘I’m only saying, little nudges don’t always go the way you think they will.’

‘I’m not going to get *that* involved! All I’m going to do is plant the seed, you know, drop some hints to them both that they ought to give each other a look. Betty already likes him; I know that much. Maybe you can find out if he likes her.’

‘How do I do that?’

‘I don’t know... bring her up in conversation or something, see how he reacts.’

Ava laughed. ‘No way! If you want to do that, then go ahead, but I’m not getting involved.’

‘Why not?’

‘You’re not Tinder, Clara! Let them decide if they like each other. If they do, I’m sure they’ll figure it out without your help.’

‘Once again, do I have to remind you that you and Harry were massively crap when it came to figuring out if you liked each other. If me and Gaby hadn’t—’

‘What? You and Gaby?’

‘Who do you think had the idea for the picnic where you got together, duh? We told Harry it was a lifeboat crew thing so he didn’t know you’d be there and he’d come. Left up to you two nightmares, you’d have never got together.’

Ava grinned. ‘Scheming little cow. But Cormac’s not Harry, and Betty has way more sense than me.’

‘She’s a lot shyer than you.’

‘*He’s* not. I’m sure if he likes her, he won’t have any problem saying so.’

Clara paused, and then nodded. ‘I expect you’re right. I can’t help seeing them both alone and thinking they might be so happy together. And you think *he* has a saviour complex?’

‘You have a matchmaking complex, apparently. I’ll have to warn people to watch out for that.’

Clara couldn’t help a grin as she went back to her soup. It was good to spend time with Ava, who always helped to banish her worries and usually talked a lot of sense. Considering Clara was the older sister, she often thought Ava was the wiser one.

The neighbouring table finished and got up to leave, and as soon as their chatter faded the space seemed a lot quieter and less conducive to frank conversations. So theirs turned to more mundane things, like the weather and how far they’d got with Christmas preparations and whether their nephew Elijah had entered his moody tweens yet.

Cormac came out to clear the table that had recently been vacated and Clara suddenly felt guilty for talking about him, even though none of it had been malicious.

‘Can I get you anything else?’ he asked, stopping at their table. ‘Another drink?’

Ava stuck her thumb up. ‘I’m good, thanks.’

There was a new and easy familiarity between Cormac and Ava these days. Clara supposed it was down to them working and training so often together and, when she thought about it, Ava probably had a far better idea of what might be good for Cormac than she did. Clara couldn’t think of anyone she had that kind of friendship with, save for those in her own family: not Logan, and not even Betty, who was her oldest and closest friend and someone she loved like a sister. It must have been something in the intensity of the way they worked together,

she supposed. She wondered vaguely whether that meant she was missing out on something very special in her life. Her dad had always talked of the camaraderie among the lifeboat volunteers and how that was a big part of the reason he loved it so much, almost as big as saving lives was. It was a bond unlike any other, where everyone knew their lives depended on one another and where it was vital to get along and communicate well, a bond that translated into their onshore lives too. There had to be trust and respect and a certain type of friendship for that to work.

‘I’m OK too.’ Clara smiled at Cormac. ‘Thanks. In fact’ – she checked her watch – ‘I ought to get back to work. I’ve already run over and Tanika won’t thank me for keeping her waiting.’

‘Right you are,’ Cormac said. ‘So I’ll call you?’

Clara frowned. ‘What for?’

He laughed lightly. ‘About the help! Don’t tell me you’ve gone off the idea already!’

‘Oh, yes... that... the thing is...’ She hesitated. She ought to tell him she’d been thinking of joining Logan in London, but then she noted the obvious hope in his expression and she didn’t have the heart to let him down. Besides, Logan had made his feelings clear. Even if she pushed and he relented, perhaps he’d only see her as an imposition he felt obliged to accept? Maybe it was better to stay away after all. And really, when she thought about it, in her heart she didn’t want to be in London at all if she didn’t have to be.

‘Yes,’ she said finally. ‘Let me know when you think you might need the extra help and I’ll let you know if I’m free.’

He beamed. ‘That’d be grand! I’ll owe you big time.’

‘You owe nobody,’ Clara said. ‘You do enough for the whole community. If anyone owes anyone, we all owe you.’

‘I mean to say I appreciate it,’ Cormac said, his smile spreading. ‘I’ll see about getting permanent help, but this will be very welcome in the meantime.’

‘If I get spare time and you show me what to do, I could help out too,’ Ava said.

‘You’d have to be really desperate, though,’ Clara put in.

Ava gave her arm a playful slap. ‘Oi!’

‘I’m sure that’s not true,’ Cormac said. ‘Well, I’d better get on.’

‘And I’d better get to work,’ Clara said.

She gave Ava a quick kiss, then waved at Cormac. ‘Call me whenever you’ve figured out what you need!’

CHAPTER EIGHT

Clara read the text. Cormac hadn't messed about getting in touch with her.

Hey, hope you're well and that offer of help is still good. I could really do with a hand when the lantern parade is on.

The lantern parade was actually known as the Promise Procession, but Cormac probably didn't know the origins of it, much like he didn't know the official name, so it wasn't quite as ironic that he'd chosen this day to ask for help as it might have been. Everyone would be out and so he was right about being busy – people would want hot drinks and maybe some of his soup, and Betty hadn't actually decided whether to stay open or not. She'd been torn between needing the business and wanting to join the parade, but if she closed, there'd only be Cormac's shack or Salty's Chips (Nigel never took part in any Port Promise event because he always wanted to stay open).

The problem was, the Morrows were usually at the head of the procession, as the parade was to celebrate their ancestor Izhiah Morrow's promise to the town. So the story went, he was the first to dedicate his life to saving others from the sea, even before the official service arrived, and every generation of Morrows since had done the same.

As a kid, Clara had hated the attention, and she'd still dread the day, even as an adult. Ava had been way cooler about it, even though she didn't exactly love the attention

either, and Gaby had simply accepted it as a fact of her birth, expressing no concern either way. But this year was different. The last one had taken place shortly after her father's death, and though the villagers had continued with the tradition as they always had, it had been a muted affair and nobody had expected the newly grieving Morrows to attend, let alone lead it. But that was last year, and things had moved on. There had been unspoken assumptions that normal service would be resumed and that the family would take their place in the procession as they'd always done, especially since a new generation of Morrows had taken up the mantle and Ava was on the lifeboats.

I'm so sorry, I'll have to speak to my

Clara deleted the half-written reply. It was a stupid thing that she didn't want to do anyway. When Logan had first moved to Port Promise and she'd told him about the procession, he'd laughed and called them all bumpkins, asking what time the human sacrifice was scheduled for and whether he ought to be worried that he might be earmarked as the victim. He'd done a better job of hiding his amusement on the night, but the damage was done – Clara felt stupid and more conspicuous than ever as she walked with her family holding her lantern aloft. He'd taken a seat on the harbour wall to watch instead of joining in and had taken photos to send home, and Clara could just imagine the accompanying messages and his family's replies. They all thought it was stupid. They all thought Port Promise was stupid; Vetiver in particular had made no secret of that.

Clara tapped a thumb on the screen of her phone as she pondered what to do. Should she talk to her mum? It wouldn't be the first time a member of the family missed the procession, and it wasn't like the rest of them wouldn't be there. Cormac was a friend in need, and Clara's dad had always taught them that if you committed your help to someone then you were duty-bound to see that commitment through. Clara hadn't even considered that the procession might be an issue when she'd

pledged to help Cormac, and she could hardly let him down now.

Yes, that's OK, I can do that.

One more second of hesitation, and then she pressed send. Once she explained it to the others they'd understand, even if they weren't exactly happy about it. And Cormac's shack didn't stay open so late that she couldn't join the celebrations at some point, even if she missed the actual procession.

She was about to put her phone away and get ready to meet her mum when it started to ring. Logan's smiling face lit up the screen.

'Hey,' she said. 'How's it going there? Everything OK? How's your grandma? Have you seen much of her?'

His reply sounded weary. 'It's fine. Well, it's not fine, obviously, but things are kind of staying the same. Grandma is quiet, mostly sleeps, doesn't really know what's going on around her now.'

'Oh, Logan, I'm sorry... are you sure you don't want me to come—'

'Honestly, there's no point. It's horrible here right now. How are things with you? No problems at the studio or anything?'

'With the studio shut there's not a lot for me to worry about, so everything is fine. Same old Port Promise, eh? I work and I hang out with my family and the odd drink with Betty... nothing to see here.'

'That's good. I've had an online order for a print, which I've just noticed come through. It's amazing really when you think the studio's not even open. Sometimes I do wonder whether online is easier and I ought to save myself the payments on a place.'

'But we'd have nowhere to live, and you need a space to work even if you don't display there.'

‘That’s true, and I can see the reasons for keeping it. Still, it does seem like an unnecessary expense at times. Enough of that anyway. You’re OK? You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?’

‘I should be asking you that. I’ve got plenty to keep me occupied here. I miss you, of course, but there’s nothing we can do about that.’

‘I miss you too.’

They should have had plenty to talk about, but a strange and awkward silence fell over them. She could have banished it by telling him the ways in which she was keeping occupied, which, of course, included helping Cormac. It wasn’t a secret and there was no need to keep it from Logan, but mentioning it didn’t seem like a good idea right now.

‘I’m going hiking with Mum this afternoon,’ she said finally.

‘Hiking? You’ve never been hiking before – what’s brought this on?’

‘I’ve hiked plenty of times, before you knew me. Mum’s taken it up again since Dad died, and I thought it would do me good to go with her. It’ll be nice to spend some time with her, just the two of us.’

‘I can’t say it appeals to me, but you do you. I’m glad you’ve got stuff going on there.’

‘I still feel as if I should be in London with you.’

‘We’ve been through this. There’s really no need and no point.’

‘I understand. I suppose I feel guilty that I’m having a lovely time here and you’re suffering there.’

‘You’re having a lovely time, eh?’

Clara smiled. ‘You know what I mean. Not lovely, but definitely not as bad as you. Do you know when you might come home?’

‘I thought I’d catch up with some friends while I’m here, so I’ve arranged a couple of nights out. Sorry, they’re in a few days’ time because that’s all people could do, so it might be next week now. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘God no! You should see your friends – it’ll do you good. Anyone I know?’

‘Not really. Not anyone you’ve met anyway. You’ll meet them at the wedding, though, I hope. If they can all make it.’

‘Well have a good time and don’t worry about me. I’m glad you’re making the most of your visit. Listen, I’d better go or I’ll be late for Mum. I can call you later?’

‘Don’t worry about that. I’ve promised my parents I’ll have dinner with them. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

‘OK.’

‘I love you.’

‘Love you too. Bye.’

Clara ended the call and went to get her boots. She’d have time later to digest all that Logan had told her, but right now, she had a date to keep with her mum.

The grass on the hills was tall and woody, turned brown and stiff by the passing of the summer, but underneath lay a bed of soft moss and bracken undergrowth. With their stout boots and thick trousers it didn’t bother either Clara or her mum too much. And any inconvenience fighting through the undergrowth might bring was more than compensated by the views. They were on high ground, marching a trail that had been walked by their ancestors for centuries, a narrow footpath meandering across the rolling fields and hills that tumbled down to the cliffs that overlooked Port Promise.

They stopped for a breather at the point where the hills parted into a valley that revealed a cauldron of grey sea in the distance. Somewhere down there, hidden by the hills, was home. Clara didn’t come up here as often as she ought to – life was far too busy for that – but when she did she felt blessed.

Not only did she live in the most perfect place, but on her doorstep were breathtaking views that could be mistaken for heaven itself. Even now, in the gloom of the winter, it was achingly beautiful.

Jill handed a bottle of water to her daughter and then bent to retie a bootlace. Clara took a drink while she looked out onto the vista with the deepest contentment.

‘We’ll have to keep an eye on the time,’ Jill said. ‘It’ll be dark early with there being so much cloud cover; don’t want to get caught out up here. A broken ankle is not on my to-do list today.’

Clara fastened the lid back on the bottle. ‘Mine neither. I’m sure we’ll be fine; we’ve got a few hours yet and if things get desperate, we’ve got phone torches.’

‘I expect if things got desperate we could ask someone to come up to us with proper equipment, but I’d rather not put anyone out. Don’t want to be that idiot woman who needs mountain rescue.’

‘We’re hardly up a mountain.’

Jill straightened up and Clara handed over the bottle. She took a sip and then stood next to Clara, eyes trained on the same grey sea in the distance.

‘Your dad loved it up here. Didn’t come up often because he never wanted to be this far away from the blasted lifeboat station in case there was a shout, but when he did...’

‘I know,’ Clara said as her mum’s sentence faltered. And she wasn’t talking about the hills or her dad’s lack of walking on them now but that she understood – sometimes her mum resented the lifeboats for what they had taken from them. It was only natural, she supposed, and she knew her mum didn’t choose to feel that way, but sometimes she couldn’t help it.

‘So...’ Jill fastened the bottle again and stowed it in her rucksack. ‘How are you?’

‘You know how I am. I’m here, with you, and perfectly all right.’

‘I meant, *how are you?* With everything that’s going on?’

‘Ah... Ava’s been talking to you.’

‘Actually it was Gaby who said she was worried.’

Clara supposed Ava had told Gaby about their recent conversation concerning Logan’s visit to London without her and Gaby must have told their mum. It was strange that Gaby didn’t come directly to Clara, though. She must have decided Jill would get further, perhaps get Clara to open up more.

‘It must be a strain on you,’ Jill continued. ‘I know you barely know his grandmother, but still...’

‘It’s more that he’s in London and I’m here when I feel I ought to be there. But at least I’m not alone here, right? I have you and Gaby and Ava.’

‘Yes, but there’s still all that time at home to dwell on things.’

Clara nodded. If anyone knew how that was, her mum did.

‘I’m fine, honestly,’ she replied. ‘You don’t need to worry about me. I complained a bit the other day, but I’m busy enough here that I don’t have all that much time to think about it.’

‘I suppose it’s a good thing then. Gaby said you’d agreed to help Cormac – that’s kind of you.’

‘Not really. He’s going to pay me, and even if he didn’t it would be more like fun than work. He’s good company, I’ll be doing something I love to do and getting out of the flat for a bit. It’s no hardship at all.’

‘I still say it’s nice of you; I gather he’s been tearing his hair out recently.’

‘I reckon he underestimated how popular his winter menu might be. Which is a good thing, obviously, but I don’t think he was quite prepared.’

‘Well I’m glad he’s getting the business; it means he’s more likely to stay in Port Promise for good. We can’t afford to let good people like that move away.’

As Jill seemed well-disposed towards Cormac at this juncture, and as she'd have to break the news sooner or later, Clara decided to seize the moment.

'He's a bit desperate for Friday night actually, so I said I'd help.'

Jill turned sharply to her. 'Friday?'

'I know it's the procession,' Clara replied. 'But surely I can miss it this—'

'But you know how important it is; this year more than ever.'

'That's not what I... I only meant I'm hardly the most important member of the family. If the procession commemorates Iziah's promise, then surely it's more about those who've joined the lifeboats than the rest of us. So, let's face it, this year it's really about Ava, and it's her everyone wants to see. After all, she's the first Morrow girl to join and was a bit of a local hero even before that, especially after she rescued that man and his son last summer...'

'We all ought to be there – it's about family solidarity.'

'Yes...'

Clara went for her trump card. 'But Dad used to say that we ought to honour our commitments, and I made one to Cormac. And Dad always used to say we ought to help anyone where we can, and isn't it better to help a friend in need than to parade around the streets, especially when that event isn't really about me at all? Dad would have thought so. He would have said "a promise is a promise". I told Cormac I'd help, and I can't let him down now.'

Jill gave her a shrewd look. 'Why do I get the idea you've somehow engineered this?'

'I haven't, I swear. I just forgot what night it was when he asked. And really, that's the one where he'll be busier than he has been in months; everyone will be out and they'll want feeding. Betty won't be open because she'll want to join the procession.'

'Salty's will be open.'

‘Mum...’ Clara raised her eyebrows in admonishment. ‘You said yourself you want Cormac to stay in Port Promise, and that’s more likely to happen if his business is doing well. He could earn good money on Friday.’

Jill let out a sigh. ‘Seems all my girls are intent on doing things I don’t approve of these days.’

‘At least I haven’t joined the lifeboat crew.’

‘There is that. I don’t think I could cope with another of you announcing you wanted to go to sea. I suppose it is what it is.’

‘It’s only a few hours here or there, not forever. I’ll be at the procession next year for sure.’

‘You’re right – if you’ve told Cormac you’ll help him, then you must go and help him. That’s what your dad would have done too.’

‘Thanks, Mum. And I promise as soon as I can get away I’ll come and find you. Even if I miss the actual parade I’ll be there for the gathering afterwards.’

‘I hate to say it, but your dad would have approved.’

‘I hope so,’ Clara said. ‘I’d like to think so.’ She hugged her mum. ‘I’ve still got you, and all this stuff happening lately makes me more thankful for that than ever.’

Jill smiled. ‘Me too. I don’t know what I’d have done this past year without you and your sisters. The whole community in fact. Everyone has been so kind; I’m a lucky woman in many ways.’

A brisk wind swept across the hillside, flattening the grasses and sending old leaves into the air.

‘You know what,’ Jill said as she pulled her scarf tighter. ‘I could go for a hot chocolate at Betty’s right now.’

‘Oh, yes, so could I! I’ll race you down to the village!’

‘No need for that – I don’t want my hot chocolate with a broken ankle, thank you very much!’

While the rest of the village was gathering ahead of the procession, Clara was striding towards Cormac's shack. It was yet more work for her, but in a strange way she was looking forward to it – a lot more than she'd looked forward to tonight's alternative.

She'd never told anyone in the family, but back when Cormac's uncle had first retired and the shack had become available, she'd wanted to buy it for herself. Of course, the usual obstacle got in the way – money. It wasn't a huge amount of money, but it would need a lot more spent on it once she'd done the deal, especially given the changes she would have wanted to make, and when she'd discussed it with Logan, they'd decided that in light of striving to grow his business, it wasn't the right time. Managing both would have wiped out what time they had for each other, and Clara had to reluctantly agree. Though she was disappointed to have missed out, she'd been glad to see someone so invested in Port Promise and with such exciting plans arrive to take over in her stead; she'd have hated to see the shack go to ruin or end up as some fast-food kiosk.

Clara let herself in at the side door of the shack to find a sweaty-looking Cormac.

'Am I glad to see you!'

'You've been busy then?' she asked.

'Mad! Not that I'm complaining, of course – the business is welcome. There's a spare apron on the hook there if you need it... you might want to hang your coat under the tarpaulin at the back so it's in the fresh air. Might be a bit cold when you put it back on but at least it won't smell of fish.'

'Will do. Not that it matters all that much if I do go back to the flat smelling of fish – there's nobody home to complain. You could have called me,' she added, unbuttoning her duffel coat. 'I'd have come down earlier if you'd wanted me to.'

'I didn't want to take advantage. It's good enough of you to come down tonight as it is. Nice jumper, by the way.'

Clara was wearing an old sweater that had been knitted for her many years ago by Robin's wife. It was a close replica of the one he often wore when he went out fishing, made from good thick yarn, and it was the warmest thing Clara owned.

'This... it gave out frost tonight so I thought I ought to layer up. This is an old thing I've had years but it's toasty and it was also handmade for me, so even though it's a bit frayed and bobbled I can't bear to get rid of it.'

'I don't blame you...' He pulled some celery from the fridge and started to chop. 'Need to make some more...' He nodded at the celery, but then got distracted again. 'Maybe we won't be so busy after all if it's going to be cold later – people might stay home.'

'You must be joking! Everyone turns out for the Promise Procession! In 2010 we had six-feet-deep snow drifts and winds strong enough to rip your hair out and everyone still turned up with their lanterns! It would take an apocalypse to keep folks away, and even then some of them would try to make it!'

'Right... so we'd better batten down the hatches?'

'I'm afraid so,' Clara said, and in her tone was a certain glee. She was looking forward to being busy. She'd trained for this, and she so rarely got to exercise her skills in a proper kitchen for more than a handful of people. She was ready, raring to go, and a night of good honest work doing something she enjoyed would be the perfect tonic for all the anxieties that had plagued her over the previous days.

As she fastened her apron and opened her mouth to ask what Cormac needed first, there was a tentative tap at the side door.

'That'll be Robin,' Cormac said, going to open it.

As predicted, Port Promise's old fisherman was there, a crate of various fresh fish in his arms.

'Afternoon,' he said in his usual gruff way. But then he caught sight of Clara and she smiled at his obvious confusion.

'I'm helping out here,' she said.

‘But the procession...?’ Robin began.

‘Can do without me for one year,’ Clara said. ‘It’s not like I’m the star attraction. You’re late with a catch,’ she continued. ‘Just got in?’

‘Too rough first thing,’ he said. ‘And after... well, I don’t take the risks these days.’ He studied her for a moment. ‘Is that...?’

Clara pulled at the sleeve of her jumper. ‘Oh yes, it is. I still wear it.’

Robin’s answering smile was small and melancholy. ‘She used to love her knitting. Always a pair of needles clicking away. Used to drive me mad when the telly was on, but now...’

‘I know,’ Clara said softly. ‘But she left you a lot of good memories and those lovely boys. It’s only normal for you to miss her.’

‘Anyway...’ Robin sniffed and held up the crate. ‘Where do you want this?’

‘Oh, on the counter by the sink will do,’ Cormac said. ‘Wherever you can find space. I’d just about given up on you. I was about to google the nearest supermarket.’

Robin looked appalled at the notion and Cormac chuckled softly. ‘All right, maybe that was going too far. But I had thought about sending Clara out with a fishing rod.’

‘I’d have gone too,’ Clara said. ‘But I don’t think we’d have made much money from what I’d have come back with.’

‘Right...’ Robin looked between the two of them uncertainly as he set the crate down. ‘Want me to gut this lot? Only I’ve got to...’

‘I’ll do it,’ Clara said. ‘I expect you want to get back and get cleaned up for the procession.’

‘I can do it if you need me to,’ Robin said, but Clara shook her head as she looked to Cormac for his opinion.

‘It’s good of you to bring it over,’ Cormac said to Robin. ‘I couldn’t ask you to prepare it as well. Clara’s right – you must want to get back and get ready for the procession tonight.’ He glanced at Clara. ‘And if I were to ask you to do such a dirty job, I’m sure you’d never come back again.’

‘It honestly doesn’t bother me,’ Clara said.

‘It wouldn’t have bothered me either,’ Robin put in. ‘Was my fault they’ve arrived so late – I know you’re always good enough to come to the boat to pick up your stocks when I land earlier; least I could do was bring it over when I was late.’

‘It wasn’t your fault at all,’ Cormac said, going to the crate and looking over the fish. ‘You can’t help what the sea’s doing, and I’d rather have this than get a page from the lifeboat station to come and get—’ He stopped, mid-sentence, his cheeks flushed as he realised his mistake. ‘Robin, I didn’t mean...’

Clara spoke into the awkward gap to try to change the subject. ‘These look lovely,’ she said, going over to the crate. ‘You’ve really picked the best of the catch here, Robin.’

Robin took off his hat and ruffled his unruly hair. ‘No bother...’ he mumbled. ‘Best get off...’

Before they could say anything more, he’d backed out of the door and was gone.

Cormac turned to Clara with a grimace. ‘I can’t believe I said that.’

‘Don’t worry. He knows you didn’t mean anything by it.’

‘But to Robin of all people!’

‘Honestly there’s no point in beating yourself up over it. Robin knows you would never deliberately say something mean.’

‘Are you sure? He looked upset.’

‘I’ll bet he’s not as upset as you are now. And I don’t think he was. He always looks kind of miserable anyway; always has done. I’ve never seen him look anything else.’

‘From what I’ve heard, he has plenty of reason to look like that.’

‘I suppose so, but even when his wife was alive and before the night with my dad he was... well, I don’t want to say dreary, but let’s just say he’s not exactly known for dancing on tables.’

Cormac didn’t look any happier, despite Clara’s reassurances. In a strange way it was sweet. He was such a huge, confident presence, and yet he seemed to feel the pain of others as acutely as if it was his own. He was so much more perceptive and sensitive than people realised, and the more Clara saw of him, the stronger her impression was that he was far deeper than he at first appeared. He was a conundrum that intrigued her – a pleasant one at that.

‘I hope it didn’t ruin his night,’ Cormac continued. ‘What was I thinking, reminding him of *that* night?’ Then he looked up at Clara, his concerned expression deepening. ‘And now I’ve gone and reminded you of it too! I’m such an idiot!’

‘I really wouldn’t worry – the procession will remind everyone anyway, so...’

‘Will it?’ Cormac glanced up from the fish he’d scooped up to wash. ‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s for...’ Clara frowned. ‘Has nobody told you what the Promise Procession is actually about?’

‘I know it’s to do with the lifeboats. Ava said I ought to go; you know, so people can show their appreciation.’ He began to fill the sink with water. ‘But I don’t need any of that. Seems a bit too close to hero worship for my liking and that’s not why I do it.’

‘That’s what Ava told you? Nothing else?’

‘Should she have told me something else?’

Typical Ava. She was probably as embarrassed about the fuss as Cormac. It was the villagers who kept this particular tradition alive, not the Morrows themselves, who only went along with it because the rest of the village enjoyed it so much. Her dad had once suggested that they turn it into something

else – they could still trudge around the harbour with their lanterns but make it a celebration of something different – but the people sitting around his table in the Spratt had looked so aghast at the idea that he'd quickly rowed back and never mentioned it again.

‘Well it’s...’ Clara tied her apron. ‘It’s sort of about us actually.’

‘Who?’

‘The Morrows. Well, at least, the promise made by Iziah Morrow.’

Cormac looked even more confused. ‘Who’s Iziah? I know there’s a story about how the lifeboats came to Port Promise, but I don’t really know the details.’

‘Oh, it’s a daft old thing,’ Clara said briskly, rooting in the drawer for a knife to start on the fish. ‘You don’t want to hear all that ancient crap, I’m sure.’

‘I do. If you want to tell me. I mean, it it’s going to bring back painful memories, then—’

‘Of course not.’ Clara came over to the sink. ‘This was all way, way back, way before any recent events. I’m talking three hundred years, maybe even longer. I don’t even know if it really happened. People say it did, but there are no records – nothing reliable at least. I reckon Iziah started the rumour himself, fancied being a celebrity.’ She laughed lightly. ‘But it goes that he was the first to pledge to rescue people stranded at sea, here in Port Promise at any rate, the first to kind of make it his mission in life rather than, you know, just being in the right place at the right time and wading in. He patrolled the shores and kept watch because he’d lost his best friend at sea and vowed nobody else would ever be lost while he could prevent it. That was the promise from where the town gets its name, if you believe what people say. The rest I expect you know. Since then, a Morrow has always served on the lifeboats.’

‘Wow...’ Cormac turned off the tap. ‘So I have royalty here in my little shack?’

Clara giggled. ‘Yes, so on your knees, peasant.’

‘But what’s it got to do with tonight?’

‘The procession commemorates Iziah’s promise. The lanterns represent the lanterns his wife lit to guide his ship back to shore the night he lost his friend but he survived, and the lanterns he lit in the years after that to keep watch. Personally, I think people just like the idea of marching up and down with them. Gaby says it’s all a bit druid – she might have a point.’

‘Oh, so I’m guessing your family go every year?’

‘Oh God, yes! It’s like you’d be disowned if you said you didn’t want to.’

‘But you won’t be there tonight. Why didn’t you say something when I asked you to help me here?’

‘Well, if I’m being perfectly honest – and never tell my mum this! – I’m quite glad of an excuse to be out of it. I hate all that fuss. Ava does too really, though she might enjoy it more this year now she’s on the lifeboats and she’ll be there with Harry. Might feel a bit more like she’s earned it, you know?’

‘I’m sure she has. I do feel guilty making you miss it, though.’

‘Honestly, don’t. You’re doing me a favour.’

He shoved his hands in his apron pockets and studied her for a moment with a warm smile.

‘What?’ she asked, suddenly aware of the moment, and how she was feeling guilty and didn’t know why.

‘Oh, nothing...’ He shook himself, seemingly flustered by her question. Cormac didn’t do flustered, which made the whole thing weirder still.

‘Sorry,’ he added, ‘must have zoned out there. Bit tired, you know – it’s been a long week.’

Clara waved away his apology, grateful for an explanation she could safely get behind. ‘I bet it has. I don’t know how

you keep on top of everything – running this place and volunteering on the boats, and your personal life too. I'd be in the nuthouse with all that to think about.'

'I'm sure that's not true; you seem quite busy to me, yet you always seem to cope with a smile.'

'You wouldn't say that if you'd spent any time with me this week.'

'Hmm... excuse me for prying, but would this have anything to do with your Logan going off to London?'

Clara's smile was rueful. 'So you've heard all about that? Of course you have – Ava probably told you.'

'You've said it yourself, there are no secrets round here. Have you heard from him?'

She paused. She didn't know why, but she felt a little reluctant to talk about it. Not because she thought Cormac was poking his nose in, but because if she started to tell him about it, she was afraid all the fears she'd been bottling up might burst from her, and she didn't want that. Cormac was being Cormac – he just wanted to help if he could. He'd have done the same for anyone. As an impartial listener it was harder to think of anyone better, but did she really want to burden him with so much when he had enough going on in his life?

'Yes,' she began slowly, 'he's—'

Clara's reply was cut short by a voice at the serving hatch.

'Hi... excuse me... are you open?'

'We are!' Cormac shot Clara a faint look of apology and went to attend to the customer. As he did, more arrived, forming a patient queue behind the first lady. It looked as if their conversation was going to have to wait, and maybe, with time to reflect, Clara would decide it wasn't such a good idea to have it after all.

The dark came early, as it always did when the year was speeding towards the winter solstice and the longest night, but the early twilight was seen as a bonus for the procession,

because it meant the lanterns could be lit that much earlier and they'd look their best. There was always the weather to contend with, of course, and though the procession would go ahead regardless of that, it wasn't quite as much fun with the wind slapping hail into your face.

Tonight, a frost had been forecast, with temperatures below freezing, but with a quiet wind and no rain. Clara knew this because she'd been told by many people that day. The British in general were known for being a little obsessed with all things meteorological, but in Port Promise they took this to a whole new level. The lives and livelihoods of almost everyone depended on it in one way or another, and so most of the residents would not only keep a close eye on the forecasts, but their interest would often extend to tide times, wind speed and direction, and sometimes the entire shipping forecast in all its unintelligible and enigmatic glory.

One of those people was Clara's mother, Jill. She'd always listened to it, mostly so she felt prepared for the possibility of Clara's dad being called out to a rescue. Jill had told Clara exactly what sort of weather they could expect for the procession, which was exactly what she'd repeated to Cormac.

So nobody was more surprised than Clara to look out of the serving hatch during a lull and see fine snowflakes beginning to pepper the ground beyond the shack.

'Well, I didn't see this coming...'

'I hate snow this early in the winter,' Cormac said, coming to her side to see for himself. 'It usually means there'll be none for Christmas.'

'Does it?'

'Aye. We've used the year's quota already.'

'I'm pretty sure that's not how it works,' Clara said with a light laugh. 'And why do you care so much if it snows at Christmas?'

'Doesn't everyone?' Cormac asked, with genuine surprise in his voice. 'I thought everyone hoped for a white Christmas. There wouldn't be betting on it every year if they didn't.'

Clara turned to him with a grin. ‘You really are like a big kid, aren’t you? A huge muscle-bound kid.’

‘You got me. Want to take a break? I think most people are up the hill lighting their lanterns now, so we should have a quiet spell. You could even go and catch some of the procession if you want to; I shouldn’t need you until it’s winding up and people want to get something to eat.’

‘I could do that; it would definitely get me brownie points with my mum. Are you sure you don’t need me here? I’m happy to stay, so if you’re being a martyr because you feel bad that I’m missing it, don’t.’

‘Honestly, I think the next hour or so will be dead. Go on up there – make your ma happy.’

‘Aww, thanks, Cormac. I’ll be back in an hour... is that OK?’

‘You’re doing me the favour – take as long as you like!’

‘An hour is plenty of that nonsense.’ Clara smiled as she unfastened her apron and went to get her coat. ‘I’ll bring you back a snowball if I can find enough snow to make it!’

From the bottom of the slope that led away from the harbour and into town, Clara could see the trail of yellow lights and hear the excited voices and laughter of the villagers. The snow was barely a dusting of icing sugar, but it was enough to make her nostalgic for Christmas. And this one, she hoped, would be better than the last one, where the loss of her dad was so recent and every day had been darkened by grief. They may yet face another one just like it if Logan’s grandma died before then, but she had to hope and pray for better – she certainly felt she’d earned it.

She walked to meet the procession, the cold snow kissing her face, and in a few minutes she met the first of the crowd, friendly greetings coming at her from all directions:

‘Clara! How are you?’

‘Oooh, hello, my love! It’s so lovely to see you!’

‘Here she is – Clara Morrow! Ready for the procession?’

‘We thought you weren’t coming – what a lovely surprise!’

‘Had enough of Cormac already then? Nice to see you, my darlin’.’

They hadn’t yet started the parade, but everyone was gathered in a loose fashion at the starting rendezvous, getting their lanterns ready as they caught up on town gossip, agreeing on the order and route – which had always been quite flexible – wondering if the snow would get worse and marvelling at its appearance at all because it had been notably absent from the forecast.

Clara found Marina and gave her a hug.

Marina beamed. ‘Hello, my love! Your mum said you couldn’t come!’

‘I’m helping Cormac tonight, but it’s gone a bit slack down there, so I thought I’d show my face up here.’

‘Aww, she will be pleased!’

‘Do you know where she is?’ Clara asked, casting her gaze over the crowd.

‘Up the hill a bit last I saw, talking to Robin.’ Marina pointed, and straight away Clara could see Gaby, Killian and Jill in conversation with Robin. Robin’s two teenage sons were there too, entertaining Elijah and Fern. Ava and Harry were close by talking to Port Promise’s infamously tardy vicar. At least he’d managed to get to one thing on time.

‘I’d better go and let her know I’m here,’ Clara said, leaving her mum’s friend to greet members of her rambling club, who were excitedly making their way towards her.

On her way, Clara was stopped by Shari, the church treasurer who sometimes volunteered at the lifeboat station as shore crew, and then Bob, Marina’s husband, who was with two of the regulars of the Spratt – Dave and Lester – and then she got to her mum’s little group. Gaby was the first to notice her arrive.

‘I thought you couldn’t come!’ she exclaimed.

‘It’s lovely to see you too,’ Clara said drily.

Gaby hugged her. ‘I only meant I’m surprised to see you; I thought you were helping Cormac.’

‘I was, but he insisted I took an hour off to come up here. I think he felt bad – nobody had told him we’re supposed to be at this thing as guests of honour.’

‘Is that what we are?’ Gaby asked with a knowing smile. ‘Feels more like we’re the entertainment sometimes.’

‘Clara!’ Jill had glanced to her side and noticed Clara for the first time. ‘What are you doing here?’

Clara laughed. ‘Not you as well! I can easily go back down to the shack if nobody wants me up here.’

‘Don’t be silly...’ Jill hugged her. ‘Of course we want you – we didn’t expect to see you, that’s all. Have you got a lantern?’

‘No, I—’

Jill grabbed Killian’s lantern and held it out to her.

Killian turned and stared at them. ‘What...?’

‘Killian,’ Jill soothed, ‘could you be a love and see if you can get yourself another, only Clara didn’t have one.’

‘Now I don’t have one,’ Killian grumbled as he started to walk away.

‘Killian, it’s all right!’ Clara called after him, but he simply waved his hand in a vague dismissal and went on his way.

‘Someone will have a spare,’ Jill said as they watched him for a moment. ‘It’s far more important that you have one now you’re here.’

Clara didn’t reply because it wouldn’t have made a scrap of difference. Jill was in full matriarch mode. As the new head of the Morrow household, everything had to be done properly, as tradition dictated, and the Morrows had to behave as Morrows should. She’d given her blessing so that Clara could miss this event in the first place, but that didn’t mean she

would have been completely happy about it; she'd have taken every future opportunity to remind Clara of how much she actually disapproved. At least Clara's appearance here now would spare her that, so she wasn't about to complain that Jill was being a tad bossy.

A few minutes later everyone started to move, the choreography of the event unspoken and unplanned but very much in evidence. It was an order that had been centuries in the making: Jill began to make her way to the front of the line that was forming, taking the rest of her family with her. Gaby and Killian and their children followed Jill, and then Ava, with Harry as an honorary family member. Clara walked with her mum at the head of the procession, both of them missing their significant others. Unlike her mum, however, who'd have been thinking about how Jack ought to have been there with her, in a slightly ungrateful way, Clara was glad Logan wasn't. This was so much easier than being in sight of his sly grins, knowing what he was thinking about the whole thing. He'd made his disparaging feelings known plenty of times, and Clara was glad this time not to be reminded of them.

Someone started up a song, an old sea shanty particular to that region that they sang every year as they walked, the words and phrases so old-fashioned nobody used them anymore. Everyone joined in.

The night was clear and cold, the streets of the village echoing with the song against the track of the sea as it crashed against the shore.

With powdered snow settling in their hair they walked down the gentle slope that led to the harbour, following the line of the wall, past the bronze plaque that remembered Clara's dad, past Robin's moored boat and the lifeboat station and Cormac's shack, lanterns held aloft on poles or others swinging from handles grasped in cold fingers as they sang.

Clara glanced at the shack as she passed and saw Cormac at the serving hatch, smiling and nodding at everyone as they walked by. They'd detour through the streets, past rows of coloured cottages and cute gardens, and end at Betty's Cafe, as they always did. Tonight it would be in darkness, Betty

choosing to close up and be a part of the procession. The line would come to a halt, and as people wandered off to their evening's plans the procession would slowly break up, like driftwood on the tide, the lanterns going out one by one. Then the procession would be done for another year.

Clara returned to the shack just over an hour later, followed by a group of hungry customers. Betty had joined them, walking alongside Jill, Ava and Harry, with Killian, Gaby, Elijah and Fern, Marina and Bob, Harry's dad Sandy, and Vas and Maxine behind.

'Feed us!' Maxine hammered on Cormac's hatch as Clara went inside, grinning. 'Feed us, man!'

'I'm sorry I'm a bit later than I meant—' Clara began, but Cormac waved away her apology.

'Don't worry about it. I see you've brought a present with you – how thoughtful.'

'Yes,' she said, her grin returning. 'I thought it only fair, as you let me go to the procession, that I bring half the procession back with me.'

'Come on, Cormac!' Maxine yelled.

Cormac shot Clara a wry look. 'So kind of you... Was it good?'

'It was actually. I'm glad I could make it in the end, which is weird because I've always found it such an absolute pain in the arse. But this year... I don't know, it felt different somehow.' She shrugged as she tied her apron. 'No idea why. I suppose it must have felt different because we lost Dad and it's the first one we've been to without him.'

'Aye, I expect that has something to do with it... All right, Max, I'm here... what can I get for you?'

'Food!' Maxine grunted, doing a passable impression of a caveman. 'Feed me!'

'So I've got some chowder on,' Cormac said with a grin. 'That do you?'

‘Ug! Food!’ Maxine started to giggle.

‘And she hasn’t even started drinking yet,’ Vas said.

Maxine nudged him playfully and then went back to her own voice. ‘I’ll have some chowder, Cor – bloody lovely it was last time.’

‘No problem. Fish or sweetcorn?’

Maxine frowned. ‘Sweetcorn? What the hell kind of chowder is that? This is a fish shack, right? I want fish!’

Cormac chuckled. ‘Just trying to cater for the vegans amongst us.’

‘Vegans – what are they? Are they like Martians?’

‘Right.’ Cormac grinned at Vas, who was shaking his head. ‘Fish it is.’

‘Fish?’ Clara called over. ‘I’ll get it! Take the orders and shout them over; I’ll plate them up and take them out.’

‘Right you are,’ Cormac said. ‘Good plan. Dream team, that’s what we could be.’

‘We could,’ Clara replied as she ladled some soup into a bowl.

‘I wish I could have you here all the time – I’m getting used to you already.’

‘Pay me what the caravan park pays and I’m yours!’

‘If only I could...’ Cormac turned to Vas to get his order. ‘What’ll it be for you, Vas?’

The laughter from the seating area was growing louder and louder and, despite being content to help Cormac in the shack, Clara half wished she was out there joining in. Whatever was going on, it was funny. Her mum’s laughter seemed loudest of all, which made Clara happy, but at the same time she wished she could see what was making Jill laugh more than she had since Dad had died.

In the kitchen, Cormac had just put a second batch of chowder on to cook. He'd procrastinated, wondering whether he'd sell enough before closing to justify it, but then decided he'd rather have some left over than not enough and that he and Clara could always put what they didn't sell in their freezers at home to eat themselves at a later date. They watched as it started to bubble up in the pan, hitting that moment where the ingredients began to coalesce and meld into something delicious, the smell mouth-watering. For Clara, that moment was the most satisfying one, the point at which the perfect chemistry of cooking happened. She went to the pot and sniffed as she stirred it.

'The customers will have to fight me for this. Is it bad that I really hope you have some left over for me to take home?'

Cormac was drying some spoons. 'I'm getting a bit hungry myself. Might get a cup when it's done, just to keep me going.'

'I don't blame you.'

'Have one yourself if you like.' He looked at his watch. 'I'm inclined to give it another hour and then we could think about clearing down to close. It's been a good night; I'm happy with what business we've done.'

'I'm glad it's been worthwhile,' Clara said.

She glanced up to see Betty at the hatch. 'Hey...' She went over with a broad smile for her friend. 'What can I get you?'

'A bottle of lemonade, if you don't mind.'

'Coming up. So...' Clara went to the fridge. 'I've hardly seen you all night. Have you had a good one?'

'Oh yes, but I got accosted by Grandma and... well, you know what she's like.' Betty rolled her eyes. 'Interrogating me about how I'm keeping "her" business. She forgets she gave it up a long time ago, along with the right to complain about how it's run. How's it been here? Looks as if you've been busy.'

'We have been.' Clara placed Betty's lemonade on the counter of the serving hatch. 'I'm surprised you didn't open

up, to be honest, given what you were telling me about being quiet.'

'I thought that too,' Cormac put in from the stove.

Betty shrugged. 'You have to be at the procession, don't you? Besides, it'd have been mostly hot drinks and I wouldn't have made that much from it. Not like in the summer at the oyster festival when all the tourists are here.'

'And I suppose that's in the day, so you'd be open anyway.'

'Exactly. Hardly worth the cost of switching the lights on. And people don't expect me to be open in the evenings either so they might not have bothered walking down that far to see if I was.'

'But the procession ends around there.'

'Still... I think most people would rather go to the Spratt for their drinks.'

Clara got the impression that nothing she said would have persuaded Betty that opening up would have been a good idea, and that Betty had simply decided she didn't want to work during the lantern procession. Was this something to do with Betty feeling restless? If their conversation was anything to go by when Clara had found her reading a book about how to improve her lot, then perhaps Betty's general dissatisfaction with her life was deeper than Clara had imagined. But if not opening up tonight was Betty's choice, then it wasn't Clara's place to question it further, so she dropped the subject.

'You want anything else?' Clara asked.

Betty's gaze went uncertainly to Cormac.

Clara gave a knowing smile. 'I'll get him to come over... pretend you want some soup or something...' she whispered. 'But use the opportunity wisely!'

'No, Clara—' Betty began, but even as Clara turned to get him, the moment was snatched from them both.

A loud bleep echoed around the shack, and then a groan from the seating area, followed by laughter. One by one, Ava,

Harry, Maxine, Vas and Killian filed past the hatch.

‘We got this, big man!’ Killian shouted as Cormac untied his apron. ‘You keep going here!’

‘No, I...’ Cormac shot Clara a pleading look.

‘Go,’ she said. ‘I can manage here until you’re back.’

‘Give it an hour. If I’m not back then lock up and take the keys with you; I’ll call for them tomorrow.’

‘No worries. Now go, or you’ll miss the launch!’

‘You’re a star! Thank you!’

Clara shook her head slowly as she watched him race out. ‘He just can’t help himself, can he?’

‘Doesn’t look like it,’ Betty replied. ‘Need some help in there?’

‘That’d be good, thanks. I don’t know how Cormac does all this alone every day.’

‘Well, I think it means he has no social life, to be honest. Hang on...’ Betty took her lemonade before going to the side door and letting herself in.

‘I get that impression too. I think he spends almost all his waking hours doing this, and when he’s not, he’s training for the lifeboats. That’s one hell of a man, right? I think he needs someone to show him a bit of fun.’

Betty laughed as she tied Cormac’s apron around her waist. ‘I suppose you think I’m that person. Listen, you’re preaching to the choir already – I like him and I’d love to go on a date with him, but I’m not sure he feels the same way about me.’

‘Rubbish! Of course he does! Why wouldn’t he?’

‘I’m not exactly getting signals.’

‘Maybe you’re just not seeing them, because they’re definitely there.’

‘If you say so,’ Betty said doubtfully.

‘So ask him because he’s never going to ask you.’

‘See, there’s my problem straight away. If he does like me as much as you seem to think, then he would ask me.’

‘He’s too wrapped up in this business and his training to think about it. It wouldn’t occur to him he needs something outside work, but once he got a taste of that... well, I think you two would get along brilliantly. You’ve got loads in common.’

‘What? We both work in catering. Ding dong, let’s get those wedding bells ringing.’

Clara laughed. ‘Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit – you know that, right? I bet you have loads more than that, and if you had a few dates, you’d find out what those things are.’

‘Hmm. You might be right, but don’t keep trying to push us together please, Clara. I know you mean well, but let things go how they’re going to go. If it’s meant to be, then we’ll make it happen, but I’m not happy forcing it.’

Clara let out a sigh. ‘OK. If that’s what you want, but I still say you have to seize the moment. You want him, don’t you?’

‘Well, I want a man and he is a very nice one.’

‘Then you have to be brave!’

‘Easy for you to say – you’re a Morrow. It’s in your DNA to be brave.’

‘I’m definitely one of the crapper Morrows, so not necessarily.’

Betty’s gaze went to a shelf. ‘Is that your phone?’

Clara looked up to see the mobile she’d left there vibrating.

‘Shit... this might be Logan. Keep an eye on things for a minute for me, will you?’

Betty nodded and Clara grabbed the phone to answer it. Logan appeared on the screen.

‘Thought I’d FaceTime you – wanted to see a friendly face, you know.’

He looked tired. And thinner maybe, and Clara wondered if he'd been eating properly since he'd arrived in London.

'That's OK. How are you? How are things there? Any developments?'

'Not really. Grandma's about the same. Mum says it's cheered her up, having me around, so I guess that's one good thing to come out of all this. I'd rather hear about you. What have you been up to?'

'Oh, nothing much. Tonight was the procession of course.'

'What procession?'

'You know, the Promise Procession.'

'Oh, that thing! Right. And was it as loopy as always?'

'Logan, it's not...' Clara frowned. 'People around here like it, that's all. And if it makes them happy, what's the harm? It's not hurting anyone – it's just an old tradition.'

'Sorry, you're right. I still struggle to get my head around things that go on in that village. They seem even weirder when you're viewing it from a distance. So was it good?'

'It was nice, yeah. The first one since Dad, so...'

'Of course. I forgot about that.'

Clara saw his forehead wrinkle as he stopped and stared at her. 'Where are you?'

'I'm... I'm at the fish shack. A lot of us are, having food, you know...' Clara caught sight of Betty's confused sideways glance, but she couldn't answer it now. Yes, she was lying to Logan, and she didn't even know why she felt the need to.

'If you're having food,' Logan said, 'why does it look as though you're inside?'

'Well... Betty and I are watching the place for a bit.'

'Where's Cormac?'

'There was a shout... the lifeboat went out. He had to go.'

'And you just happened to be there?'

‘Yes.’

‘And you just know how to do all the stuff that needs doing?’

‘There’s not much to know. As long as I can keep the soup from burning and work the till then that’s that.’

‘And you’re just doing it while he’s at the station?’

‘Yes – what is this? I’m helping out a friend – is it such a big deal? Betty’s here too...’

Clara pointed the phone at her friend, who gave an awkward wave. ‘Hi, Logan.’

‘Hi, Betty.’

Clara turned the screen back. ‘Right place at the right time, that’s all. Betty and I were getting a snack after the procession, and it was lucky we were here and could help out.’

‘Well I hope he appreciates how good he’s got it, everyone running his business for him for no pay.’

‘But he’s volunteering at the lifeboat station, so the least we can do in return is help him out.’

‘I don’t know about that – could turn into a bit of a piss-taking situation. He knew the drill when he volunteered. If he needs people to look after the shack when there’s a shout then he ought to have something in place, like a paid member of staff. He can’t expect everyone else to drop whatever they’re doing and run to his assistance. People have plenty going on in their own lives without indulging him in his hero fantasies.’

Clara’s expression darkened. ‘That sounds very mean – you know that, right? He’s not indulging in hero fantasies – he’s doing a valuable and dangerous job. Would you say those things about Ava or Killian or Harry? Or my dad?’

It was gratifying that Logan looked immediately mortified. ‘God, I’m sorry, as soon as I said it I realised... I’m tired and cranky and it’s been a weird couple of days and I miss you... Please don’t listen to me; I didn’t mean it.’

Clara’s tone softened. ‘I know.’

‘I shouldn’t be taking it out on you. How long will you be there? I can’t talk to you properly while you’re working. Will you be home shortly so I can call you back?’

‘We’ll probably have to close up, so it might be a couple of hours yet. Even if it’s a very quick call-out Cormac will probably be tired when he gets back, so I don’t want to leave all the cleaning up for him.’

‘Of course.’

‘So maybe I should call you tomorrow? If you’re tired you ought to get an early night and try to get some decent rest.’

‘I would if I could sleep when I get there.’

‘It’s really stressing you out that much?’

‘It’s not just Grandma, it’s... Doesn’t matter now; it’s not the time to talk about it. I’d rather tell you when you’re alone.’

‘Now I feel as if I should be worried about what you have to say.’

‘Don’t be. It’s something for later, that’s all. I’ll let you carry on with what you’re doing.’

‘You don’t have to hang up – I can spare a minute.’

‘It’s OK. I expect you’re busy and I’m supposed to be getting ready for dinner anyway.’

‘It’s late for dinner.’

‘I know, but this was the only reservation Mum could get at Chez Xavier.’

‘Your mum still sticking with her dress code like she’s in Downton Abbey?’

‘Kind of. She’s insisting on a collared shirt, but in an attempt to embrace the twenty-first century she’s dispensed with the blazer and tie.’

Clara smiled. ‘OK, enjoy your dinner.’

‘I will. Speak to you later maybe?’

‘Call when you’re back from dinner and you get a minute; I’ll keep my phone off silent so I’ll hear it come through, even

if I've gone to bed.'

'OK. I love you.'

'Love you too.'

As Clara ended the call and put her phone back on the shelf, she caught Betty's questioning look. 'I know what you're thinking,' she said.

'Not thinking anything.'

'Yes, you are. You're confused why I'm not telling him about working for Cormac.'

'Nothing to do with me,' Betty said airily.

'You don't want to know why?'

'I'm sure you have your reasons. Whatever you choose to tell or not tell Logan is your business. If you want to tell me, tell me; if not, it's fine.'

'I'm not even sure myself, except that he'd be weird about it.'

'Weird how?'

'I don't know... I mean, he was weird just then, wasn't he? I think he feels a bit threatened.'

'By Cormac?'

Clara nodded. 'Which is crazy, because I'm not even... I mean, I've never given him the slightest reason for concern that I might be... Cormac is totally into you – anyone can see that, and surely Logan can! It's frustrating that he chooses to be so... It's annoying.'

'I'm sure it must be,' Betty said, and then looked at the stove. 'I think that soup wants stirring... It'll be sticking to the pan.'

Clara held back a frown. Was Betty annoyed at her? What had she done? First Logan and now Betty, and Clara had done nothing to deserve it from either of them. What had started out as a brilliant evening was fast turning into one she'd rather put behind her.

‘Sure, I’ve got it... Betty, I’m sensing... We’re OK, right?’

‘Of course we are. Now, what do I need to do first?’

CHAPTER NINE

Clara left her phone switched on, as she'd promised, but Logan didn't call that night. She and Betty had cleaned and locked up the shack, and so, as it was now Saturday and there was no work for her at the caravan park, Clara decided she'd take a leisurely walk to the lifeboat station to find out what the shout had been and, if he was there, to return Cormac's keys. Otherwise, she'd have to stop by his cottage, guessing he'd want them sooner rather than later.

Before she left she tried Logan a couple of times, but he didn't pick up. Clara could only assume he'd decided to sleep in – he'd been tired after all – and so she sent him a text saying she'd try to catch him for a proper chat later.

From the window of her bedroom over the studio she could see that the snow had settled in a sparse, powdery layer over the streets. It lay over the sand of the beach so that it was white, looking all the starker against the iron grey of the day's sea. But at least it had stopped falling and, although it was cold, there was no wind to ramp up the chill.

She pulled her old fishing jumper from the wardrobe and gave it a sniff. It smelled a bit of the shack's kitchen, but the fresh air would soon blow that out, and so she put it on again, along with a pair of leggings and old jeans over the top of those, and finished with the walking boots she'd worn when she'd gone rambling with her mum. She was no style icon, but that had never worried her. She was like Ava, far more practical in the way she dressed; it was Gaby who brought the

glamour to the family, and Clara was happy to let her be the well-dressed sister.

She pulled her duffel coat on, pocketed Cormac's keys alongside her own and then headed out.

The streets were still quiet. A lot of people would have ended up in the Spratt after the procession and were no doubt nursing hangovers. Robin's boat had left its mooring but that was hardly surprising. Betty's lights were on, so she'd arrived early and was probably getting ready to open for the breakfast shift. Clara decided she'd call in to see her, maybe get a pastry and a coffee, after she'd been to the station.

But the station was locked up when she got there. Perhaps it had been a very late return. Clara hadn't heard anything bad about the mission, so it must have been fairly straightforward with everyone back safely – whenever there was trouble it didn't take long for news to get round, so she wasn't worried. She'd stop by Cormac's cottage and knock, and if she got no answer she'd push the keys through his letterbox so he had them when he needed to open up.

Cormac had taken one of the cottages near to Marina's shop. This, according to Marina, had made her year and would certainly improve her view on the days she spotted him outside it. She'd also said she was going to buy a telescope in case he liked to wander around naked in his bedroom with the curtains open, and while Clara was fairly sure her mum's oldest friend had been joking about this, the tiniest element of doubt was rather concerning. Marina's husband, Bob, must have felt the same, because as she'd made the joke at their table in the Spratt, he'd almost choked on his beer.

Cormac's house was rendered and painted apple green. The front door was a darker, bottle green, as were the window frames, and the garden was a fragrant (albeit tiny) mass of gangly hollyhocks in the summer and evergreens in the winter. The house his uncle had occupied while he'd run the fish shack had proved to be far too expensive – at least, when they'd chatted as they worked together during the procession Cormac had told her he'd been unable to get a mortgage on both the cottage and the business, and as his uncle had needed

money for a retirement he hadn't planned for financially, Cormac had been forced to pay close to market value to buy his business.

He'd never said what had made him decide to come all the way from Ireland to a place nobody outside Cornwall had heard of, except that when he'd learned the business was available it seemed serendipitous, as he'd been looking for something. He'd also needed all his spare capital to make alterations at the shack, so he'd taken a rental for now. The owner of the house was someone who lived outside the village – nobody was quite sure where, and they seldom showed up to inspect their property. Everyone had been pleased at the time to learn that a local would be renting it. There was nothing sadder to Clara than to see a perfectly lovely house sitting empty for months on end while the owner lived in their main house somewhere else.

Clara arrived at Cormac's gate a few minutes after she'd left the lifeboat station. It opened with a faint squeak and she went to the front door, deciding to push the keys through the letterbox without knocking, in case Cormac had decided to stay in bed an extra hour.

She heard them clatter onto the mat behind the door and then went to leave.

'Clara?'

The front door was open when she turned back, Cormac standing there holding the keys she'd pushed through his letterbox. He looked as if he'd been up for a while. If not, she thought, then he certainly looked brighter when he woke up than Clara did.

'I was about to come to your place to get these,' he said, holding up the keys. 'And to thank you for last night. I don't know what I would have done without you.'

'There's no need. I enjoyed myself. And I do realise how weird that sounds, because it's definitely not everyone's idea of fun.'

‘I’m sure, but I know what you mean. I like to think my little shack isn’t like real work. After all, how many people get to hear the sea as they work? And most of my customers are an absolute pleasure to serve.’

‘Right,’ Clara said. ‘So just let me know when you need me again.’

‘Actually... I was about to make a coffee before I open up... Don’t suppose you want to stay for one?’

Clara hesitated, then smiled. ‘You know what, that sounds nice and I have an idle hour. You can tell me all about last night’s shout.’

‘Great.’ Cormac stepped aside to let her in before closing the front door.

Clara had never been inside his cottage before. The hallway was tiny and dark, but it opened into a more spacious living room decorated in tasteful sage greens and creams – green seemed to be the owner’s favourite palette, and Clara’s suspicions were confirmed when she followed him into the kitchen, which was decked out with white units and mint walls. Her gaze went to the dining table, where alongside the remains of a hasty toast breakfast sat packs of unopened bedding.

‘Treated yourself?’ Clara asked, nodding at them.

‘Oh, those...’ Cormac went to the kettle and filled it. ‘They’re for the guest bedroom. You know, with my parents coming, I thought I ought to get them something a bit nicer than my threadbare old stuff.’

‘Of course, yes – I forgot they were due.’

‘But you’re still coming to the meet-and-greet?’

‘Meet-and-greet makes it sound like you’re parading royalty around.’

‘Trust me, sometimes it feels that way,’ he said with a smile. ‘Sit down, make yourself at home.’

Clara took a seat. It was then she noticed the recipe book open but face down next to the bedding. ‘Looking for some

dishes to impress them too?’

‘Sort of. Also getting ideas for new dishes for the shack. Things I can batch cook easily in the limited space I have there. The soups have gone down well but I want to have a more varied menu rota, keep things interesting and people coming back, you know. In fact’ – he pulled two cups from a cupboard – ‘if you have any recipes you think might work I’d love to hear about them.’

‘Do they have to involve fish?’

‘Well, they have to be able to work in a fish shack. So I think vegetarian stuff is OK, but meat is probably not an option – a lot more work to avoid cross-contamination and, in all honesty, would probably require—’

‘A bigger kitchen with dedicated work areas,’ Clara finished for him.

‘Yes, exactly. I forget you know your stuff.’

‘I wouldn’t go that far. I’ve probably forgotten quite a lot of it.’

‘If you don’t mind me asking, how come you didn’t take a job as a chef when you qualified?’

‘Most of them were out of the area... well, the ones that paid enough to live on were. I suppose it sounds a bit pathetic, but I didn’t want to move away. I worked with Betty for a while but it wasn’t right for either of us – she felt awkward asking me to do cafe stuff because I was overqualified, and I didn’t find it challenging enough. The job at the caravan park came up and I went for it on a whim and got it. I figured it would tide me over until I could find something that suited me better.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘About three years. Shortly after that I met Logan and we decided to buy the studio and the flat together, so then I was locked into the job a bit more because we needed the money.’

‘If you had the opportunity, what’s your ideal? I mean, what job would you want if you could get it?’

‘Something local, something that uses my skills, something I love... I suppose what most people want from a job. My real ambition is to open somewhere of my own. I know it’s a pipe dream, but I think about it a lot, and if the right place became available, maybe...’ She shrugged. ‘But it never does, so there’s no point in getting hung up on it.’

‘You’ve looked then?’

‘I look all the time.’

‘And what sort of place do you want?’

‘Something a bit upmarket. Something with a challenging menu. I’m not looking for Michelin stars or anything, but I’d love to make it somewhere with a good reputation, somewhere people want to travel for.’

‘I suppose it’s only natural – you did train to be a chef after all.’

‘I always wanted to work in food. It might be sad to some people, but I love thinking about it and ways to make my cooking better – it’s all about the enjoyment it brings others, isn’t it?’

‘I can see that. I don’t have your training but after a few years in a miserable bank job I thought about what I loved to do and realised it was food for me too. And for the same reasons. There’s nothing better than watching someone enjoy a meal you’ve created – at least, I think it’s one of life’s pleasures. So it made a lot of sense when my uncle’s shack came on the market to give it a go. People thought I was mad, but I say sometimes you’ve got to take risks to be happy.’

‘God, I couldn’t agree with you more! Working at the holiday park is all very well, and it’s not a bad job, but sometimes I envy Logan. He gets to do something he loves. The only thing that gets me through my working week is the hope that, some day, I might be able to do that too. I just have to wait for my moment – like you did.’

Cormac brought over two coffees and put them on the table. ‘Sugar?’

‘One please...’

Clara watched as he spooned some into her mug and gave it a stir. ‘Look at me – ten minutes in here and I’ve shared my life’s ambitions with you.’

‘That’s all right; I like to hear about them. I think lots of people work their whole lives doing jobs they were never meant to do purely to keep a roof over their heads. It’s a shame we can’t all chase our dreams and do the work that makes us happy.’

‘Like you.’

‘I’m happy in my little shack, yes.’

Clara was silent for a moment as she took the coffee from him. Logan was happy too, working in the studio. So was Ava, teaching her students and indulging her passion for water sports at the same time. And her mum got to work on her beloved allotment every day, talking to her plants and getting soil beneath her fingernails. Even Robin loved taking to the sea in darkness to haul in his latest catch, though he’d never say so to anyone. But Clara... At times it seemed unfair that so many of her friends and family had what she didn’t, but when she had those thoughts, she’d tell herself not to be so ungrateful. She lived in the most beautiful place with the most amazing people, and she had a job she liked well enough and a nice flat and a loving fiancé, and she ought to be thankful for all those things.

‘I wish I could offer you the job you want,’ Cormac said into her silence. ‘I’d love to have someone like you work alongside me, but I could never afford to pay what you’re worth. I’d love to give you free rein, see what menus you came up with.’

‘Thanks, Cormac,’ Clara said. ‘I appreciate your faith in me.’

‘But it’s not something I can offer. At least, not in the next couple of years.’

‘Never say never. Things might take off for you.’

‘Right. I hope so – that’s the plan. When I open my second place, I’ll be sure to make you head chef.’

Clara smiled. ‘I’d love that. Anyway... you were going to tell me about last night’s shout.’

‘Ah, I was, wasn’t I? Engine failure. All we had to do was tow them back. They were stranded quite a way out, though. Sorry it wasn’t more exciting than that.’

‘God, don’t be! I’m happy when it’s something routine, believe me!’

‘To be honest, I’m glad we got to them when we did. Looked like quite a young, inexperienced crew to me, could have gone south very quickly if we hadn’t got there.’

‘Lucky for them you did then. Did you get out on the sea much at home? In Ireland, I mean? You’ve said you were close to the coast.’

‘Aye, a little. Did a bit of sailing, a bit of kayaking. Swam a bit. It was wilder than here, but I didn’t mind that.’

‘So, it’s my turn to be nosy, but I don’t think I’ve ever been told – what made you come here? Apart from the shack?’

‘It was mostly the shack if I’m honest. It seemed like an opportunity too good to miss out on.’

‘So do you sometimes wish you were in Ireland?’

‘I miss it, of course, but I don’t wish I was back there. I can visit any time. For now, Port Promise is home and I like it here.’

Clara sipped at her drink. Something told her she wasn’t getting the whole story. It was a conviction she couldn’t shake. In all the time he’d been in Port Promise he’d been so open and frank about things in the here and now, but hardly mentioned his past at all. Even Marina, who managed to get the gossip on everyone eventually, hadn’t unearthed any information beyond where his hometown was and his tenuous family connections to Port Promise. Perhaps they’d learn more when his parents arrived, an event that was worthy of note in itself.

‘Is it true that the Guinness is different here than in Ireland?’ she asked, deciding to change the subject.

He grinned. ‘Aye, it is. I can’t say what’s different, exactly, but I can tell. It’s probably in my head. Do pasties taste different here than in the rest of the world?’

Clara giggled. ‘I have no idea; I don’t eat them!’

‘You don’t eat them? What kind of Cornish are you?’

‘A very bad kind, apparently.’

‘Shame on you.’

Clara was still grinning when she took another sip of her drink. It was good coffee, just the way she liked it. Was there anything this man couldn’t do well?

‘How long do you think it will take to finish your lifeboat training?’

‘Not sure. I want it to be soon; I’d like to think I’d be out by the spring, summer at the latest, but Vas keeps telling me that’s quicker than most and so not to get my hopes up.’

‘Ava’s quite impatient about it too.’

‘I suppose she already knows quite a lot about it, having grown up around it; she’s bound to learn faster than me.’

‘I don’t think you’re doing too badly, from what everyone says.’

‘Have I been discussed?’

‘Oh yes, you’re a question at the pub quiz in the Spratt.’

Cormac laughed. ‘OK, I deserved that.’

‘Honestly, people do talk around here, but everyone’s rooting for you both.’

‘That’s good to hear.’ He glanced at his watch, but then faced Clara again.

‘You need to get to the shack?’ she asked.

‘No... I mean, yes, but I’m good for a few minutes yet – don’t rush your drink.’

‘I don’t want to hold you up—’

‘You won’t; it’s fine. I’m not going to kick you out as soon as you sit down. I’m just keeping an eye on the time. Don’t want it running away from me, and that’s likely to happen once I’m in the middle of an interesting conversation.’

‘Will you want me at the shack again this week?’

‘I’m not sure but I think maybe things will be a bit quieter again. No big events coming up for a while, are there?’

‘Nothing I can think of until Christmas really. But I’m happy to come over on my afternoon off this week if it helps you.’

‘I can’t keep asking you – I don’t want to wear out your good will.’

‘You wouldn’t be; I enjoy it. It’s basically the job I’d love to do, so it’s no hardship at all.’

‘You really wouldn’t mind?’

‘Not one bit.’

‘OK...’ He nodded slowly. ‘That would be good. As long as you’re sure you can spare the time.’

‘Right now I can. And with Logan away I’m bored at home.’

‘Do you know when he’s coming back?’

‘Not yet. Hopefully I’ll talk to him later and find out, but I don’t think it will be until the end of the week. In time for your parents’ thing, of course.’

‘You must miss him.’

‘The flat’s weird when he’s not there. It’s not big, but it feels it when I’m in it alone.’

‘I can imagine. It’s not long until your wedding, right?’

‘February. It’s a crappy month, but we had to put it back when Dad died and it was the first date free at the church. And it’s Logan’s birthday – thought it might be a nice way to celebrate it, you know. And Logan said he’d never forget our anniversary because it’s the same day.’

Cormac smiled. ‘Smart lad.’

Clara wanted to ask if there were any women in his life. It was another mystery. He never talked about an ex and he never talked about whether he had his eye on anyone. But it didn’t seem like the right moment, somehow. He had to get to the shack to open up and it might not be a straightforward conversation.

‘I might go to the Spratt later with Betty... We enjoyed seeing you up there last week – other than the fact that you got called away early of course. Maybe you could come up to us when you’ve closed the shack? With a bit of luck, you’ll actually get a night off and won’t have to rush down to the station. Betty would love to see you, I’m sure.’

Cormac looked surprised. ‘Would she?’

Clara nodded. ‘I’ll text you if we go.’

‘Oh... right... fine.’

‘Listen...’ Clara finished her coffee. ‘I’d better let you get on. Thanks for the drink.’

‘God, thank you! Thanks for coming down with my keys. I’ll see you to the door.’ He got up and followed her out of the kitchen.

She opened the door and stepped onto the porch. ‘Let me know about helping in the week.’

‘I will. Thanks. And thanks for last night – you were amazing.’

‘Aww...’ Clara was about to brush off the compliment when there was a movement at the corner of her eye. She turned at the same time as Cormac to see Logan standing at the gate at the top of the tiny path.

‘What...?’ Clara’s eyes widened. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Decided to come home early,’ Logan said stiffly, giving Cormac a distrustful once-over.

‘You should have called me!’

‘I thought it would be a nice surprise,’ he said, looking very deliberately at Cormac again.

‘Hi, Logan,’ Cormac said. ‘How’s London?’

If he was aware of the looks Logan was giving him he didn’t show it. He simply gave him an amiable smile.

‘London’s fine,’ Logan replied. ‘Thanks.’

‘I’d better...’ Clara looked helplessly at Cormac. ‘I should...’

‘Thanks so much for bringing my keys,’ Cormac said to her.

‘No problem...’ Clara dashed up the path and opened the gate. ‘See you.’

She turned to Logan to offer him a kiss, but he moved out of range.

With a last wave, Cormac shut his front door, leaving them alone on the pavement.

‘If I’d known you were coming back I’d have waited at the flat for you,’ Clara said.

‘I’m sure you would have done,’ Logan replied coldly. ‘I’m sure you wouldn’t have wanted to be caught out.’

‘What?’

‘You’re at his house early in the morning. What’s that about? And what did he mean by “thanks for last night – you were amazing”?’

‘I helped him at the shack – you know that!’

‘And after the shack... did you *help* him then?’

‘Logan! What are you getting at?’

‘I think you know what I’m getting at.’

‘Then no! Of course not!’

He started to march away from Cormac’s cottage in the direction of the studio and Clara jogged after him.

‘Logan, wait! You don’t really think—’

‘I don’t know what to think. All I know is that I get back and here you are, at his house, and he’s telling you how amazing you were last night.’

‘Yes, because I looked after the shack when he got called away! That’s all it is!’ She reached for his arm and pulled him back. ‘Logan, I swear! There’s nothing more to it than that!’

He looked down at her with such disgust that she could barely return his gaze. ‘And would you have told me about this if I hadn’t caught you?’

‘There would have been nothing to tell!’

‘That means you wouldn’t have done. When did we start to have secrets?’

‘There’s no secret if there’s nothing worth knowing! God, Logan, this is stupid! On my dad’s grave, nothing happened – you have to believe me!’

He paused, still holding her in that flinty gaze. And then his expression softened.

‘I’m sorry. I’m tired... I’ve been driving since early doors because I wanted to get home to you. I thought it would be a nice surprise, that you’d be at home and you’d be pleased to see me.’

‘And I am!’ Clara reached to kiss him, relieved to find that her affection was reciprocated. ‘I’m so happy to see you, and I love that you wanted to surprise me, and I’m sorry I wasn’t home. But in my defence, I didn’t realise I had to be.’

‘I know.’

They began to walk again, and this time he curled an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close.

‘What made you decide to cut the trip short?’ she asked.

‘It was pointless. Grandma was the same every time I saw her, and, to be honest, it was painful sitting with her. I might as well have been sitting with a doorstep for all the interaction I got. She doesn’t know who I am and she mostly sleeps.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that, but I can’t say I’m not glad to have you back. How did you know where I’d be?’

‘I didn’t. I thought you might be at Betty’s and was on my way there when I heard your voice.’

‘Ah. So now you’re back, what do you want to do today? If you’re not too tired from your drive, of course.’

‘To be honest... Clara, we need to talk.’

‘Do we? I don’t like the sound of that.’

‘It’s nothing bad. At least I hope not. But if I don’t get this off my chest then I’m going to go mad.’

‘What is it?’

‘Let’s wait until we get to the flat; I don’t want to have this discussion in the street.’

‘Right,’ Clara said, her mind racing to places that weren’t good.

As they passed Betty’s Cafe Clara could see Betty inside, yawning as she placed a tray of cream cakes in the glass-fronted fridge. She glanced up, hand poised for a brief wave, but then stopped and stared. A second later, she’d raced out onto the pavement.

‘Good morning, you two!’ She looked at Logan. ‘Clara didn’t tell me you were due home!’

‘Clara didn’t know,’ Clara said.

‘Right...’ Betty gave Logan a sympathetic look. ‘How’s your grandma?’

‘Stable,’ Logan said. ‘Thanks for asking.’

‘That’s OK. You two want to come in for a drink? I mean, I’m just prepping everything but you’re more than welcome, and you can tell me about London, Logan.’

‘We were about to—’ Clara began, but then stopped and turned around as her name was called.

Clara's young niece, Fern, raced towards her, followed by her nephew, Elijah, at a pace that suggested he wanted to race towards her but was aware of how uncool that might look if anyone was watching. A way behind them was Gaby.

'Clara!' Fern threw her arms around her. 'We're going to get milkshake – want to get milkshake with us?'

'Milkshake?' Clara frowned slightly. 'At this time of the morning?'

'Any time is milkshake time when you're Fern,' Gaby said as she caught up.

'Well there's a mantra to live by,' Clara said with a laugh. 'I think it's a bit early for me.'

'Awww, please!' Fern cried.

Clara glanced uncertainly at Logan, who simply looked resigned to his fate. With good reason: Fern and Elijah usually got their way where Clara – and indeed Ava – were concerned. It was the aunty thing, Clara had always told Logan; she was genetically programmed to give in to them.

'We weren't expecting you to be here,' Gaby said to Logan. 'Just got back?'

'Yes, literally twenty minutes ago.'

'You must have floored it.'

'Started out early and I'm beginning to feel the effects of it now.'

'Kids,' Gaby said, turning to Fern and Elijah, 'we ought to let Clara get back – Logan's tired and I expect they've got stuff to talk about.'

'We do—' Clara began, but Logan cut in.

'I'm going to get some sleep,' he said. 'You weren't expecting me and I suppose you had plans – don't let me get in the way; we can talk later.'

'But—'

‘It’s fine,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you in a few hours; probably be in bed when you get back but wake me if you want to.’

‘Logan, it’s all right...’ Gaby glanced at Clara with a silent apology.

‘Honestly,’ he said. ‘I really need some sleep. So if it’s all the same to you, I’ll leave you to your milkshakes. I’ll see you later, Clara.’

She made a move to kiss him, but before she could he turned and walked away. Clara was left feeling awkward and worried. They’d already got today off to such a bad start – was he really in need of some sleep or was he annoyed that their conversation had been interrupted?

‘You don’t have to come in,’ Gaby said to her. ‘It’s fine if you want to go after him.’

Perhaps it was better to let him get some rest, and maybe he’d be more reasonable afterwards. Getting up early and a long drive was bound to make someone a bit crabby. ‘No...’ she decided. ‘I’ll see him later.’

Gaby looked unconvinced, but Fern was oblivious to any tension.

‘Yes!’ she cried. ‘So you’re coming for milkshake?’

Clara smiled down at her. ‘Looks like it.’

‘Might need a couple of minutes to get set up,’ Betty said. ‘You’re eager beavers this morning!’

‘Can we go to the lifeboat station while we wait?’ Elijah asked his mum.

‘It’s locked up,’ Clara said. ‘I went down first thing and there was nobody there.’

‘I’m not surprised.’ Gaby pulled her collar up against a wind that was sending shivers along Clara’s neck too. ‘It was a late one last night.’

‘Cormac told me.’

Gaby turned to her as Betty went back inside. ‘You’ve seen Cormac this morning? I’m surprised he’s up and about

this early.’

‘Well, not about but up. I dropped off the keys to the shack. I pushed them through the letterbox, but he heard me and opened up. Engine failure, he said.’

‘Yes, Killian said the crew of the other vessel didn’t make it easy – didn’t really know what they were doing, found it hard to follow instructions, that sort of thing. He said they’d have done it in half the time with an experienced crew on there.’

‘I suppose that’s how it is sometimes.’

‘Yes. We’ve left Killian in bed – partly why we’re out so early, so the house is quiet.’

‘Life as a lifeboat wife, eh?’

‘You could say that. Ava and Harry are lucky; at least they’re both in the same boat – if you’ll excuse the often-made pun.’

‘Yeah, sometimes I think I’m lucky too. I see what you put up with and what Mum went through and think at least I’ll never have any of that with Logan.’

‘I mean, I’m proud of Killian, don’t get me wrong. I think it’s amazing, even though I know I complain. I only really complain because I’m often so scared for him.’

‘I get that. Everyone does.’ Clara turned to the children. ‘We could walk on the beach for ten minutes while Betty gets herself organised, see what’s washed up on the shore lately.’

‘We saw the seals the other day,’ Elijah said.

‘Wow, that must have been cool.’

He nodded.

‘And our class went to pick up plastic off the beach last week,’ Fern added. ‘We found bottle tops and bits of cup.’

‘Not too much I hope,’ Clara said. ‘I’d like to think our beach is nice and clean.’

‘Miss Latham said it probably gets carried on the sea from other places far away and so it doesn’t matter how clean we are here, it won’t stop coming until everywhere is as clean as us.’

‘I suppose that must be true,’ Clara said. ‘As long as kids like you are picking it up, that’s all we can do for now.’

‘That’s what Miss Latham said.’ Fern slipped her hand into Clara’s as they began to walk down the steps that led to the beach. ‘Are you going to take your shoes off, Clara?’ she asked.

‘When we get to the sand, hell yeah!’

‘Me too,’ Fern said, glancing back at her mum. When there was no argument, she turned back to Clara with a bright smile. ‘I love taking my shoes off on the beach.’

‘Even when it’s cold?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Me too.’

‘That’s where she gets it from,’ Gaby said. ‘When she gets pneumonia – which I keep telling her will happen – you can come and nurse her because it will be your fault.’

‘She won’t get pneumonia,’ Clara said. ‘I never have, and I’ve been doing it forever.’

‘Never have doesn’t mean never will,’ Gaby shot back, but when Clara looked she wore a wry smile. ‘Wait till you have your own kids; I’ll make sure they do everything you don’t want them to.’

‘I’d expect nothing less. So what else have you been doing at school?’ Clara asked the children.

‘We did cycling proficiency,’ Elijah said.

‘Wow, they still do that at school?’ Clara asked.

‘We did. We had this really old man showing us what to do on the roads.’

‘Really old? Like how old?’

Elijah was thoughtful for a moment. ‘I don’t know... like forty or something. Maybe even as old as Grandma.’

‘As old as Grandma?’ Clara smiled. ‘That’s very old.’

Gaby laughed as they stopped at the slope that led from the promenade to the sand, and Clara bent down to untie her bootlaces.

‘So what can you tell me about cycling proficiency?’ she asked, slipping off her boots and socks.

‘Um...’ Elijah sank his hands into his pockets and looked pensive.

‘That much?’ Clara asked after a long pause in which he’d offered no information. ‘It’s lucky that the roads around here are quiet.’

‘My thoughts exactly,’ Gaby said.

‘Sometimes there are loads of cars,’ Fern offered, taking her lead from Clara and bending down to take off her shoes.

‘In the summer, yes, that’s true,’ Gaby said as Fern leaned on her to steady herself as she lifted a leg. ‘Not so much in the winter.’

‘In the winter the fastest thing on the roads around here is Marina’s shopping trolley,’ Clara said, sending both Elijah and Fern into fits of giggles.

‘Thanks for that mental picture,’ Gaby said, smiling. ‘I won’t be able to talk to Marina with a straight face again.’

She took Fern’s shoes from her, and the little girl hopped onto the sand.

‘It’s cold!’

‘I did try to warn you,’ Gaby said.

‘That’s part of the fun!’ Clara said as she hopped onto the sand to join her niece.

A second later, Elijah was undoing his boots too.

‘Don’t think I’m carrying those as well,’ Gaby said.

‘But you’re carrying Fern’s.’

‘Not anymore...’ Gaby handed the shoes back to her daughter, who immediately dropped them. Gaby rolled her eyes and Clara laughed.

‘We can leave our shoes here,’ Clara said, gesturing for the kids to follow her. ‘It’s not like there’s anyone around to steal them and it’s far easier to poke about in the sand with two free hands.’

Without a second thought, all shoes were dumped, and they raced across the sand towards the sea, laughing.

CHAPTER TEN

‘How many people did you say he was having over?’ Logan asked.

Clara frowned as she knocked on the green lacquered front door. ‘I’m not sure. Us, Ava and Harry, Mum, Marina and Bob, Gaby and Killian and the kids, Betty... the rest of the guys at the station will come, I expect. Maybe Harry’s dad... and of course Cormac’s parents. I suppose he’ll have invited some others.’

‘It’s going to be an uncomfortable evening then. That’s a lot of people for this tiny house.’

‘There wasn’t really anywhere else to have it.’

‘Could have gone to the Spratt and done it there.’

‘But then you have the Spratt’s customers knocking around and it’s not such a private function.’

Things between Clara and Logan had been tense all week. On the Saturday, Clara had arrived back a few hours after her walk and milkshakes with Gaby and the children to find Logan in the kitchen with a coffee. He’d clearly been waiting for her return and had launched into a list of things that were bothering him as soon as she’d walked in. So much for wanting to get some rest. She’d told him he ought to say what he meant, and if he’d been so desperate to talk, he only needed to let her know and she’d have been there. Far from placating him, this had only riled him more, until they were bickering as if he’d never been away.

Clara felt he was being weird about everything. That being in London had reminded him he liked it there much better than he liked it in Port Promise, and he was picking fault with everything about their life there. She didn't think either of them had realised three years ago how much it would bother him being away from all the action; Logan had convinced himself that eventually she'd go back to London with him. Then again, she supposed it wasn't all his fault. It was bound to be difficult for him to settle; he hadn't been born in a small village like her, and she knew it could be hard for outsiders.

The green door opened, but it wasn't Cormac standing in front of them – it was a woman in her mid to late fifties dressed in black, her white hair cut into a soft bob and tinted lilac.

'Hello,' she said in an accent that sounded just like Cormac's. 'Who might you be?'

'I'm Clara. This is my partner, Logan... are you—'

'I'm Sinead,' she said, kissing them both on the cheek. 'Otherwise known as Cormac's ma. Don't mind me; I said I'd get the door and then realised I don't have a clue who anyone is! Could have been a mad axe murderer knocking and I'd have let them straight in!'

'It's lovely to meet you at last!' Clara said as Sinead beckoned them in. 'We've heard so much about you.'

'Likewise,' Sinead said. 'We've been hearing all about everyone in Port Promise...' She screwed her eyes in concentration. 'You're... don't tell me... you're Ava's sister? Did I get it right?'

Clara smiled as they followed her down the tiny hallway. 'That's me!'

'Oh, she's a lovely girl; Cormac speaks highly of your whole family. I'm so sorry to hear your father passed away.'

'Thank you. It's been a year now.'

'It's no time at all. You must still be suffering terribly.'

‘We’re getting there. Every day a little easier. Life goes on, doesn’t it? My dad would have said the same.’

‘It does,’ Sinead agreed.

Jill, Marina, Bob, Ava, Harry, Vas and Maxine were already sitting in Cormac’s living room when they went in.

‘Hello, you two!’ Jill’s greeting was echoed by everyone else in the room. ‘How was London, Logan? How’s your grandma?’

‘London was fine,’ he said. ‘Grandma’s about the same.’

‘Well I suppose the same is better than worse, though it’s not ideal.’

‘No,’ Logan said. ‘Not really.’

Clara cast around for a chair, but there wasn’t one that wasn’t already occupied. Vas moved along a wooden window seat to make space. It was lucky both Clara and Logan were quite slim because they would never have fit otherwise, but they managed to squeeze in.

‘Cormac’s in the kitchen with his dad,’ Sinead said. ‘It’s knives at dawn when they cook together – both obsessed with food, and both think they can do it better than the other. I’ll go and break them up and tell them you’re here.’

But there was no need. No sooner had Sinead said she was going to get them than Cormac came in from the kitchen, followed by a man who could only be his dad.

Clara, involuntarily, stared as Cormac introduced him. She couldn’t help it. Now she could see exactly where Cormac got his impressive physique from. His dad had to have been pushing sixty – maybe older – but he was still solid and the sort of handsome that would stop you on the street to get a better look. He was dressed in cargo trousers and a soft checked shirt, his hair threaded with grey that somehow looked as if it was meant to be there, his cheekbones sharper than his son’s, his brows a little bushier and his eyes a little fiercer, but there was still the underlying kindness of Cormac’s. He looked as if he was no stranger to the gym

either. Lucky Cormac, Clara thought, if those were the genes he'd inherited.

'Newcomers!' The man smiled. 'I'm Darragh!' He reached out to shake Logan and Clara's hands in turn.

'This is Clara and Logan,' Cormac said. 'And this, as you've probably worked out already, is my dad.'

'Oh, I've heard all about you two,' Darragh said. He looked at Clara. 'You're the chef, right?'

Clara flushed under his scrutiny. Was he expecting her to be a lot more impressive than she actually was? 'Not really... I mean, I trained in food but... I don't work in it now, and it was quite basic training.'

'Don't do yourself down,' Cormac said, his native accent coming through stronger than ever, perhaps due to the presence of his parents. 'Sure, you're brilliant.'

'Can't say I blame you for dropping out of the profession,' Darragh said. 'I worked kitchens myself many years ago; I love food, but working in it's a thankless task – long hours and bad pay. I keep telling Cormac he must want his head looking at, wanting to make a living from it. There's a lot more money in medical devices, though it's not nearly as exciting.'

'It's not that bad, Da,' Cormac said.

Darragh turned his attention to Logan. 'And Cormac tells me you're an artist... a very good one by all accounts.'

Logan's sudden smile lit his face. He'd been largely silent until this point but was obviously pleased at the compliment. At least that was a good start to the evening. Logan had made it very obvious he hadn't wanted to go the whole time they'd been getting ready at home, so Clara was hopeful this would be the start of things improving.

'Yes,' he said, beaming at Darragh. 'I have a studio here... You should come and take a look before you leave; I can show you some of my work.'

'Doubtless I'll end up buying a piece too. If it's half as good as Cormac says.' Darragh winked.

Despite being very obviously flattered, Logan waved away the praise. ‘I’m not that good really.’

‘My friend,’ Cormac said, ‘I couldn’t paint for fudge. Take the compliment – you’re brilliant at what you do.’

Another brownie point for Cormac, Clara thought, as Logan’s grin spread so wide she might have to move along the seat to make more room for it. Her hope grew with his smile – she really didn’t see how Logan could continue to be so antagonistic with Cormac when he was making such a huge effort to be friendly. Perhaps he’d sensed Logan’s dislike and was working to fix it.

There was another knock at the door.

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ Cormac said, and went out to get it.

A minute later, just as Darragh and Sinead had started telling Jill about their flight over, Cormac returned with Betty.

Clara smiled warmly at her friend. She wore a knee-length crushed velvet dress with a subtle gold thread and her gingernut curls were piled into a high ponytail that spilled spirals in all directions to frame her sweet face. Clara marvelled at how pretty she looked, blushing from the winter air and slightly breathless as Cormac introduced her to his parents, and she resolved to tell her at the first opportunity.

‘What a lovely dress!’ Sinead said, smiling.

‘It’s quite old really,’ Betty said, ‘but thank you.’

‘Well it looks lovely on you. Sometimes the old reliables are the things that make us feel the best, right? And your hair is a lovely colour – is that your own colour?’

‘I tint it, but it’s not far off. Mine is a bit more carrotty, I’m afraid, so I tend to tone it down.’

‘Nothing wrong with red hair – a good Celtic colour,’ Darragh put in. ‘You’ve a look of the Irish about you, now that I think of it. Do you have family there?’

‘I don’t think so. I suppose there could be some from way back, but I’ve no idea for sure. As far as I know my family are

all from Cornwall.’

Clara shot a small smile at Cormac as Betty continued her conversation with his parents. ‘It’s going well...’ she mouthed.

He stuck up a covert thumb.

There was another knock at the door and this time Cormac returned from answering it with Killian, Gaby, Elijah and Fern. By now the living room was standing room only and the temperature was climbing with all the bodies packed in there. Marina went to open a window, even though nobody had asked her to, and stood next to it, fanning herself. Logan nudged Clara and gave a subtle nod in Marina’s direction.

‘Make yourself at home then,’ he whispered.

‘Ava! Clara!’ Fern went to hug them both in turn.

Elijah grinned awkwardly. Not quite ten, but already acting as though he was too old for hugs and kisses from his aunts, however much he still wanted them.

‘Looks like we’re the last to the party as usual,’ Gaby said, acknowledging everyone.

‘Oh, there’s a few to come yet,’ Cormac said cheerily, and Clara silently wondered whether he was planning to suspend any guests still to arrive from the ceiling, because there was certainly no room left on the floor.

He gestured to his mum and dad, who’d looked around expectedly, pausing their conversation with Betty. ‘Ma, Da, this is Killian – I told you he’s on the lifeboat crew – and his family, Gaby, Fern and Elijah.’

Darragh got up and took Killian’s hand in a firm grip to shake it. Not in the aggressive way of the alpha male but in the way of a man who is pleased and grateful to meet someone he admires and respects. ‘I’ve heard good things about you, Killian. I’m very pleased to meet you.’ And then he turned to Gaby and the kids. ‘Very pleased to meet you all too.’

‘Yes, it’s lovely finally putting faces to all these names,’ Sinead said.

‘Likewise...’ Gaby glanced around for a seat and then seemed to decide it wasn’t worth the bother. ‘We’ve heard so much about you both it feels as if we already know you.’

‘Everyone has been so welcoming here we feel the same! I can see why Cormac seems so settled already.’

Once they’d established that all the guests had arrived, Cormac informed them that food would be another fifteen minutes, but in the meantime they could help themselves to drinks.

‘I’ll do the drinks,’ Sinead said as Cormac went back to the kitchen, followed by his dad. ‘It’s far safer out of the way; it takes a braver woman than me to get in the middle of Cormac and Darragh shut in a kitchen together.’

‘I don’t go near our kitchen when Clara’s in there,’ Logan said. ‘More than my life’s worth.’

Clara nudged him. ‘Oi! You hate cooking! You always say you’re glad I want to do it!’

‘Well it’s a good thing I do; I’m surprised you haven’t had something written into the wedding vows about not messing in your kitchen.’

Clara laughed. ‘I’m not that bad!’

‘You’re getting married?’ Sinead asked.

‘Yes, it’s only a few months away now,’ Clara said.

‘A winter wedding? How lovely.’

‘It’s been a longer engagement than we’d originally planned,’ Clara added. ‘For lots of reasons really. We didn’t want to bankrupt ourselves so gave it time to get the money together, and then we had to put it back again because of my dad, so...’ She held up crossed fingers. ‘Hopefully it will all go ahead this time.’

‘I always said I’d have paid,’ Jill put in, suddenly tuning into their conversation.

Clara held up a hand to stop her. ‘I know, but as far as we’re concerned, the notion of the bride’s family paying for

everything is old-fashioned nonsense and you need your money for other things.’

‘Looking out for your ma,’ Sinead said approvingly. ‘As it should be.’

She turned to Jill. ‘How are you doing these days? Cormac told us all about your sad loss; I suppose it doesn’t get any easier. I can’t imagine what it must be like.’

Jill gave a small smile. ‘Sometimes I still struggle to believe he’s gone. But we move on, don’t we? We have to, for the sake of our other loved ones.’

Sinead nodded. ‘That we do.’

She looked at Ava. ‘And I hear you’re taking up where your father left off. Cormac says you’re quite the superstar.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Ava said. ‘Let’s just say Cormac and I have a friendly rivalry and it’s a very good motivation.’

‘I’ll bet; I know what he’s like.’

Sinead got up and went to a set of drawers where glasses and bottles containing drinks of all sorts were lined up on top.

‘Competitive?’ Logan asked.

Sinead nodded as she scanned the label of a bottle of red wine. ‘Not with other people so much as with himself. Always pushing to do more and do it better; always has to prove himself even if nobody’s asking for it. He’d never make anyone else look small by trying to beat them; if he’s trying to win something, he’s only doing it to prove to himself he can.’

‘Sounds kinda perfect,’ Logan replied.

Clara gave him a sharp look. There was sarcasm in his tone, she was certain, too subtle for anyone but her to notice.

Darragh stood at the doorway of the kitchen. ‘Food’s ready, everyone. I’m afraid there isn’t much room for sitting in here – not much room for standing either! Probably easiest if everyone grabs a plate and helps themselves and then finds a place to sit wherever they can in the living room.’

‘I’m sure we’ll manage just fine,’ Jill said. ‘There’s no standing on ceremony around here.’

Clara smiled as Darragh waved them all enthusiastically into the kitchen. She loved Cormac’s parents already. There was an instant ease and informality that was easy to love.

There were too many bodies trying to get to the plates at once, so Clara stepped back for a moment to let others get in first. Betty did the same, and Clara took the opportunity to have a quiet word.

‘You look lovely,’ she said.

‘Really?’ Betty smoothed a hand down her dress. ‘I feel I’ve overdone it a bit now I see everyone else.’

‘No, you look gorgeous. Just perfect. Seen anything of Cormac this week?’

‘Only in passing. You’re more likely to have seen him – didn’t you help out at the shack this week?’

Clara shook her head. ‘Actually, he texted me to say he was OK to manage so I didn’t.’

‘He did? That was Thursday, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Only he looked mad busy when I went past. I couldn’t stop in to help because I had to be at the wholesalers before they closed. I wondered where you were when I didn’t see you.’

‘That’s weird,’ Clara said, glancing up to see Logan chatting to Darragh about his art and Cormac telling Jill what was in the quiche. ‘Maybe he thought he wouldn’t be busy and then got more custom than he’d expected.’

‘Maybe. Or perhaps he couldn’t pay you after all.’

‘He did say things were tight, but he seemed OK with a few hours. Honestly, if he’d needed me, I’d have probably helped him out for free.’

‘I’m sure Logan would have had something to say about that.’

‘He wouldn’t have to know. I don’t have to tell him everything I do just because we’re getting married. If Cormac had needed me, I wish he’d asked.’

‘Maybe he didn’t. I’m only saying he looked busy to me.’

‘Ladies...’ Cormac came over to them. ‘You’re not eating?’

‘Oh, we thought we’d let everyone else get in first,’ Clara said. ‘You *do not* want to be in the way of Ava and a plate of chicken legs for anything.’

Cormac grinned. ‘I’m glad you could both come. I think it’s going OK, isn’t it? I’ve never been much for entertaining – never had a place big enough... never had a friendship group big enough, come to think of it.’

‘I find that hard to believe,’ Betty said. ‘You must have had friends coming out of your ears in Ireland.’

‘Not the right sort, though,’ he said. ‘My friends back then were more the getting-sloshed-as-quickly-as-possible-and-then-falling-out-of-the-pub-and-into-the-nearest-kebab-shop type of friends. We didn’t do civilised get-togethers like this.’

‘Well this is great,’ Betty said.

‘Maybe I’ll do more things like this now I’m settled here,’ Cormac said.

‘I see a gap!’ Betty said.

Cormac glanced at the table and then back at Betty. ‘Go for it.’

‘Oh, I’m going to take full advantage of having someone else cook for me,’ Betty replied. ‘It’s not often that happens in our line of work, right?’

Clara watched Betty go to inspect the food.

‘You’re not getting any?’ Cormac asked.

‘Yes, I... I just wanted to check... You definitely didn’t need me at the shack on Thursday?’

‘Oh no – I was fine.’

‘Only Betty thought you looked really busy. You could have asked, you know, if you needed help. If...’ Clara paused. If it was about money, would he be embarrassed to admit it? Or perhaps he really hadn’t needed her. Or maybe, though he’d never shown any signs of it, he’d decided she wasn’t that good after all. What if her being there had proved to be more trouble than it was worth? But he’d seemed so keen after she’d helped out during the Promise Procession, so surely that couldn’t be it?

‘To be honest,’ Cormac said, lowering his voice, ‘I didn’t want to be a nuisance. I know you’d have said yes to coming over even if it wasn’t convenient so I didn’t want to put you on the spot.’

‘You wouldn’t have done!’ Clara said. ‘I was thinking that maybe I was so rubbish you didn’t want me back!’

‘God no!’ Cormac shook his head. ‘Never! It’s just...’

‘What?’

‘Well, your man Logan’s back. I know you two have a lot going on and I didn’t want to... you know... if you needed time...’

Clara held back a frown. There was something Cormac wasn’t saying. Her glance went to Logan, who looked up at the same time and caught her eye before quickly looking away again. Had he been watching her and Cormac?

‘You can always ask me,’ she said finally. ‘I won’t always be able to make it, but if I can, I will. You mustn’t feel you can’t ask; I’d hate to think you were struggling there for no good reason.’

‘I managed in the end. I usually do.’

She glanced across the room again to see Logan making his way over, a plate of food in his hand. ‘You should get some before it’s all gone,’ he told Clara.

‘Yes,’ Cormac agreed. ‘Help yourself before the hot food goes cold.’

Clara hesitated, her gaze switching between the two of them. Dare she leave them alone together? But then, if she didn't, would that look as if she had something to hide? And why was she worried – she hadn't done anything wrong and there was no reason to panic about leaving them alone. True, she hadn't been entirely honest with Logan about how much help she'd agreed to give Cormac at the shack, but if it came to his attention there was no reason to feel guilty about it.

In the end she decided to grab a plate and get something to eat.

Sinead came over and started to ask about her wedding, and as they chatted Clara's gaze went to where Cormac and Logan were still in conversation. There wasn't much humour being shared and the body language of both men was awkward. What were they talking about? Should she be worried? More to the point, why did she even think there was a need to be worried? Logan didn't much care for Cormac, and he'd never made any secret of that, but Cormac was always polite and courteous to Logan and surely there was no reason why there might be conflict?

'What's the colour palette?' Sinead asked, dragging her back to the conversation.

'Sorry?'

'For the bridesmaids? What colour are you having?'

'Oh... claret.'

'How lovely. Who are you having? Your sisters, I expect?'

'Yes, Ava, Gaby and my niece, Fern.'

'Nobody from Logan's side?'

'Logan doesn't have much in the way of family... not that he's close to in the same way. So it's just my sisters and my niece. And as I don't have my dad, Betty and my mum will be giving me away.'

'You must be—'

Sinead's next sentence was cut short by a chorus of bleeps. Everyone in the lifeboat crew looked at each other with faint

amusement.

‘At least we’re all in one place,’ Killian said.

‘Convenient,’ Vas agreed.

Cormac dropped the sticky rib he was eating into the bin and wiped his hands on a cloth.

‘You don’t need to come,’ Vas said to him. ‘We can deal with it.’

Cormac tossed the cloth into the sink. ‘No way! I’m coming!’

‘But your parents—’ Ava began.

But Darragh put a hand on his son’s shoulder. ‘Don’t mind us – do what you need to do,’ he said, his pride obvious. ‘We’ll see you later.’

Harry reached for a rib from the plate. ‘I’m not risking it,’ he said as Ava rolled her eyes. ‘They might all be gone when we get back.’

A second later, everyone who was needed at the station raced out. The front door slammed shut and the house was left suddenly and strangely quiet.

‘Bloody boats.’ Gaby gulped back her wine. ‘I can’t remember the last time we got through an evening without those pagers going off.’

‘It must be hard,’ Sinead said.

‘It is,’ Jill agreed. ‘But we bear it because we have to.’

Darragh ran his gaze over the food. ‘I’ll put some of this aside for when they get back.’

‘I’ll help,’ Clara said.

‘Me too,’ Betty put in.

Darragh smiled at them both as the others left the room to make space. ‘Thank you. I can tell you two both know what you’re doing,’ he said as they all worked together to put a little of everything aside.

A few minutes later they were done, and everyone else returned to resume their meal.

‘I thought for a minute we were going to have to move the party to Salty’s Chips,’ Marina said.

Clara smiled. ‘There’s no need for that. You can all fill your boots now; we’ve saved plenty for the heroes.’

As she said this, Logan gave her a strange look. She could guess he had a dig ready about the men of the service – he’d always labelled them macho alpha males. Yet none of them really were, not even Killian. Clara suspected it had more to do with Logan’s insecurities than anything any of them had done, but that wasn’t her fault. She wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of looking as if she cared.

Clara got drawn into conversation with Marina and Bob, who were telling her about plans to sell some of Jill’s plants at their hardware shop, while Jill was listening to Fern recount her week at school in excruciating detail, right down to what she had for lunch every day and what her friends had for lunch every day, while Elijah piled half a dozen chicken legs and the same number of ribs onto his plate and settled in a corner with his spoils.

‘Get some salad on that plate!’ Gaby called over.

‘I’ve had some already,’ he replied.

Gaby rolled her eyes. ‘And don’t have any more meat! Leave some for everyone else!’

Clara laughed. ‘It’s like Gollum with the ring.’

‘If he could eat chicken every day for the rest of his life I think he would.’

Clara watched Elijah tuck in. He was changing before their very eyes; she’d seen it plainly over the last few months. He was less and less the wide-eyed boy who’d always been so impressed by everything and so eager to please, and more like the man he would become – definitely more like Killian than he’d ever been before. And then she saw his sister, Fern, perusing the buffet, taking only a little from here and there and if there was a dish with only a small amount left, she didn’t

take any, even though Clara knew it was a thing she liked to eat.

‘You’d have done that,’ Jill said in Clara’s ear, nodding at Fern. ‘Always thinking of everyone else.’

‘Nah!’ Clara said. ‘It only seems that way because I wasn’t quick enough to get in there before Ava ate everything.’

‘I can’t argue with that,’ Jill said with a laugh. ‘She’s always had a good appetite and been active enough to burn it off.’

‘I hope they’re all right out there,’ Clara said quietly.

Jill didn’t need to ask who she meant. ‘Me too. At least the weather’s not too bad; whatever they’ve gone out for should be straightforward enough.’

‘I hope so. I hate to say it but I’m glad Ava’s not on the seagoing crew. I mean, I know she will be and that’s what she wants, but the longer it takes her to qualify...’

‘I agree. I’d be happy if she never qualified, but, of course, that’s never going to happen. This is Ava we’re talking about after all.’

‘I realise I told her to go for it, but sometimes when the boat is out and I think of her being on it...’ Clara shrugged.

‘I know. But they’ll be fine.’

Clara looked up to see Logan making his way over.

‘What are you two looking so miserable about? Have we run out of mayo or something?’

‘People we love are out risking their lives to help others,’ Jill said coldly. ‘If we’re worried about that, it’s only natural.’

‘Oh... sorry...’ Logan drank from the can of lager he was holding.

Clara hadn’t seen him drink that much tonight, but a sober Logan would have known better than to goad her mum in that way. As he flushed and looked awkward, she had to feel a bit sorry for him. He hadn’t grown up with a dad who’d volunteered on the lifeboats, where the service was a part of

everyday life; he hadn't witnessed all the rescues Clara and her mother had; he hadn't sat and waited for the crew to return while the waves hammered at the harbour wall. He hadn't lost anyone to the sea like they had. She supposed, looking at it like that, he didn't understand what it was like to be bound to the service as they were. And because Clara chose to shield him from as much of it as she could, she supposed he never would.

From across the kitchen there was raucous laughter. Darragh and Betty were helpless over something, and in a bid to defuse the awkward tension between Jill and Logan, Clara called over.

'What did we miss?'

Darragh wiped his eyes. 'I was telling Betty about the time Cormac thought he could jump across a canal on holiday... you remember that, Sinead? He'd have been about fifteen... Full of himself at that age he was.'

'How could I forget it?' Sinead said with a grin. 'Took a run up... We told him he wouldn't make it, but would he listen? Straight in! He had to walk three miles back to the cottage covered in canal slime. Stank to high heaven!'

'So he's always been a daredevil?' Marina asked.

'I wouldn't go that far,' Darragh said. He caught Sinead's eye and whatever silently passed between the two of them suddenly threw a shadow over the jollity of the moment. 'Maybe when he was younger, but that all changed when he turned seventeen. Anyway...' He looked around at everyone. 'Who needs more drinks?'

Clara was aware of something more forced in his humour than there had been. Something in that moment had changed things. Perhaps he was worried about Cormac and the shout they'd all gone out to.

As Sinead started to ask people if they wanted their drinks topping up, Clara went to speak to Darragh.

'He's not on the boat tonight, you know,' she said quietly.

Darragh gave her a grateful smile. ‘I know. Still, you worry for them, don’t you? I know you lost your da...’ He rubbed at his neck. ‘Truthfully, I try not to think of the risks, and I know he’s not out there yet... but I know Cormac. He’s protective... I worry about him losing a crewmate because it would destroy him. He’s that sort of a man – if you’re in his life, then you’re in it to the end and he’d do anything for you. I hear him talk about that crew and he thinks the world of them... of everyone here, in fact. He wants to protect everyone – that’s how he is.’

Clara thought back to Ava’s boyfriend, Harry, and how he’d struggled to come to terms with her father’s death, especially as he’d been on the boat that night serving alongside him. She was about to mention this when Logan called over.

‘Do you know where Cormac keeps his salt?’

Clara held in a sigh as Darragh went off to search through the kitchen cupboards. Sometimes her fiancé’s timing was spectacular.

If anyone harboured a hope that the crew would return quickly, it was to be dashed. It was close to midnight by the time people started to give up on the party. There had been a valiant effort to keep it going, but without the host and half of the guests, and with the other half worried about them, it was never going to be the party of the century. It would be memorable, but not for the right reasons.

Elijah had been determined to stay awake until his dad came back, and although he kept up a steady stream of questions for his mum, grandma and aunt, and just about anyone else who’d answer, his eyes were heavy and it was becoming an obvious struggle. Fern had given up an hour before and was leaning against Jill on the sofa as she dozed. Marina and Bob had already left, asking Jill to call if there was any news that they needed to know.

Logan was asleep too, head back against the sofa next to Jill, his mouth hanging open. Clara was hardly surprised,

given how much she'd seen him drink, and she was faintly annoyed, though she'd tried to give him the benefit of the doubt. He perhaps felt the need to cut loose, given that he was still waiting on bad news from London that hadn't yet come.

They'd all been able to rest a bit easier when Darragh returned from a walk to the lifeboat station and reported that the mission was to free a cargo ship that had strayed off course from a sandbank. It might be a long night, but compared to some rescues it was fairly routine.

'Bit of a baptism of fire, eh?' Gaby said to Sinead. 'Your first visit to Cormac and he's answering a shout.'

'A shout?'

'Oh, it's a lifeboat thing. Means he's been called on a mission.'

'Ah... ' Sinead pulled a cushion from the armchair she was sitting on and hugged it to her. 'I see. Yes. I suppose you're used to this by now.'

'Sadly, yes.' Gaby looked fondly at Fern. 'It's a love-hate thing, that's for sure. Of course I'm proud of Killian and I get why he wants to do it... Ava too. But that doesn't mean I don't sometimes resent it. Sometimes I hate how much of our lives it takes from us, and the people it takes too when we're very unlucky.'

'Why did your dad join?' Sinead asked. 'Cormac said the main reason Ava joined was because her dad had always done it.'

'It's a daft family thing,' Jill put in. 'The Morrow Promise.'

Sinead raised her eyebrows in a silent question.

'Morrow's have always done it,' Gaby said.

'And Jack firmly believed in it. A Morrow has always been on the boats, ever since they came to Port Promise, and they always would be. I thought it might end with Jack, but then Ava decided to join.'

'And Killian was already on the crew?' Darragh asked.

Gaby nodded.

‘I’m going to join!’ Elijah then announced.

Every waking gaze in the room turned to him.

‘We’ll see,’ was all Gaby said, but in a flinty tone that suggested she had some rather stronger opinions that she was saving for a more private moment. It was certainly enough to leave nobody in any doubt of her disapproval.

Darragh looked at Clara. ‘Does Logan not fancy it?’

Clara shook her head. ‘It’s different for him. He’s not from here and there’s no seafaring blood in his family, so...’

Betty stood up from her spot on a floor cushion and stretched. ‘It’s been lovely but I’m afraid I’m going to have to get home. I have a breakfast shift early in the morning, so I really ought to be in bed.’

‘I’ll walk you back,’ Darragh said, getting up.

‘There’s no need,’ Betty replied. ‘It’s freezing and I’m only down the road.’

‘We could come with you,’ Clara said. ‘I could wake Logan—’

Betty shook her head. ‘Don’t do that. It’s fine.’

‘I’d like to go by the lifeboat station again,’ Darragh said. ‘So if I come with you, I could see you home and then pop in there to see what’s happening. You live above the cafe, don’t you? So it’s not far, if my memory serves me right.’

Betty paused and then relented. ‘All right. Thanks. I suppose if you’re going to be with me you could pop into the cafe and help me make some hot drinks to take to the station – help keep the shore crew going at least.’

Darragh smiled. ‘I’ll get your coat for you.’

He went out of the room and Betty said her goodbyes.

‘I’ll come by and see you tomorrow,’ Clara said as she hugged her. ‘We have things to talk about.’

‘Do we?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Like what?’

‘I’ll tell you tomorrow.’

‘Keep me in suspense why don’t you?’

Darragh came back with a scarlet woollen coat. ‘This is yours, right?’

‘Well remembered.’ Betty smiled as she took it from him.

Sinead got up and gave her a brief hug. ‘It was so lovely to meet you; hopefully we’ll be back to visit soon and next time we’ll come and see your cafe.’

‘You must,’ Betty said. ‘It was lovely to meet you too. Enjoy the rest of your trip.’

The moment Betty and Darragh left, Logan stirred.

Gaby nodded in his direction. ‘Sleeping Beauty’s up.’

Logan opened his eyes, his grin sleepy. ‘Sorry, long day.’

‘I’ll bet,’ Gaby replied wryly.

Clara bit back a retort on his behalf. He might not go to sea on rescue missions or do all the manly things that Killian did, but he still worked hard to earn a living, and it was taxing in its own way.

‘You want to go home?’ she asked him.

‘Yeah. Are you coming now?’

‘I wanted to wait until the crew came back, just so... you know, it’s hard to settle when they’re out there.’

‘But Ava’s not out there.’

‘Even so.’

‘I suppose I ought to wait too then.’

‘There’s plenty of us to wait here,’ Jill cut in. ‘We can phone you and let you know what the situation is when the crew comes back. If you’re tired, go home.’

Logan pushed himself to sit and rubbed his eyes. ‘It’s all right, I’m awake now. I’ll wait with you – can’t be much longer, can it? Want me to run down and see what’s going on?’

Clara wondered whether he was still feeling guilty about his comments to Jill earlier, but if he was, at least he was trying to make amends.

‘Darragh and Betty have gone,’ Sinead said. ‘Darragh is going to walk her home and they’ll call at the station with hot drinks and find out if there’s anything to report.’

‘You should have woken me,’ Logan said to Clara. ‘I’d have walked Betty back.’

‘I think he was glad of the excuse to go and see what’s happening at the station, to be honest,’ Sinead added.

‘I wish I could go,’ Elijah said.

‘It’s cold and dark out there,’ Gaby said.

‘It’s not that cold.’

Gaby gave him a withering look. ‘Oh, it’s not? How about you go stand out in the garden for an hour and we’ll see how warm you think it is then?’

‘I bet I wouldn’t care.’

Clara cocked an eyebrow at her sister. Elijah was definitely becoming his father’s son.

‘You’re not going,’ Gaby said.

‘You never let me go to the station; Ava told me you used to go all the time when you were young.’

‘That was different.’ Gaby glanced at Clara. ‘Looks like I’m going to have to have a word with Ava about her stories.’

‘Just once, Mum... please? If you let me go this once I’ll never ask again.’

‘Until the next time,’ Gaby said. ‘It’s late – if we go anywhere, we go home to get Fern to bed, so you either stay here and wait, or we go back and you go to bed too.’

Logan stretched and yawned. ‘Maybe we should head back ourselves,’ he said to Clara.

‘You just said we ought to wait.’

‘But that was before I knew other people were leaving. We don’t know how long it will take for the mission to be wrapped up and there doesn’t seem any point in sitting around waiting half the night. They’ll probably go straight to bed when they’re done anyway.’

‘But I want to see that everyone is back safe.’

‘Being here or being at home won’t change that outcome,’ Gaby said. ‘If there’s anything you need to know we’ll call.’

Clara was torn. She realised it was probably pointless, but at the same time she wouldn’t be able to rest if she went home, even if she got into bed. Finally, she turned to Logan. ‘Go home if you want, I don’t mind. But I’m going to stay a while longer.’

Logan looked far from happy at this plan. ‘Can’t you come? Gaby said she’d call if there was anything you needed to know.’

‘I know, but I won’t be able to settle.’

‘The boat’s been out loads of times and you’ve never been bothered before.’

‘I’m always bothered; maybe you just don’t notice. And this one is taking a really long time.’

‘Like Gaby said, you being here isn’t going to make any difference to how long it takes.’

‘No,’ Clara replied evenly, though she could feel her irritation start to rise, ‘but it will make me feel better to be here.’

‘But Gaby will call—’

‘Please, just let me wait! Half an hour, and if there’s nothing more to know I’ll come home.’

‘Fine...’ Logan glanced around the room, clearly trying to work out which of them sounded unreasonable to the

onlookers and concluding that it might be him. 'I'll stay with you then.' I'll just go splash my face with some water to wake up.'

He went upstairs to use Cormac's bathroom. As he did, there was a knock at the front door.

Sinead leaped up. 'I bet that's Darragh back.'

As she went to answer the door they could hear Logan's footsteps on the floor above. Sinead returned with Darragh, the cold of the night clinging to his coat. Darragh was smiling, and Clara could feel the tension in the room ebb away as everyone relaxed. Clearly things were as they should be, or at least there was no immediate danger to anyone.

'What's the situation down there?' Gaby asked.

Darragh opened his mouth to speak when there was a clatter from the stairs and they turned to see Logan holding his phone, his expression somewhere between anger and resignation.

'What's the matter?' Clara asked, knowing immediately that something was wrong.

'Mum and Dad have been trying to call but I didn't hear my phone... Grandma's died.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The mood was tense and silent as Clara and Logan marched back to their flat. She could see lights out in the black of the bay and assumed they were coming from the cargo vessel and the lifeboat trying to haul it free. Nobody else was on the tiny streets of Port Promise and so their footsteps echoed on the pavements. Logan's stride was long and irritated – Clara could feel it almost radiate from him. He was annoyed at himself he'd said as they'd left Cormac's house; he should have been keeping an eye on his phone; he shouldn't have drunk so much because now he'd have to wait until he was properly sober to drive back to London; he should have realised something like this would happen.

She'd tried to reassure him, but it wasn't just that he didn't want to listen; it was almost like he was incapable of listening. Sometimes he'd do that, become fixated on a problem to the point where everything else would be shut out. Clara had always put it down to his artistic temperament, and she'd shrugged it off; it had never really seemed like a problem until tonight. Not being able to get through to him, to show him her support at such a moment made her sad. He'd been there when her dad died and she wanted to be there for him now, but he wasn't letting her in.

It was only a ten-minute walk back to the studio. Clara unlocked the door and Logan almost pushed past her to get inside. But then the lights went on and he stopped, staring at the ground.

‘What the...?’

Clara looked and immediately saw the pool of water. It was coming from under the door to Logan's studio space, spreading across the floor of the gallery where he displayed his paintings for sale.

'Oh God!'

He splashed through it and opened the studio door. Here the water was deeper and covered almost the entire floor. It was running down the wall from the ceiling.

'The bathroom!' Clara gasped.

The bathroom in the flat was directly above. Something had to be wrong in there.

Logan raced up and Clara followed. He burst into the room and strode over to the sink, and then spun to face her.

'What did you do?' he yelled.

'Me?'

'The tap's been running this whole time with the plug in!'

Clara felt the blood drain from her face. 'I don't...'

He yanked out the plug. 'You were the last one in here! You were rushing to wash... rushing to get to that stupid bloody party! And now look!'

'I don't know how... I thought I'd turned everything off!'

'Well you didn't turn it off properly, *obviously!* And why have the plug in the sink if you're not using it? What kind of moron does that?'

'It must have... I must have dropped it and it must have somehow slotted back in... I'm sorry – I messed up.'

'You did that all right! Did you see the state of my studio? What am I meant to do with that now? And I have to drive to London, like, now! I don't believe this!'

'I'm sorry. It was an accident!'

'All because you were in such a rush to get to that stupid thing at Cormac's house! This place drives me insane, everyone living in everyone else's pockets! What was so

important about meeting this guy's parents? Anyone would think you were marrying him, not me!' Logan shoved her out of the way and went back downstairs.

Clara followed him. 'Logan, I'm sorry!'

Showing no sign of acknowledging her apology, he went back into his studio. 'Water in everything.' He held up his brush caddy. 'Absolutely everywhere! It's going to take all night to clean this!'

Clara ran to get a mop and bucket. When she came back he was standing in the pool, staring into space.

'I hate it here,' he said in a dull voice. 'This is a sign – I shouldn't be here.'

'It's not a sign; it's only me being stupid.' Clara began to mop up the water.

'No, it is. This is telling me I'm not where I'm meant to be. I hate this stupid village. I've tried so hard to fit in and it's impossible, and this is the universe telling me it's time to give in.'

'Please don't say that. You're stressed, you've just had bad news and now this has made it worse, and you were already tired, and drinking doesn't help—'

'It's none of those things.' Logan went over to a large canvas that had been on the floor, propped against the wall, and lifted it up, watching as water dripped from the frame. 'I've always hated it; I thought I could deal with it as long as I was with you, but... there's not enough for me in this place. I'm stuck painting stupid seascapes for stupid tourists, and while I'm here I'll be doing it for the rest of my life, until I die, and then, if I'm lucky, there'll be some stupid lantern lit for me somewhere, like I'd have been excited about that.' He turned to her. 'I want to make a name for myself, Clara. I want to achieve something – how can I do that in Port Promise?'

'Lots of artists make a name for themselves while they live in places like this. And lots of artists are famous for landscapes.'

'But it's not me. There's no... I don't feel inspired here.'

‘You said you did. That was why you came in the first place.’

‘At first, but how long could that last? I feel as if I’m painting the same thing over and over again.’

‘Then paint something else. There’s more than sea here.’

Logan let the canvas drop back into place against the wall. ‘Is there?’

Clara went back to her mopping. What else could she do? She could see this was a discussion that would go round in circles until Logan snapped out of his current mood. And given the evening’s events, that wasn’t going to happen any time soon.

‘I’m going to pack,’ he said.

She looked up. ‘Surely you’re not driving to London tonight?’

‘It’s better than dealing with this mess.’

‘I’ll deal with it – I caused it, so I’ll clean it up. You’ve had too much to drink anyway. Go to bed, get some sleep and we’ll go together in the morning.’

‘What about work?’

‘I’ll get some days off. The park’s closed so there shouldn’t be a problem. There’s no point in driving up there right now; nothing is going to change whether you’re there or not, so you might as well sleep first. Driving there tonight would be asking for another disaster, and we’ve had enough for one day.’

He didn’t reply; he simply left the studio. A moment later Clara heard him moving about upstairs as she mopped, but it didn’t last long. She had to assume he’d taken her advice and gone to bed. She let out a sigh as she wrung her mop and moved her bucket along the floor.

There was a lot to do here, so no bed for her yet.

She'd fallen into bed a few hours later next to a sleeping Logan, completely exhausted. The next thing she knew he was shaking her gently awake and there was daylight streaming in from the curtains he'd clearly just opened.

'Sorry to wake you, but I'm going to leave shortly. I didn't want to go without seeing you.'

Clara pushed herself up. 'You're going? But I thought we were both going?'

He pushed her hair behind an ear and kissed her. 'You don't want to get dragged into all this.'

'All what? Logan, your grandma's died and I want to be there for you. When's the funeral?'

'There's no date yet so there's no point in getting time off work until we know.'

'But I want... You can't go on your own.'

'I won't be alone; I'll have Mum and Dad.'

'But what will it look like to them if I don't come? It'll look like I don't care!'

'It won't.'

'It will! Logan, why are you shutting me out like this?'

'I'm not; I...' He got up from the bed and went to pick up his comb from the dresser. 'I'm not shutting you out, but it's awkward right now.'

'In what way? Logan, if it's about last night—'

'It's not and I'm really sorry for being such a dick. Things were getting on top of me, that's all. I'd love to have you there but it's not practical right now.'

'Practical has nothing to do with it! There's nothing practical about a death in the family! I don't care about practical; I care about you! I love you; I want to be there for you!'

'I know, but it's not that simple. It's...' He took a deep breath. 'My mum.'

Clara's shoulders slumped. Of course it was. She might have known that woman would be behind this. 'She doesn't want me there.'

'It's not personal,' Logan said hastily. 'She only wants family there until the funeral, says she has enough to do without looking after a whole platoon of people at the house.'

'Then I won't stay at the house. We'll get a hotel and I'll stay there. I'll be out of the way; she won't even know I'm in London, and in the evening, when you want a bit of sanity, come back to the hotel to me.'

'You'd do that?'

'Of course I would!'

He gave her a weak smile. 'Thanks. But are you sure you want to come?'

Clara could think of a million places she'd rather be, but it was a case of needing to do the right thing. And the right thing to do was to be at Logan's side when he needed her. 'Yes. If you can hang on another half hour, I'll throw some stuff into a bag and I'll be ready.'

As Logan drove, Clara made a quick call to her mum.

'Oh, hello, love,' Jill said. 'How are you doing?'

'Good. We're on our way to London now. Is everything all right there? Everyone get back OK from the shout?'

'Oh yes, they got back about three, I think. Everyone accounted for and everyone rescued, so nothing to report. Want me to look in on the studio while you're gone?'

'That would be brilliant – thanks, Mum.'

'I hope it's not too stressful for you, love.'

'I'm sure it will be,' Clara said ruefully, 'but thanks. Love you.'

'Love you too. Keep me posted, won't you?'

Clara called her boss next and explained she'd need a few days off, then she sent a text to Tanika to tell her too. Then she messaged Ava, Gaby and Betty.

Betty replied immediately.

*Please tell Logan I'm sorry to hear about his grandma.
Of course I totally get why you wanted to go with him,
I suppose my news will have to wait till you get back x*

What news?

It's silly. You don't want to hear about it now.

Clara glanced across at Logan. 'I need to call Betty. Is that OK? Can you manage without me navigating?'

'No, go ahead.'

'Oh, and she says she's sorry to hear about your grandma.'

'Tell her thanks.'

Clara nodded and then dialled Betty's number. She'd probably be getting the cafe ready for the breakfast opening, but maybe she'd be able to spare a minute or two, and Clara didn't think she could stand the suspense of waiting to find out what her news was. It rang for a while, and Clara was about to give up when Betty answered, sounding breathless.

'Sorry, just taking the bins out...'

'God, no, I'm sorry if I'm phoning at a bad time.'

'No, it's OK; I can put you on the speaker and carry on working. What's up?'

'I have to know what your news is. Good news? Something exciting? It is, isn't it? Please give me something nice to take the edge off this horrible day!'

'Well...'. Even though she couldn't see her, Clara could hear the broad smile in Betty's voice. 'I took your advice. I asked him.'

‘What? Cormac? How? Where? When did this happen?’

‘Like five minutes before you texted me!’

‘What did he say?’

‘He said yes. We’re going to the Spratt later!’

‘Oh my God, I can’t believe you did it!’

Betty laughed. ‘Neither can I!’

‘So tell me everything! How did the conversation go? You asked him? What did you do?’

‘Aw, well, to be honest he was walking past the cafe as I was opening up, on his way to get some of Robin’s catch, and I kind of... well, I have to say I didn’t really think it through; I sort of rushed after him like a crazy woman and I was like, do you want to get a drink at the Spratt? And he was like, sure, who else is coming? And I was like, just us. And I gave him the look and was like, you know, just us. And he was like, a date? And I was like, well, if you don’t fancy it then I totally understand, I just thought I’d ask, and then I started to feel like a total idiot, and then he said yes, why not? And we’re meeting at eight! And I still can’t believe I did it – I’ve never asked a man out in my life!’

Clara could hear the tap running in the background as Betty talked, barely taking a breath. ‘Wow...’ she said when Betty finally left a gap. ‘You go, girl! I told you he was into you!’

‘What’s going on?’ Logan hissed.

Clara grinned at him. ‘Betty and Cormac are going on a date later.’

‘Really?’ Logan turned his gaze back to the road. ‘Never saw that one coming.’

‘What’s that?’ Betty asked.

‘Oh, Logan was saying it’s cool, he’s happy for you.’

‘I’m happy too. Am I allowed to have a good feeling about this, Clara?’

‘Absolutely! You’ve had enough bad luck. And the difference this time is that you already know Cormac’s a great guy. Are his parents still with him, by the way?’

‘Yes, but they’re leaving this afternoon to go on to some other relatives. They might call back before they leave for Ireland if they get time. They’re so lovely, aren’t they?’

‘Yes. Lucky you – you’ll probably have them for in-laws.’

‘Hold on!’ Betty squeaked. ‘We haven’t even had our first drink yet!’

‘You said you had a good feeling about it. I do too.’

‘I do,’ Betty said. ‘But I’m trying not to get too swept up in the excitement because, as I’ve discovered, a lot of things can go wrong.’

‘You’ve been with the wrong men up until now. This time will be different – I know it.’

‘I hope so. Thanks, Clara.’

‘For what?’

‘For pushing me. I never would have done it if you hadn’t persuaded me that I could.’

‘That’s what friends are for, right?’

‘I know, and you’re the best. Listen, I’d better go... getting a bit behind and about to start on really noisy tasks. Call me later to let me know how things are at your end.’

‘I’m not calling you later! I’m expecting you to be very busy later – far too busy to answer your phone! I’ll call you tomorrow sometime and we can swap news.’

‘OK. Speak to you soon.’

‘Bye, Betty.’ Clara ended the call and slipped her phone into the handbag she had stashed by her feet.

‘So your machinations finally paid off?’ Logan said with a faint smile.

‘Looks like it.’

‘Hmm. I can’t wait to see how this turns out.’

‘It’s going to turn out just fine. They’re a good match – I’ve said so all along.’

‘Yep, you could be right, I suppose.’

He was silent again, and Clara looked out of the window. The bare trees, brown fallow fields and evergreen hedgerows that surrounded Port Promise had long gone, replaced by fleeting glimpses of roadside housing estates and industrial yards. This landscape was so alien to Clara she might as well be driving on the moon. Civilisation existed beyond her village, but she’d never felt comfortable in it. Whenever she was away from Port Promise she desperately pined for the beach and cliffs, for the harbour and the bracken-clad hills that climbed away from it. But if it meant supporting Logan in his time of need, then being away from her beloved home was a sacrifice she’d make.

Her thoughts turned to Betty. It was strange, where her sudden courage had come from. She’d have put money on Betty never making a move, but she was thrilled that she had. And if nothing else, perhaps now Cormac was dating Betty, Logan would stop being so weird about him.

With that final thought, she laid her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. She’d been woken far too early; she’d grab this chance to catch up on some sleep.

‘Oh God, it’s horrible, isn’t it?’ Logan dragged his suitcase over to the wardrobe of the hotel room they’d checked into. He opened the doors, peered inside and sniffed, wrinkling his nose. ‘Stinks of damp in here. I should have realised when we walked in and the lobby was so scruffy – let’s see if we can get our money back and check in somewhere else.’

‘It’s fine.’ Clara sat on the bed. ‘This is comfy enough – we can put the heating on or open the windows or something and the room will dry out.’

Logan shoved at a window catch but it didn’t move. ‘Well, we’re not opening the windows. Odds on the heating creaks like a Cold War submarine.’

‘I think we’re going to have to deal with it. If you recall, the reason we booked this one was because everywhere else was either already booked or too expensive. We left it till the last minute, and beggars can’t be choosers. Besides, we don’t know how long we might need to stay, and this was one of the few hotels prepared to be flexible about that. Mustn’t have a very full check-in schedule for the next few weeks.’

‘Why doesn’t that surprise me?’ Logan parked his suitcase in a corner. ‘At least let me talk to my mum, see if she’ll let us —’

‘No. I’m not begging.’

‘It wouldn’t be begging. I can’t expect you to stay in this dump, and if Mum could see it, she wouldn’t expect it either.’

‘I don’t think it’s all that bad.’ Clara gave him a tired half-smile. ‘Or is this more about you not staying in this dump?’

‘Me?’ Logan shook his head. ‘I slept on floors travelling around India; I think I can deal with this.’

‘Yes, you did, as an eighteen-year-old art student. I bet you wouldn’t want to do it now.’

‘I could if I had to.’

‘But you don’t have to. Stop pretending to be all cool and worldly. Have a word with Tanika when we’re home – she could tell you a thing or two about living off-grid; she’s done it properly.’

‘I’ve done it properly.’

‘Hmm...’ Clara got off the bed and went over to the dresser. ‘At least there’s a kettle and cups.’

‘Spoken like a true octogenarian,’ Logan said wryly.

‘What can I say? I like tea. Although...’ She peered into a cup. ‘I think I’ll wash these before we use them.’

Putting the cup down, she went to the window, peeling back the net curtains. Below, their view was of a cramped car park, a line of bins at one end, beyond which was a maze of roofs intersected by roads. The sound of the traffic was a

constant dull roar, like her ears were blocked and all she could get was that irritating background static. She'd get used to it, she supposed, but even though she was still tired and longed for a bedtime that was yet hours away, it might take some time to get to sleep later. She was used to silence – or at least only the faintest whoosh of the sea as it rolled in and out like a sleeping giant's breaths, echoing around the harbour walls. This hotel was horrible, and she wanted nothing more than to be back in her warm, familiar bedroom at home, but she would never say so to Logan. He had enough to deal with and she wasn't about to add to it. She'd insisted she was coming no matter what, and so all she could do was keep her mouth shut and pretend she was perfectly content.

'I'll let my mum know we've arrived,' Logan said.

Clara turned back to him. 'Will she want to see you?'

'I would imagine she'll want to see both of us. She did mention dinner.'

'Won't she be too busy for dinner? She'll have a lot to do with your grandma's affairs, won't she?'

'Probably, but you know my mother. Everything done properly. We're here and she'll want to go to Chez Xavier, where we always go.'

Clara turned back to the window. 'Right.'

It was no wonder Logan rebelled. Not that becoming an artist and moving to another county was hugely rebellious by most standards, but for someone who'd been raised in such a suffocating way, it was off the scale. At least Clara thought it seemed like a suffocating upbringing. Her parents were strict, and they'd expected certain things from her, but she'd been mostly free to make her own choices, and she'd been allowed to revel in the surroundings of her home, exploring the coves and beaches and hills, staying out with her sisters swimming, sailing, surfing or hiking until the sun went down. There was no stranger danger in Port Promise, only a childhood that she supposed was rather idyllic, now that she thought about it. No 'good' school, none of the 'right' sort of friends, no dressing for dinner at Chez Xavier, no expectations of a City career.

Logan's family were loaded, but she wouldn't have swapped his childhood for hers, not for billions.

'Are you sure she wants me to come?' Clara asked. 'She might be saying that for your sake... I feel like she might be happier if it's just you. I could get something around here... I saw a place that sold falafel when we were driving in – doesn't look too far away and I've never had falafel before. I fancy trying it.'

Logan came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. His breath tickled her neck, and the faintest snatch of his favourite cologne was on the air. 'Of course she wants you to go. And even if she didn't, I'm not about to make you sit in a miserable falafel shop by yourself.'

'How do you know it's miserable? Have you ever been in?'

'No.' He laughed, turning her around to face him. 'But I saw the street it was on – trust me, there will be better places to eat in London.'

Clara raised her eyebrows. 'Like Chez Xavier?'

'OK, you got me there! I hate the place, but Mum's been taking me there for years and I don't suppose that's going to change now.'

'But I thought you said she only wanted family?'

'I know, but this is different.'

'How?'

'Because you're here now and even my mum wouldn't have you sitting alone in a scruffy hotel when you've come all this way.'

'Well that makes me feel wanted. Thanks.'

'You know what I mean.' Logan kissed her lightly. 'I'll call her and see what the plan is. You brought something decent to wear?'

‘My diamanté-encrusted ball gown is in the boot of the car.’

‘Ha ha, very funny.’

Logan drew his arms from her and went to get his phone. Clara watched as he dialled his mum’s number. She was beginning to wish she hadn’t come to London after all.

Stepping into Chez Xavier was like stepping back in time to some Victorian gentlemen’s club. The walls of the restaurant were clad in gleaming walnut, as was the bar, the fittings brass and the carpets a deep red. There were dark leather armchairs in an area set aside for drinking and chatting, and the walnut dining tables had seats in matching leather and were dressed with white Wedgwood crockery edged in gold. You could almost breathe in the pomp and, in Clara’s case, choke on it. This was about as far as you could get from a breezy bowl of chowder at Cormac’s shack, perched on rough wooden seats under a tarpaulin, laughing with friends and loved ones as the sea rolled onto the beach, and Clara definitely knew which kind of dinner she preferred.

But she took a breath and smiled stiffly as Logan led her over to the table where his parents waited. His mum, Vetiver, was the first to get up and greet them. She air-kissed Logan at such a distance that her lips would have to get a taxi to reach him, and then turned to Clara.

‘Here you are, dear,’ she said, directing another mid-air kiss at her. ‘You look tired.’

‘Oh, it’s been a long day,’ Clara said.

Vetiver nodded. ‘It must have been. Has it been a dreadful rush? We could have made dinner later if you needed more time to do your hair.’

Clara tried not to bristle. There would be much more of this – better to tune it out. She simply gave a vacant smile.

‘Logan...’ His dad, Julian, held out his hand to shake Logan’s.

‘Dad.’ Logan nodded.

‘Clara,’ Julian said, extending his hand to take hers.

‘Hello,’ she replied, wanting more than anything to laugh as she shook his hand. It was the most ridiculously stiff greeting she’d ever been subjected to.

They sat back down, and Logan went to take the seat across from his mum when she stared at him. ‘Oh, right...’ He got back up and pulled out Clara’s for her.

‘Oh... thanks,’ she said, trying even harder not to laugh as she sat down.

‘Now that you’re here we can order. We’re already ten minutes out on the schedule – I shall have to apologise to Xavier,’ Vetiver said.

‘Sorry,’ Logan said. ‘Tubes... you know what it’s like on public transport.’

‘Hmm...’ Vetiver clicked for the nearest waiter’s attention.

‘I just wanted to say,’ Clara began, ‘how sorry I am for your loss.’

‘Thank you,’ Julian said.

‘How are you both?’ Vetiver asked. ‘How’s life in that quaint little backwater?’

‘Oh, the same as ever,’ Logan said. ‘Moves at a snail’s pace.’

‘That’s what I like about it,’ Clara said.

‘It can’t be very exciting for a young woman like you,’ Vetiver said.

‘It’s exciting enough...’ Clara reached for the carafe of water on the table and poured some into her glass. ‘After the year my family has had, I don’t think any of us wants too much excitement.’

‘Of course,’ Julian said. ‘And how are your family? Logan tells us your sister has become a lifeboat volunteer. That’s an unusual step, isn’t it?’

‘Is it?’ Clara took a sip of her water.

‘For a young woman, I should think so.’

‘Well, Ava’s been brought up with the service, so it’s not all that unusual when you think about it. One of us was always going to follow in Dad’s footsteps eventually.’

‘Goodness, you’re not planning to do it, are you?’ Vetiver asked her, looking faintly appalled by the notion.

‘No, it’s not really me. Ava’s the daredevil in our family.’

‘One can’t imagine how such a life is conducive to having a family,’ Vetiver continued. ‘I thought your sister had children.’

‘My older sister, Gaby, does.’

‘Of course. How many sisters do you have?’

‘Just the two,’ Clara replied evenly, and tried not to be irked by the fact that she’d been with Logan for three years and yet his mother still didn’t really know the first thing about her. She could blame it on forgetfulness, but she’d be fooling herself. Vetiver hadn’t concerned herself with retaining any information about Clara because she secretly hoped that Clara wouldn’t be a permanent feature in Logan’s life. Even though they were engaged to be married, Clara got the impression that Vetiver still didn’t believe the wedding would happen.

The waiter came over with huge, leather-bound menus complete with the tassels that Clara could never see the point of. He handed them one each and then stood back. Vetiver didn’t even open hers. Instead, she called the waiter back.

‘I’ll have moulles to start and then the steak tartare,’ she said. ‘My husband will have the same.’ She looked at Logan. ‘You like a steak tartare, don’t you? Would you like that? And the moulles to start with?’

‘No, I...’ Logan opened the menu. ‘Hang on, let me look.’

Vetiver clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth and then turned to Clara. ‘What would you like?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to look yet...’ Clara said, opening her menu too.

‘It’s just that we’re behind schedule,’ Vetiver said. ‘Xavier will be expecting to start cooking our order.’

‘Well, he won’t need to cook your steak,’ Logan said from behind the menu.

Vetiver let out another impatient click. ‘Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Logan.’

‘Also the funniest,’ he said without looking up.

‘You’ve changed since you left London,’ she replied haughtily, and looked at Clara as she said it.

‘For the better, I like to think,’ Logan fired back. He lowered his menu and looked at the waiter. ‘I’d like the brie tartlet to start and then the lamb.’

Clara bit back a grin as she looked up at the waiter. ‘I don’t really want a starter so I’ll just have the sea bass.’

‘No starter?’ Julian repeated. ‘What will you do while we eat ours?’

‘Oh, I expect she’ll think of something,’ Logan said carelessly as he handed his menu to the waiter.

‘I hope you’re not one of those girls who starve themselves,’ Vetiver said as she held out her hand for Julian’s menu and then passed them both to the waiter.

‘No, I just couldn’t see anything I wanted from the starters. I’d rather leave room for pudding.’

As the waiter left them, Logan turned to his dad. ‘Do we have any more news? Like a funeral date?’

‘Keen to get away from London?’ Vetiver asked coldly.

‘No,’ Logan said. ‘But I need to plan things around it.’

‘Like what? You’re unemployed.’

‘No, I’m not, I’m self-employed.’

‘Well, you don’t have a job, so I don’t see what difference it makes what date the funeral is. It’s not as if you have to be

back in the office.'

'Yes, but Clara does.'

Vetiver turned the full force of her disapproving gaze on Clara now. 'Of course, I quite forgot. What is it you do again?'

'I work at the caravan park near the village.'

Vetiver looked at Clara as if she'd vomited on the table in front of her. 'Yes, that's it.'

'I expect it's only a temporary thing, though,' Julian said. 'Until you get something proper.'

'No,' Clara said. 'That's it.'

'Well what is it you do there?' he pressed.

Was he hoping for something impressive? Did he want to hear that she was the general manager? She opened her mouth to reply when Logan stepped in.

'Practically runs the place,' he said.

'Oh, so you're the manager?' Julian said. 'And how many staff do you have under you?'

'Depends what time of year it is,' Logan said.

Clara tried not to stare at him. She wouldn't have answered his dad's questions like this; she'd have told him the truth. Then again, she supposed, Logan wasn't exactly telling a lie, he was merely being favourably vague about it. But why? Was he ashamed of her job?

'In peak season you'll have loads of staff, won't you, Clara? It's a very profitable and exclusive holiday complex, isn't it?'

It was a handful of scruffy caravans sitting in an old field, but somehow Clara got the impression that Logan didn't want her to say so.

'It's the most popular in Port Promise,' she said, neglecting to say it was also the only one in Port Promise.

'We must visit one day,' Vetiver said, in a tone that suggested she would like nothing less than to visit Clara's

holiday park. They'd probably be lucky if Vetiver and Julian even deigned to come to Port Promise for the wedding.

That was another thing Logan's parents hadn't forgiven Clara for – that she and Logan had chosen to have a low-key service in a church local to her rather than some stuck-up society bash in a marquee somewhere in the Home Counties. Logan had insisted he was happy with Clara's choices, and this had made Vetiver even more aggrieved. Presumably she'd always thought his loyalty ought to be to her first and foremost, and any other woman in his life a poor second. Clara must have been very popular during that conversation too.

'Although, I'd love to open my own restaurant eventually,' she said.

'Restaurant?' Vetiver looked doubtful.

Of course she did, Clara thought wryly. When had Vetiver ever taken the slightest bit of interest in what Clara did beyond being the woman who'd stolen her precious son away?

'Well, as you know, I did train as a chef.'

'Did we know that?' Vetiver asked Logan.

'Yes,' Logan said patiently. 'I have told you on many occasions.'

Vetiver shook her head. 'I don't recall. What sort of chef?'

'The sort who cooks,' Logan answered for Clara. 'What other kind is there?'

'Really, Logan—'

'Then don't ask silly questions, Mum,' Logan cut Vetiver's admonishment short.

Vetiver looked at Clara. 'Well... are you a good cook?'

'Brilliant,' Logan said.

Vetiver frowned at him. 'Has Clara forgotten how to speak now?'

'No, but I don't think she should have to answer insulting questions,' he shot back.

‘It’s all right.’ Clara laid a hand on Logan’s. ‘I don’t think your mum means anything rude by it. I’ve never cooked for her, so...’

‘Vetiver is quite particular about who cooks for her,’ Julian said.

Clara forced an uncertain smile. She had no clue what to say to that.

‘So you don’t have a date for the funeral?’ Logan asked, steering the conversation back.

‘I expect we’ll have something in the next couple of days,’ Julian said.

‘You’ll be staying for the will reading?’ Vetiver asked.

‘I don’t know...’ Logan picked up his glass. ‘Do I need to be there? Can’t you just tell me what’s in it?’

‘Yes, you need to be there.’

‘Well that’s all very Agatha Christie, but I’m sure it doesn’t work like that anymore. We don’t even have to go and sit in a solicitor’s office, do we? Not these days. Don’t they give you a call and let you know if there’s anything in it for you?’

‘Perhaps, if you’re an ungrateful brat,’ Vetiver said. ‘But in this family we do things properly. Your grandmother has left an inheritance for you; the least you can do is attend the reading of her will to see what it is.’

‘So...’ Logan hesitated.

He wanted to ask what his inheritance actually was, and Clara had a feeling Vetiver knew. It was likely that, even if she did, she wouldn’t say so here because she was determined that Logan should go to this stupid reading. If Logan knew what he was set to inherit then there would be no reason for him to attend.

‘Is it the house?’ he asked finally, clearly deciding the straightforward approach was the best one.

‘In all likelihood,’ Julian said. ‘She’d told us that was her intent. Of course, things often change between those conversations and the actual writing of the final will. But our intention is to pass the house to you even if your grandmother hasn’t.’

‘That’s assuming she leaves it to you,’ Logan said. ‘She might not have left it to either of us.’

Vetiver raised her eyebrows. ‘Who else would she bequeath it to?’

‘I don’t know; I’m only saying things don’t always go how you think they will.’

‘You’re being deliberately contrary. There will be no shocks.’

‘If that’s the case then why do we need to bother sitting around listening to the will being read like it’s an episode of *The Archers*? If we know what will happen, then why do I need to stay to hear it? I mean, I’m not saying I won’t, but I don’t see why it’s so important that I do.’

‘It’s a matter of respect,’ Julian said.

‘That might not be the way things are done in that place in Cornwall but it’s how they’re done here,’ Vetiver said, and she looked at Clara again as she did, as if Logan’s attitude was somehow her doing.

Clara didn’t care. She was glad Logan was questioning their need to stay. They had jobs and people and a life in *that place in Cornwall* and they needed to get back. They couldn’t put their lives indefinitely on hold while they waited for things to be wrapped up here. Not only that, but every day they stayed cost them more money – money they really couldn’t spare.

‘We can’t afford to stay here for goodness knows how long,’ Logan said, as if he’d read Clara’s thoughts. ‘We’re in a hotel, don’t forget.’

‘We said you were welcome to stay in your old room, Logan – it’s already made up.’

‘Yes, but that was before Clara decided to come.’

‘Honestly,’ Clara cut in, ‘I’m really fine to stay at our hotel.’ She couldn’t decide what might be worse – staying at the hotel without Logan or staying with him in the same house as Vetiver. Neither seemed massively appealing.

‘I’m not coming without Clara,’ Logan said.

‘There really isn’t the space for both of you.’

That wasn’t true. Clara knew their house was huge and there was plenty of space. Logan obviously knew this too, but he didn’t push it. Clara couldn’t decide whether she ought to be upset by this or not, but perhaps it was better to let it go for now.

‘You ought to let me cook for you one evening while I’m here,’ Clara said.

‘In our kitchen?’ Vetiver looked faintly appalled.

‘Oh, well, I’d have to, of course, because... But I suppose...’

‘She was only trying to be nice, Mum,’ Logan said.

‘I see...’ Vetiver paused. ‘But it’s not done, is it? Our kitchen is... well, *our* kitchen.’

‘Perhaps when you next come to Port Promise then,’ Clara said.

‘Yes,’ Vetiver replied vaguely.

Clara was certain she had no intention of coming to Port Promise unless absolutely necessary, but even if her future mother-in-law didn’t want to make an effort for Logan’s sake, Clara was going to be the bigger woman.

‘I suppose you’ll stay a few days around the wedding?’ Clara asked. ‘We’d be able to have you over for dinner then.’

‘I would imagine you’ll be far too busy for that.’ Vetiver fiddled with the stem of a wine glass.

‘I don’t think so. I’d make time,’ Clara said.

‘I think that’s a brilliant idea.’ Logan took Clara’s hand across the table and gave it a reassuring squeeze. ‘Clara makes an incredible chicken à la Normandy.’

Vetiver looked around the room. ‘I hope Xavier is here tonight. I haven’t seen him yet.’

Logan grinned. ‘So you can fangirl over him?’

‘No,’ Vetiver said. ‘The food is always so much better when he’s here. And he’s French, so he knows how to cook good French food.’

‘I don’t think he’s French,’ Logan said with an impish grin at Clara. ‘I think he pretends. I bet he’s from Croydon really.’

‘I’m sure he has brilliant chefs,’ Clara said, trying to send a silent warning to him. It was OK for him to rile his mother, but it wasn’t helping her to win Vetiver round. ‘I imagine he must attract the best. I’d love to work for a top chef.’

‘Better not work for Xavier then,’ Logan snorted while Vetiver aimed a frosty glare at him.

‘Ah...’ Julian looked up as a waiter approached the table. ‘Here’s our wine.’

Clara aimed a look at the ceiling. She wasn’t religious, but she was offering a silent prayer of thanks right now for the distraction.

The hotel room didn’t smell any better on their return. Clara went to the window to try to open it, but still it refused to budge. Letting out a sigh, she shrugged off her coat and tossed it onto the bed. Eventually, the smell would be less obvious, she supposed, in the way all things that were constant became that bit less obvious.

‘That went as well as could be expected,’ Logan said, collecting Clara’s coat and taking it to the wardrobe with his own. ‘I might go down to the bar and get a nightcap to bring back up – want one?’

Clara shook her head. ‘You get yours; I’m going to drink some of this tea.’

‘It’ll taste like piss – free hotel teabags always do.’

‘I know, but still, I don’t think I want anything else to drink tonight.’

‘You’re unhappy, aren’t you?’

Clara looked at him with raised eyebrows. ‘How on earth did you guess?’

‘I know Mum can be a bit abrasive, but she doesn’t mean anything by it; she’s just not...’ He paused.

‘Nice?’ Clara put in.

‘A naturally warm person,’ Logan said. ‘Everything has to be proper, and it’s hard to show emotion when you’re constantly trying to keep up appearances.’

‘Does she have any emotions in her to show?’

‘That’s not fair. All I’m saying is that our family dynamic is different from yours. It’s not Mum’s fault she’s the way she is; it’s the fault of the way she was raised.’

‘You were raised in the same way and you’re not like that.’

Clara went to fill the kettle from the tap in the bathroom.

‘If you’re giving me the silent treatment then I might as well go and have my nightcap in the bar,’ Logan said from the bedroom.

Clara went back through with the kettle. ‘I’m not; I just don’t have anything more to say about it. Your mum hates me – that much is clear – and I don’t feel I’ve done anything to deserve it. I try so hard with her it must be nauseating to watch.’

‘I know you do, and I appreciate it.’

‘And you could stick up for me a little more sometimes.’

‘I do... I mean, I did.’

‘So that was sticking up for me when you told them a barefaced lie about me being the manager at the caravan park?’

‘I said what I had to say to deflect more criticism.’

‘Well it sounded to me as if you’re ashamed of who I really am and our life in Port Promise.’

‘I’m not ashamed at all! But they wouldn’t understand.’

‘They don’t have to – you just have to lay it out for them, not to like or not like, but to accept. This is the life we’ve chosen. You need to make that clear to them – if you make it sound like it isn’t what you want they’ll never accept me. Unless...’ Clara set the kettle onto its stand to boil. ‘Unless it isn’t what you want.’

‘*You’re* what I want,’ he said.

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘Does the rest matter?’

‘Of course it does! How can we have a future together if you’re not happy in Port Promise?’

He was silent for a moment, his hand on the door handle. When he spoke again it was quiet and measured. ‘I’d go anywhere for you, but you won’t go anywhere for me.’

‘What?’

‘Say I do inherit Grandma’s house, and let’s just say I decide I want to live in it, would you move to London for me?’

‘But my home... My mum is on her own and—’

‘I get that,’ he said. ‘And we’ve spent the last year being there for her. Maybe it’s time we thought of ourselves for a change? This could be an incredible opportunity for us, Clara.’

‘I know, but it’s... I’d feel awful leaving her.’

‘She has your sisters. And think about it – in London you could easily get that kitchen job you want.’

‘I’m sure in London I’d only be good enough to wash up.’

‘Stop putting obstacles in the way. You’re an amazing cook. Sure, you might have to work your way up, but you’d do that.’

He left the door and crossed the room to take both her hands. ‘Grandma’s house could be perfect for us. It’s big enough, in a great area of the city – there are parks nearby and we can drive out to the countryside when we have time, so you’ll get your fix of that great outdoors you love so much. We even have beaches close enough – Kent, Sussex... we could get to the sea in an hour or two and you can have your fix of that too. And of course we’ll visit Port Promise as often as you like.’

‘But you don’t have to live in that exact house? You could sell it if it comes to you and buy a house anywhere.’

He let go of her hands. ‘I suppose you want me to sell it and buy a house in Cornwall. Preferably next to your mother.’

‘I’m not exactly saying that, but we could certainly live closer to Cornwall than London. And we could have such a beautiful place – better than we ever dreamed of.’

‘I happen to think Grandma’s place is beautiful.’

‘It is, but it’s not a family house.’

‘We could make alterations; anything you like. We’d make it right for a family. At least say you’ll think about it.’

Clara nodded as she reached for a cup and blew into it. ‘I will.’

‘Properly – don’t just say it.’

‘I will,’ she repeated. ‘But you don’t even know if it’s going to happen for certain yet.’

‘I think we both know it’s likely the house will come to me so there’s no point in ignoring the issue.’

Was it selfish to hope that it wouldn’t? Despite the financial security an inheritance like that could give them, Clara really hoped right now that Logan wouldn’t get his grandmother’s house. She hoped they’d be left nothing and they’d go back to their lovely life in Port Promise, back to a happy time when this complication and these decisions didn’t hang over them, to when Logan was content to paint the sea outside his window, content to be there with her. She had to

wonder, however, if that genie was out of the bottle for good. Maybe now he'd been offered a glimpse into a different life, he wouldn't be able to let it go.

'I'm going to get that drink,' he said, heading for the door.

'OK.'

Clara watched him go. Outside, the sound of a police siren cracked the night air. She went to the window to look out and could see the blue of its lights bouncing from the road, and then a second later watched it fly past. Despite the lateness of the hour, the streets were still alive with people and traffic, and it was still as noisy as it had been during the day.

When she'd been here before with Logan, the impression she'd always taken home with her was the relentlessness of it all. There was never a moment without noise or light. Even in the green spaces the city crowded in, always there, always visible through the treetops or audible through the birdsong. There was no let-up, no moments of peace or solitude, no tranquillity on distant hills, no walks on the beach soaking up the mood of the sea. A week of this place was tiring enough – could Clara live here forever? Surely it shouldn't even be a question if this was what Logan wanted.

The kettle switched itself off and she let the curtain drop back over the window. She was tired, perhaps too tired to think about this rationally, and right now, she didn't want to.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In the end, Clara had slept better than she'd expected but had been woken early by the sounds of an argument on the street beneath their window. Logan had already been awake, sitting up in bed scrolling through social-media feeds on his phone. Clara hoped that with a fresh day they might start the visit over and get something a bit more positive from it, despite the reasons they were here.

As she was getting ready, she wondered whether to suggest they do something together. He wanted her to love London; maybe he could show her the parts of the city that might persuade her.

'Look I'm going to see my parents this morning,' he said, even as these thoughts ran through her head. 'I bet you'd like to see a bit of London, wouldn't you? Maybe you'd like to do a bit of exploring – there's only going to be boring conversations going on where I am, and you'd have more fun wandering around Hyde Park.'

Clara came in from the bathroom with her toothbrush in her mouth. 'On my own? I was going to suggest we go together.'

'You'll be fine. There's so much to see you won't have time to think about being on your own, and it's sometimes better to do it at your own pace. And it would only be for a couple of hours – I'll be back in time for dinner and we can find somewhere nice to eat.'

'So we're not eating with your parents again?'

‘I don’t think so.’

Clara went back into the bathroom to rinse out her mouth. If it meant she’d get Logan to herself later, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to spend a few hours wandering London alone.

‘So you’re OK with that?’ Logan appeared at the bathroom door.

‘I suppose I’ll have to be.’

‘I just think it will be simpler if I go on my own.’

‘What are you going for?’

‘We’re...’ Logan looked awkward.

‘Logan?’

‘We’re going through some papers... at Grandma’s house.’

‘And your mum doesn’t want me there?’

‘It’s not that, but it’s a family thing. You understand that, right? I wouldn’t have got involved in your dad’s affairs.’

‘But we wouldn’t have excluded you if you’d wanted to help.’

‘I know, but I told you last night, we do things differently. It’s the way my family works; it’s nothing personal.’

Clara wondered whether it would always be like this, because she couldn’t imagine a day when Vetiver would consider her family, even if she and Logan had been married for twenty years.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘I suppose I can entertain myself for a few hours. I’ll wander along the Thames or something.’

‘You know there are lifeboat stations on the Thames? Maybe you could check out one of those. If we did end up living here, you could volunteer at one of them. It might, you know, help you feel connected to home.’

Clara clamped her mouth shut. The notion of leaving Port Promise hadn’t gone away, despite the difficult conversation of the night before.

‘I’ve got to run,’ he said, kissing her.

‘What about breakfast?’

‘Mum’s got the cook making pancakes. Sorry. Maybe you can get some on your walk; nice pavement cafe somewhere overlooking the river... all part of the tourist experience, you know?’ He grabbed his coat. ‘I’ll call you later, let you know what time I’ll be done and we’ll figure out where we’re going for dinner.’

Clara didn’t even have time to reply. In the next moment, the door was open and he’d gone.

It was cold, but at least the sun was shining as Clara walked along the river, Tower Bridge in the near distance. She’d googled the lifeboat stations and Tower Station was not only closest to her but also the biggest. She couldn’t come to the river and not go to see the station, if only to report back to the folks at home what it was like.

In the end, she’d decided not to sit in a cafe alone for breakfast but had picked up a pastry and a coffee and was eating as she walked. This way felt less lonely, less conspicuous. Not that anyone would care she was eating alone, especially not here, though she couldn’t help but feel weird about it. And this way she could make calls to catch up with home and nobody would be listening in.

She was passed by joggers, people with pushchairs, groups of tourists leaving snatches of many different languages in their wake, by people in suits on their way to work and people laughing with friends or family, or people speaking into phones in earnest tones. So many people, so many lives that she’d never know anything about. At home it was rare to meet anyone day to day who she didn’t know anything about, other than in the summer when the tourists came, but even then they usually stayed a week or two, and she soon got to learn something of their lives beyond that holiday in Port Promise. It was never like this – a glimpse at their face, a sample of their voice, and then gone again.

Once she’d eaten her pastry, she settled on a bench and dialled her mum. There was no answer – presumably Jill was

at her allotment and hadn't heard her phone. Ava would be at work at the swimming pool, so there was no point in calling her. Gaby had answered, but a quick conversation revealed that, though she was interested in how Clara was getting on, she was off to a meeting at the church hall to plan the next Flag Day for the lifeboat station – the day where a huge amount of the fundraising for the year was done – and so she'd have to call back.

Then Clara phoned Betty. She supposed she might be busy too, but if there was a slack moment in the cafe she might have time to tell her all about the date with Cormac.

'Hi, Clara.' Betty sounded a bit rushed but cheerful enough.

'I know you're probably busy with the breakfast shift but I wanted to know how it went last night.'

'Well, I am, but I've been busier, so it's OK. It went well.'

'Well? That's all you've got for me?'

Betty laughed. 'OK, it was great. We had a really nice time. I think it probably helped that we already knew each other, so there was none of that first-date weirdness.'

'So where did you go? To the Spratt?'

'Yeah, just the Spratt. It was good because, again, there was no pressure to impress or be on my best behaviour. And the bonus was there was no shout, so no need for him to run off in the middle of our evening.'

'Always a bonus,' Clara agreed, shoeing away a curious pigeon that had got a bit too close for comfort. 'So nowhere afterwards? Not even coffee... you know, *coffee*...?'

'No,' Betty said. 'Disappointingly, he was more than a gentleman. I don't mind saying I think I would have preferred if he'd been a bit less of a gentleman. It's been a while, if you know what I mean...'

'You didn't even kiss?'

'Well, yes... but you know, it was all a bit polite. I know that's how he is of course, super respectful. After some of the

douchebags I've dated, I don't mind that really.'

'Maybe things will hot up after the next one. When are you going to see each other again? Have you fixed something up?'

'Not yet, but it's not like we don't know where to find each other when we're ready, is it? There didn't seem any urgency to fix a date, so we sort of left it hanging. Like he said he'd call or pop in.'

Clara frowned.

'I know, I didn't think it sounded super keen,' Betty said into the gap. 'I don't know what to make of it, but I didn't get any vibes that the date itself hadn't gone well.'

'Perhaps he's playing it cool.'

'Why do you assume he's the one playing it cool and not me?' Betty asked with humour in her voice.

'Um... because I've known you all my life, that's why.'

'I don't want to come across as needy or pushy or whatever, though.'

'This is Cormac – he knows you. He knows you're not like that.'

'But he only knows me as a friend, someone he sees around the place. He doesn't really know me.'

'And there's only one way to change that – by making sure you get another date. You want another date, don't you?'

'Yes... yes, of course I do... Listen, sorry, but I need to...'

'Sure, sorry, I know you're at work. I'll phone you tomorrow maybe?'

'Sounds good. And, Clara... you're OK? Everything's OK there?'

'As OK as it can be. I'll speak to you when you've got more time.'

'All right, as long as you're not too stressed.'

'I'm that all right!' Clara drained the last of her coffee from the cup. 'But I suppose it will pass eventually. I'll let you

go.'

'Bye. I'll speak to you soon.'

Clara ended the call and checked her watch. She had hours until dinner and nothing in particular to do. But this was London, and surely she could find enough to keep her occupied until then.

Putting the coffee cup in the bin, she looked downriver towards Tower Bridge. It seemed as good a place to start as any.

The skies over London had long since darkened, and Clara was footsore and tired. The station had been interesting, but the people manning it had seemed busy and she hadn't wanted to give them more to do. She'd discovered they did actual tours for anyone interested, but that required booking ahead, and as she hadn't, she couldn't do that either. She did take a moment to marvel at the fact it floated on the water rather than sitting on the bank, and how often the crew must get called out because there was constant traffic on the river.

After that she'd gone along to St Paul's and taken a few photos to send to Elijah and Fern, and then across Millennium Bridge and along by the Globe, and then she'd hopped on the Tube and gone over to see Kew Gardens, though she barely had time to scratch the surface there.

By that time she'd had enough. She'd tried calling Logan as she'd headed back to their hotel, wondering why she hadn't heard from him all day. Was something going on at his grandmother's house, something worrying she ought to know about? It wasn't like him not to check in, especially knowing she was spending the day alone, waiting for him to call. They'd no dinner plans and she hadn't made a reservation anywhere because she didn't know where he wanted to go, but she worried that if they didn't sort something soon, most of the nicer places would be booked up. She didn't mind making do with a fast-food bar if it came to that, but it was hardly a relaxing atmosphere conducive to the sorts of conversations they really needed to have.

The concrete façade of their hotel came into view, rows of strip lights visible at the windows behind thick, greying net curtains. Some rooms looked occupied but many more did not. Then again, that was hardly surprising. Given the choice, they'd have booked somewhere better too.

Against expectations, in a fashion Clara had enjoyed her day. It wasn't something she'd want to do all the time, but as a one-off it had been interesting. But now, faced with the sight of their miserable hotel once again, that good mood had evaporated. Seeing it only reminded her of how little she wanted to be here.

As she walked across the lobby to the lifts, her phone began to ring. 'Logan? Where are you? I was wondering—'

'Sorry, we lost track of time going through Grandma's stuff. Listen, can you be ready in the next half hour or so? If I send a cab for you, will you be able to get in and come to me here?'

'Where are you?'

'Grandma's house.'

'But I thought we were meant to be going out to dinner.'

'We are... I mean, we will. Mum wants us to eat with her and Dad.'

'Again? But we were meant to be—'

'I know, but can we humour her? It's a weird time for them so can't we just indulge them while they're going through it?'

Clara let out a sigh. 'I don't even know where your grandma's house is. Can't I come to your parents and meet you there?'

'We're all here and we were going to go to dinner from here to save time.'

'Fine. Where are we going?'

'Chez Xavier.'

'Again? Has your mum got some sort of loyalty card for that place? I'm not remotely dressed for Chez Xavier!'

‘She likes it there.’

‘Well, as long as she does then I don’t suppose it matters what anyone else wants.’

‘Don’t be like that, Clara.’

‘Like what?’

‘Obstructive. Spare me a thought – I feel as if I’m in the middle of a war zone right now with you and my mum both giving me grief.’

‘I’m not the one giving you grief. I think I’m the one being quite reasonable. I’m the one who’s trudged around London all day by myself so you could do what you needed to do. I’m not the one ordering everyone around.’

‘I know, and I love you for it. So you’ll come?’

Clara grimaced. ‘You always did know how to get around me.’

‘I’m kind of banking on it. I’ll order the cab now – it should be with you in half an hour, forty minutes tops.’

‘Brilliant,’ Clara replied, finding it difficult to keep the sarcasm from her voice. ‘Can’t wait.’

‘Thank you. I know how hard this is, and it means a lot to me.’

So far, he seemed to be saying this a lot but not doing much to back it up. Deeds, not words, meant more, and Clara couldn’t say she’d seen much of his appreciation shown in any deed since they’d arrived in London. As he’d pointed out, it was a weird time for his parents, but it was also a weird time for him too. She had to cut him some slack, as he must have done for her when she lost her dad. Perhaps she’d been this unreasonable and inconsiderate too, unable to see past her grief. Logan wasn’t exactly grieving in the way she had, but his grandmother had meant a lot to him.

With a weary sigh, she put her phone away and headed to her room.

Logan's grandmother's house was on a well-kept Georgian terrace. Every frontage had high sash windows and a semicircle window above the door that was typical of the period. The doors were all panelled and lacquered, every house had iron railings screening steps down to the basement and more steep steps up to the front door. Number 13 was surprisingly ramshackle compared to the others and Clara had to admit she quite liked that about it. Somehow, the fact that it wasn't quite as well maintained made it less intimidating.

There was a window box, but the foliage it contained had become unruly, reaching out towards the street and encroaching on the nearest windows. It badly needed pruning, but Clara supposed Logan's grandmother hadn't exactly been worried about pruning during her last days in this house. For a few months now, she'd been in a hospice and Clara didn't know who'd been taking care of her home once she'd left it. Perhaps Vetiver and Julian had hired someone, because Clara couldn't imagine either of them with a pair of rubber gloves cleaning the kitchen.

Rather than knock, Clara dialled Logan's number. He answered after the first ring.

'That was quick,' she said.

'Yes, I had my phone out googling something. Where are you?'

'Outside.'

'Hang on, I'm coming.'

A moment later he appeared at the front door and beckoned her up the steps.

'We're not quite ready – you'll have to come in and wait for a minute.'

As she reached the top step, he kissed her. 'Sorry about today,' he said in a low voice. 'I didn't intend to leave you for so long. You were OK?'

'I found stuff to do.'

‘Good. So, just to warn you, my mum’s not in the best mood.’

‘So what I’ve seen so far this week is her in a good mood?’

Logan gave a thin smile. ‘I’m just giving you a heads-up. Come on...’

He led her inside and then closed the front door.

Clara stepped into an entrance hall that was far larger than she’d been expecting from the outside of the house, with an open staircase that curved away from a monochrome tiled floor, a high ceiling with a glass chandelier and heavy panelled doors leading to other parts of the house.

Logan took her to one of them and opened it. Beyond the door was a large parlour that looked as if it hadn’t been decorated since the seventies. It was a strange jolt after the timeless elegance of the entrance hall. This room was still furnished with high ceilings and tall windows, but the decor was strangely kitsch and out of place, with teak-framed chairs upholstered in a mustard fabric, a matching oval teak coffee table and a starburst clock in pride of place over a mantel that must have been installed long after the original building of the house, because it was built from the same sort of green tiles that Clara had once seen visiting an old relative she could now barely remember.

Sitting on the chairs and looking as if someone had forced them both whole lemons were Vetiver and Julian. They got up at Clara’s entrance.

‘Hello, Clara,’ Vetiver said, aiming one of her fleeting air kisses in Clara’s general direction. ‘I thought you were going to get changed into something suitable for dinner,’ she added, looking Clara up and down.

‘I did.’

‘Hmm...’ Vetiver looked at Logan meaningfully.

He smiled uncertainly at Clara. Far from being reassured by it, she was now suspicious.

‘Xavier himself called to say the table won’t be ready for the time we booked after all,’ Vetiver said. ‘So we have a few minutes before we need to leave. Perhaps Clara would care to peek at the house?’

‘I’ll show her around,’ Logan said. He took Clara’s hand. ‘Come on...’

They left the strange seventies living room and went back into the entrance hall, then along to the kitchen.

‘It could do with some work,’ he said as he opened the door to a room with free-standing ochre units, and a large wooden table sitting in the centre which had old drying racks hanging from the ceiling above. The window in here was far smaller than the ones at the front, giving it the feel of a room that had very definitely not been designed with the well-being of the servants who would have once used it in mind.

‘I think whoever takes this place on could knock out a big chunk of this external wall and open it out into the garden... maybe even do a glass ceiling. It could look incredible.’

‘I’m sure it would.’ Clara pointed to the far wall. ‘What’s that door?’

‘That goes to the basement.’

‘Did your grandma use it?’

‘Mostly for storage. Want to see it?’

Clara shook her head.

‘It’s huge,’ Logan said, going to open the door anyway. Beyond lay a set of stairs leading to a gloomy space. He switched on the light and beckoned her over. ‘Could be an amazing space to work on... whatever. Or a games room. I know someone who turned his into a gym.’

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ Clara said, looking down the steps, the reek of the cold, damp space filling her nostrils. ‘I don’t fancy falling down those stairs and breaking something.’

Logan closed the door again. ‘Want to see the garden?’ He turned an iron key in the back door and opened it up with a

smile. He knew here he was on safer territory.

Clara's breath caught in her throat. The garden was far larger than she'd have expected looking at the front of the house. It stretched way back, the front third a crazy paved patio lined by pots of all sizes, some with glossy evergreens, some containing plants and shrubs in their winter hibernations. There was a long bank of thick, woody lavender, not in flower, of course, but still green. The next third was lawn flanked by rose-filled flower beds, and the third was a dark mass of trees. The ground beneath was littered with apples and pears that had fallen during the autumn and had lain there with nobody to collect them. A squirrel scampered from branch to branch, a grey furry streak that shot up into the mass of branches.

'I knew you'd like this bit,' he said. 'Grandma loved gardening. A bit like your mum, eh?'

Clara looked at him. She did love this garden, but he was grasping at straws to make her fall in love with the house – that much was obvious. She didn't know much about Logan's grandma, but just because she and her mum both liked gardens didn't make them the same.

Logan glanced at his watch. 'Let's check out upstairs before the cab gets here.'

With some reluctance, Clara left the garden behind her and followed him back into the house.

Upstairs there were four doors. One led to a bathroom that looked to be about as modern as the kitchen, though Clara liked how big it was and she liked the old roll-topped bath and the toilet that still had an old pull chain. Maybe she'd find a way to keep those... should she ever decide to live here. There were three bedrooms, all bigger than the bedroom she shared with Logan in their flat in Port Promise. One was clearly the master bedroom and had been used by Logan's grandmother before she'd left the house for the hospice. The bedsheets had long since been stripped, but there were still toiletries on the dresser and a fur coat hanging from a hook on the door. All these leftovers of her life made Clara feel suddenly

melancholy, and as she glanced at Logan, tears in her eyes, he took her in his arms and hugged her.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m being silly.’

‘You’re not. I feel like that too but, you know...’

‘What?’

‘I can’t... Mum doesn’t like... Never mind. Why don’t we look at the other bedrooms? They won’t be so sad – Grandma hasn’t used them in years. One of them used to be mine whenever I came to stay.’

Clara pulled away and looked up at him. ‘Why are you doing this?’

‘I’m just...’

‘I’m not stupid. This won’t sway me. If we decide to move to London, it has to be a decision free from this... manipulation. I have to decide on my terms, otherwise it hasn’t been a proper decision. I never pressured you into coming to Port Promise, so please don’t do that to me now.’

‘So you don’t want to look at the other rooms?’

‘No, because I don’t want to be seduced by a big window with a view of the garden. There is so much more to think about than that.’

‘Is there?’

‘Yes! Of course there is!’

‘For you maybe,’ Logan said, pulling away from her now. ‘For me, this is a no-brainer. This house is perfect and, let’s face it, pretty bloody spectacular. We could never in our wildest dreams have afforded a place like this by ourselves. I think we ought to be grateful for the gift and grab it with both hands.’

‘I am grateful, but why does the gift have to come with such strict rules? Why can’t we sell this place and get somewhere that will be just as amazing but will be completely ours. Our taste, our choices.’

‘In Port Promise?’

‘We could get an incredible place in Port Promise for this kind of money. You could still have that dream life you want, but it would be better because it would be by the sea, or somewhere dramatic and amazing, and you’d have all that inspiration that you told me you’d first come to Port Promise to find.’

‘But the scene’s here!’ Logan ran a hand through his hair. ‘The opportunities are here!’

‘But you can paint anywhere!’

‘But I can’t make my name anywhere.’

‘Of course you can. Everyone is connected so easily these days.’

‘It’s not the same and you wouldn’t understand. There’s no substitute for being at a party or the opening of an installation and talking to the right people. And if everyone is so easily connected then why can’t you keep in touch with your family that way?’

Clara let out a sigh. ‘I want to want this life as much as you do, but no matter how I try to imagine myself happy in it, I can’t. You know I love you and I’d do anything for you, and if it means the difference between having you and not, then I’ll do what it takes. But I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ll ever be happy here.’

‘You say that now but in time you’ll feel differently. You’ll get used to it. And you’ll appreciate Port Promise that much more whenever you go to visit.’

‘I have to think.’

Logan stepped across the space he’d just made to take her in his arms again. ‘That means you’ll come?’

‘It means I might. I need time to get my head around the idea – can you give me that much?’

‘Of course! I haven’t—’

His words were cut short by a shout from the stairs. ‘Logan! The cab is here! We’ll be late!’

‘Sorry,’ he said, nodding at the door. ‘Better not keep her waiting. We can talk later, right?’

She gave him a wry smile. ‘Looks like we’ll have to.’

‘OK... come on then – we’d better go.’

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The funeral took place a couple of days after Logan had shown Clara around his grandmother's house. It had been a very formal affair, everyone in absolute black and everyone stony-faced and sombre. It had been a strange experience for Clara, who felt sad for the event and understood the gravity of it, but struggled to feel anything for the woman they were burying. She hadn't known Logan's grandma at all and so she'd gone through the motions for his sake but had been desperate for it all to be over. That was on top of dealing with his parents, and Clara was close to the end of her tether with them. All she got was constant low-level criticism, or dictates on how she ought to live and behave, and Logan, as far as she could tell, didn't do a lot to take her side.

The day after the funeral she had a call from Tanika at the caravan park.

'Hi, Clara... I know you're on compassionate leave and everything, but do you know... sorry to ask but I'm being hassled by you-know-who... do you know when—'

'I'm coming back tomorrow,' Clara said. 'I get it – there's only so far goodwill will get me as far as the boss is concerned.'

'Not that we don't care, but...'

'I know. It's all right, I was thinking I needed to get back anyway. The funeral was yesterday and, apart from the will reading, there's nothing happening here that needs us.'

'How was the funeral?'

‘Like most funerals – pretty miserable. How’s everything there?’

‘Same as always. So I can tell His Highness we might see you in the next couple of days?’

‘Yes,’ Clara said. ‘You can. We’ll travel back tomorrow and then I’ll be in work the following day if he wants me.’

‘He’ll want you. He hasn’t dared complain about you being missing, but he has pulled that face he does when something is bugging him and he can’t say anything about it.’

‘Oh, I know the one! So I’ll see you in a couple of days.’

‘Brilliant. Bye, Clara.’

Logan walked into the bedroom as Clara was ending the call. ‘Who was that?’

‘Tanika. Wants to know when I’m coming back to work. I told her we were coming back tomorrow.’

‘About that...’ Logan went to the wardrobe and pulled out a sweater. ‘We might not be able to.’

‘But the funeral is over and you said yourself the only things to be done now will take weeks so there’s no point in hanging around. I can’t stay here indefinitely; I’ll lose my job.’

‘Turns out there are some things I need to do here.’

‘Like what?’

He rubbed at the back of his neck as he turned to her. ‘Don’t be angry... I have a meeting with someone from the Beiderbeck Gallery.’

‘Why would I shout at you about that – it’s good, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, but it might mean spending a bit more time in London... and I’ve sort of asked someone to come and look at Grandma’s house.’

‘What for? To value it? We’re going to sell it after all?’ Clara could barely breathe. She couldn’t allow herself to get too excited, but if Logan was getting a valuation then it meant

he might be coming round to the idea of them buying a house of their choosing. And he might consider buying it somewhere a lot closer to Port Promise.

‘Actually, they’re giving me a price on some work.’

‘What work?’

‘The alterations we talked about for the kitchen.’

‘The alterations *you* talked about! I didn’t say I wanted them! I haven’t agreed to anything!’

‘I know. I just want to see how much it might cost to have this stuff done.’

‘Why? What’s the point? Unless you’ve already decided. We were supposed to talk this through.’

‘You said you didn’t want to. You told me to wait.’

‘Yes, until I’d come to terms with the idea! But as usual, you stampede all over what I want so you can have what *you* want!’

‘It’s not like that. I promise it’s only so we’ll have all the information we need to make a decision, knowing how much everything is likely to cost. Surely that makes sense.’

Clara pursed her lips. She wasn’t happy about it but she could see his point. ‘All right. But what about going back to Port Promise? I’ve told Tanika I’ll be in work now.’

‘You go. Take the car. I’ll do what I need to do here and hire a car or get a train and be down in a few days. There’s no rush for me, is there?’

‘I suppose not.’

Clara had missed her family, and the idea of seeing them again and not having to see Logan’s was more tempting than she could say. But the notion of him here, being worked on by his mother, more and more under her influence and without Clara’s to counter it worried her. What decisions might he take without her there? What might he agree to? What else had he planned that he wasn’t telling her about?

‘In fact,’ Logan said, cutting into her thoughts, ‘if you wanted to, there’s no reason you can’t go back today. I’m only going to be busy here with legal stuff and you’d have been spending the day on your own again, so...’

‘I suppose I could.’

‘And I bet you’ve missed everyone.’

‘You know I have.’

‘So why don’t you go? It would save us another night in this shithole too – I can go and stay with my parents, and we can check out as soon as we’ve had breakfast.’

‘That’s true; the less money we pay to these people the happier I’ll be.’

‘Exactly. So it makes sense, right?’

‘OK then,’ Clara said. ‘I’d better get my arse in gear and get packing.’

Clara could have cried with relief as she rounded the curve of the hill and the cauldron of sea that belonged to Port Promise came into view. She couldn’t recall a time when it had looked more beautiful than it did today, even though the sky was low and grey and full of rain and visibility was poor and the wind rattled the branches of the trees as she drove under them. It had been a long and lonely drive home, but the thought of this moment had kept her going.

Another fifteen minutes saw her pulling on the handbrake outside the studio. Getting out of the car, she drew in a deep breath. It smelled like home. No fumes, no noise, no bodies crowding in on her wherever she went. She’d missed Port Promise, but hadn’t really understood how much until this moment, with the hustle and stress of London far behind her.

Shari walked by and held up a hand. ‘You’re back then?’

‘Hi!’ Clara called. ‘Just.’

‘Your mum will be pleased!’

Clara nodded and smiled as Shari went on her way. She let herself into the studio, turned on the light and looked around. Everything was as they'd left it, including the bucket and mop in the corner of the room from when Clara had spent half the night clearing up the leak she'd caused. She took it upstairs to the kitchen in the flat before coming back down to get her suitcases from the car. As she opened the boot a text came through on her phone.

Hello, stranger.

Ava. Clara grinned as she replied.

What's up?

Shari says she saw you at the flat.

Bloody hell, news travels fast. I've been home for ten minutes.

I know. I'm coming over now.

Ten minutes later, Ava knocked on the door. Clara had turned on the heating and was still in her coat when she answered it, almost pushed over by the force of her little sister's hug.

'We missed you!'

'I missed you too!'

Ava held her at arm's length and smiled broadly. 'Was it grim?'

'A bit, but what can you do?'

'I know. But you're home now. Have you seen Mum yet?'

'I've literally just arrived – I haven't even had time to tell anyone I'm home yet, let alone see them.'

'How was London?'

‘It was all right. The hotel was awful, but we managed.’

‘You’d have thought his parents would have put you up, wouldn’t you? I couldn’t believe they didn’t offer.’

‘They said there wasn’t enough room.’

‘Yeah, but they’ve got enough cash in the bank to sub you a bit for a nice hotel if they don’t want to put you up. Tightwads. I’ve never even met them and I hate them.’

‘I’d better not sit you at their table at the wedding then,’ Clara said with a wry smile.

‘Oh please do! I can think of a million ways to ruin their day that we’d all find hilarious.’

‘Logan wouldn’t.’

‘I bet he secretly would. He must feel as if he got the short straw getting such miserable parents, especially when he knows how cool our childhood was.’

‘I don’t think he quite sees it like that,’ Clara said. ‘Sorry it’s a bit cold in here – I’ve not long put the heating on.’

‘Come to Mum’s if you like. She’s in right now; I was going to go up and see her anyway.’

Clara paused. She had things to do here, but nobody was going to tell her off if they weren’t done right away. ‘Go on then.’

‘While we’re at it, we might as well call Gaby and get her over. The kids have missed you like crazy.’

‘Have they?’

‘God yes! We all have!’

Clara laughed. ‘I’ve only been gone a few days.’

‘Then that just goes to show how much we all love you, doesn’t it?’

Jill was in the old corduroy trousers and flannel shirt she wore for gardening. Her curls were spilling out from a hair clip and

her cheeks were flushed from the cold. There wasn't a pearl choker or a manicured nail in sight, and Clara had never been so glad to see it.

'Knock knock!' Ava shouted as they went through the front door Jill had left unlocked for them and into the kitchen. 'Look who I've got!'

'Clara!' Jill ran to hug her.

She smelled of the outdoors, of grass and sea. Clara took a contented breath and hugged her back.

'You should have said you were coming home early!'

'I didn't know until this morning,' Clara said as Jill let go. 'We weren't planning on coming home this early, but Logan had stuff to do and there didn't seem any point in me hanging around, so we decided I might as well go. He's coming back in a few days when he's done.'

'I haven't done any shopping,' Jill said as Clara and Ava both sat at the table. She went to the fridge and looked in. 'I don't know what we're going to eat.'

'Mum, that's not why we came over!' Ava said with a grin at Clara. 'Chill! We can get something later... Cormac will be open – we'll treat ourselves.'

'That's a lovely idea,' Jill said. 'You're right – now that he has all those heaters and blankets it's lovely down there, even in the winter. As long as there's no wind, of course – the other day one of his heaters blew over and nearly set fire to the shack!'

'It wasn't quite that bad,' Ava said in answer to Clara's look of shock. 'The heater didn't blow over – it fell over because someone knocked it and got unplugged as it did, so there was no way it was going to set fire to anything.'

'That's not what Marina said,' said Jill.

'Well that's what Betty said, and I know who I'm going to put my money on for a more accurate report,' Ava replied. 'She was there at the time.'

‘I need to call Betty,’ Clara said. ‘I said I would, but there hasn’t been time. Is she... are Betty and Cormac...?’

‘They’ve had two dates now,’ Ava said.

‘Oh...’ Clara held back a frown. It wasn’t important, but she wondered why Betty hadn’t mentioned a second date – Clara was her best friend after all. ‘And it’s going well?’

‘I think so. Cormac hasn’t really said.’

‘Hasn’t he?’

Ava shook her head. ‘It’s early days, isn’t it? I don’t suppose there’s much to say yet. Some people are cagey about these things, aren’t they? Until they know where they stand, I mean.’

‘Two dates, though. That’s good, right?’

‘Well, you can’t tell a lot from one, I suppose. I’d say you’ve got to go two or three before you really know what you think about one another.’

‘You and Harry were practically inseparable after date one.’

‘Yes, but that’s me and Harry. We’re weird.’

‘You can say that again,’ Clara replied with a laugh.

They turned as one towards the sound of the front door opening again. A moment later the door to the kitchen opened too, and a smiling Gaby came in, Elijah and Fern following.

‘Welcome home!’ she said to Clara.

‘Clara!’ Fern squealed, beating her mum to a hug. Elijah grinned sheepishly.

‘No hug?’ Clara asked him.

He looked torn for a moment before relenting and hugging her too, and then finally Gaby took her chance.

‘How long have you been back?’ Gaby asked as she sat at the table with them.

‘Not long. Ava practically abducted me as soon as I pulled up at the studio. We came straight here.’

‘We’re going down to eat at the shack in a bit,’ Ava said. ‘Come with us.’

‘I’ll give Killian a call; he’s just finishing up on a report but he’ll probably want to join us. I think he might be more in love with Cormac than he is with me – his cooking, at least.’

‘Are we having a pot of tea before we go?’ Jill asked.

Ava looked at everyone else. And then at Clara. ‘How tired are you and how desperately do you want tea? I could eat now, to be honest.’

‘You can always eat,’ Gaby said.

‘Hey, I have a demanding lifestyle!’

‘I’m happy to go whenever everyone else is,’ Clara said.

There was a strange anticipation bubbling away in her. These people and situations were so familiar to her, and yet she was excited to go sit outside Cormac’s shabby old shack on the wooden benches under a tarpaulin and eat fish with her coat on.

‘Right then!’ Ava said, standing up and ushering everyone else to do the same. ‘I’m making the decision – let’s go!’

‘I know there’s a lot of us,’ Jill said as she saw Cormac’s barely disguised look of consternation at their arrival, ‘but we’re in no rush and we’ve even brought you a reinforcement.’

Clara stepped out from behind Gaby. ‘At your service!’

Cormac broke into a huge grin and slapped his hands on the counter of his serving hatch. ‘Clara! You’re back! I don’t mind telling you you’re a sight for sore eyes!’

‘I am? Has it been that busy?’

‘Let’s just say there have been times this past week where I would have appreciated your very capable hands.’

‘I offered again,’ Ava said. ‘But for some reason he keeps saying he doesn’t need me.’

Gaby sent a withering look in her direction. ‘Is it because you can burn toast just by looking at it?’

‘Your skills lie elsewhere, my love,’ Jill said to her. ‘Pay no mind to what Gaby says.’

‘Oh, I don’t,’ Ava replied carelessly.

Gaby looked at Cormac. ‘We’re celebrating Clara being home a day early. If you can manage us, that is.’

Cormac pumped some sanitiser onto his hands and nodded. ‘I should think so.’

He turned to Clara. ‘So you weren’t meant to come back yet?’ he asked as he opened the side door of the shack and went to clear some crockery from a table. ‘What brought you home early? Actually, sorry, none of my business... ignore me.’

‘It’s OK,’ Clara said. ‘No big secret. I was planning to come back in the next couple of days anyway. Logan’s not quite done, so he’s coming later.’

‘Clara’s got a great big house now!’ Fern said.

Cormac raised his eyebrows at Fern, and then at Clara.

‘Not yet she hasn’t.’ Gaby gave her youngest a stern look. ‘What have I told you about telling people things that are for family ears only?’

‘Pretend I never heard it and there’s no harm done,’ Cormac said airily, though it was clear his interest had been piqued.

Meanwhile, Fern’s face fell.

Clara wound an arm around her shoulder. ‘Don’t worry – it doesn’t matter to me, and Cormac’s our friend, right? We should have said if it was a secret but we didn’t – that’s totally my fault.’

‘Still,’ Gaby said, giving Fern a look that said Clara might have forgiven her but that she ought to expect a telling-off once they got home.

Cormac went into the shack with his dishes and then returned a moment later with a cloth to wipe the table. ‘You might need to push two together to fit everyone on.’

‘It’s a good thing you’re not busy right now.’ Ava dragged a table across the space. ‘We’re almost a full house on our own.’

‘Aye, lucky you came down now and not an hour ago.’

‘If things carry on the way they are, you’ll have to get some more tables,’ Ava said.

‘I must admit I’ve been thinking about extending out somehow, but I’m not sure I’d get the permission to take up as much land as I’d need.’

‘You could always get new premises,’ Gaby said.

‘There’s nowhere in Port Promise,’ Clara said. ‘I should know.’

Cormac shot her a knowing look, perhaps recalling their conversation about Clara’s ambitions to get her own place, but Ava spoke into the gap.

‘You can’t shut the shack! Everyone loves it!’

Cormac shrugged. ‘I don’t want to – it’s been good to me. But I do want to expand the business, so I’ll have to give it some thought.’

‘But you can’t open up outside Port Promise!’ Ava insisted. ‘What about the lifeboats?’

‘I’m only mulling over my options right now,’ Cormac said. ‘I’m nowhere near those sorts of decisions yet, just thinking about what I might do in the future if business continues as good as it is right now. Actually...’ His gaze lifted to the path that led from the beach and past his shack. ‘Speak of the devil...’

Clara followed his gaze to see Betty hurrying towards them wearing a huge smile. She broke into one of her own and waved at her.

‘Room for a little one?’ Betty asked as she hugged Clara, Ava and Gaby in turn. ‘Ava called and said you were back,’ she told Clara. ‘So I thought I’d pack up and come down to see you. There wasn’t a huge amount going on at the cafe anyway.’

Cormac watched the exchange with an expectant look, and then Betty turned to him, suddenly shyer.

‘Hey...’

Cormac smiled at her. ‘I was about to tell them about the cafe... I mean what we talked about... It’s not a secret, right?’

‘Oh, there’s nothing to tell really,’ Betty said. ‘We’ve talked about joining forces somehow. Like, there’s me practically on my own and Cormac the same, so...’

‘How would you do that?’ Clara asked, looking from one to the other.

‘We haven’t got as far as details yet,’ Cormac said. ‘Just ideas that might come to nothing.’

‘But I said because the cafe closes at six and I have no desire to open up later than that, Cormac could use the space later as a restaurant for the evening crowd. We’ve always said how there’s nothing in Port Promise if you want a fancier meal out, so there’s definitely a gap for it.’

‘That’s a brilliant idea!’ Ava said. ‘You’d run it? Together? Or Cormac would rent the cafe for the night-times?’

‘Haven’t really thought about any of that yet,’ Cormac said. ‘It’s early days.’

‘But who’d run the shack if you were in the restaurant?’ Clara asked. ‘You said you wanted to keep it on if you could.’

Lucky Cormac, Clara thought. For years she’d dreamed of running something similar of her own and hadn’t been able to get it off the ground and here was Betty, who’d never really cared and who only saw her cafe as a ready-made job handed down from her mother, getting what Clara wanted without even trying. And with Cormac, who’d be the most incredible, driven, dedicated, considerate partner.

‘Well, we thought...’ Cormac glanced at Betty. ‘We thought we might ask you actually.’

Clara brought her wandering thoughts back to the conversation. ‘What?’

‘Only if you wanted to,’ Betty said. ‘But I know... well, it’s early days, like Cormac said, and we’d pay you a proper wage, like a manager’s wage, what you’re worth, but we don’t... well, nothing’s certain yet.’

Clara forced a smile, but her stomach suddenly dropped. Was she being given a sympathy job in this scenario? She watched as Betty and Cormac shared a smile, the anticipation of all those future possibilities so evident in their expressions, and something stabbed at her, deep inside, an unwelcome emotion. She had to push the feeling out. If this was happening, she ought to be glad – she’d engineered it to some extent after all.

‘That would be amazing,’ she said uncertainly. ‘Thank you.’

Betty beamed at Clara. She looked so proud of herself. They both looked pleased; they probably thought they were doing a good thing for a friend. She was sure Betty would think this was the way to give Clara the job of her dreams. So how could they know that what they thought might be a life-changing opportunity for her was only a poor substitute?

She shook off her negative thoughts. She ought to be grateful. She ought to be thankful that she had two wonderful friends who’d thought of her straight away. She had so much that so many other people didn’t – how could she feel this way? And the job would be brilliant, if it ever happened and if she was even here to take it...

‘Anyway,’ Cormac said. ‘That’s for another day. Do you all know what you want?’

‘I’m thinking we should just order drinks for now while we wait for Killian and Harry to get here,’ Gaby said.

Everyone nodded agreement.

‘I could get those,’ Clara said. ‘I’m happy to scoot back there and help you, seeing as there are so many of us and you weren’t expecting it.’

‘Don’t worry about that!’ Betty said. ‘I’m here. You sit with your folks and catch up; I can help Cormac.’

‘Oh...’ Clara pushed that smile a little further, the knife sinking deeper. What was wrong with her? Wasn’t this what she’d been trying to achieve all along? To see them together like this?

‘Come on, sit,’ Betty ordered before going to the door of the shack. ‘What’s everyone having to drink? I can get those while Cormac fires up the stove.’

Cormac rested a gentle hand on her shoulder and smiled down at her. ‘Thanks, Betty.’

‘Any time!’ she said brightly.

He looked up at the others. ‘Fish pie’s on today.’

‘That’s new,’ Ava said. ‘Sounds good.’

‘There’s also goujons if the kids would prefer, or there’s some chowder. I’ll give you a minute,’ Cormac said before going into the shack.

A few minutes later Betty came out with the drinks. Clara got up to help her dispense them, but she waved away the help with a gracious smile. ‘No, you don’t work tonight.’

Once the drinks had been served, Betty fussed around with extra blankets and turning up the heating to make sure everyone was warm enough before going back to the shack.

‘Quite a power couple already,’ Gaby said in a low voice, watching her go. ‘Good call, Clara.’

‘Who knew?’ Ava said.

‘Clara, apparently,’ Gaby replied. ‘Could end up working out well for you too,’ she added, turning to her.

‘Maybe,’ Clara said. ‘There are a lot of hurdles to jump first.’

‘So, London...’ Gaby reached for her lemonade. ‘Apart from this possible inheritance, what’s going on?’

But as Clara opened her mouth to begin, Fern yelped and shot up from her seat. Elijah’s glass was on its side on the table. Luckily for everyone else but not for his sister, most of the contents had spilled over their shared blanket.

‘Here...’ Clara got up and took the cover from them, bundling it up. ‘I’ll take it inside and see if there’s a spare.’

With the sopping wet blanket in her arms, she tapped at the door of the shack before opening it and stepping in.

At the doorway she stopped, standing awkwardly as she walked in on Cormac and Betty kissing. Unable to decide whether to sneak off or say something, she hovered just long enough for them to realise she was there. They broke off hastily. Betty flushed and went to the sink.

Clara held up the blanket. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean to... Elijah spilled his drink. I need a cloth and maybe a spare throw if you have one.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Betty said, grabbing a cloth.

She followed Clara outside again and went to clean the mess, Gaby apologising profusely as she did. Then she fetched a fresh blanket, and when things had settled, the noise at the table grew louder and louder as they all began to chat. Apart from Clara, who watched them silently. Gradually she became aware of Ava’s eyes on her.

‘What?’ she asked, turning to her younger sister.

‘Nothing. I mean, not nothing. Are you all right? You suddenly don’t seem yourself. A minute ago you were all happy to be here and now...’

Clara forced that smile again, though it was getting harder and harder. ‘It’s been a long day and it’s hit me all at once. I think I overestimated how much gas I had in the tank.’

Ava glanced towards the shack and then back at Clara. ‘Of course – you must be tired. As long as that’s all it is. You

know you can talk to me, don't you? Any time you need to, about anything at all.'

'I'm fine,' Clara said. 'There's a lot going on and it's catching up with me – that's all.'

'Harry's here!'

They both looked round to see Fern waving madly at a figure coming towards them.

'So she's still got her mad crush?' Clara asked.

Ava grinned. 'Poor thing.'

'I seem to recall you had a very similar reaction to meeting Killian for the first time.'

'God, don't remind me!' She looked up with a sappy smile as Harry bent to kiss her.

'Hi, Clara,' he said. 'How was London?'

Clara moved along the bench to make room for him to sit next to Ava. 'Loud and busy.'

'Sounds about right. So Ava tells me you're going to inherit a mansion— Ow!' He turned to Ava, who'd nudged him hard in the ribs. 'What's that for?'

'For you and your big gob!' she hissed. 'You're worse than Fern!'

'Sorry,' Harry said. 'Sorry, Clara. I didn't know it was meant to be a secret.'

'It's not; it's just not confirmed yet. And it's hardly a mansion. And also, it's not really mine, it's Logan's.'

'But when you're married it will be yours too.'

Clara didn't want to air her fears of what that might mean for them – not here and certainly not now. So she simply painted on that worn-out smile again. 'I suppose so,' she said.

Feeling weird and vulnerable, Clara had asked Jill if she could stay at her house overnight. Jill had been only too happy for

her to, and so she'd picked up a few things from the flat and gone straight over. They'd watched television together, making easy conversation, both happy and content to have each other's company. Jill hadn't pushed Clara to talk about what had happened in London, and Clara hadn't offered all that much. She was happier not talking or even thinking about it.

Sometime after eleven, Clara was downstairs finishing a milky hot chocolate and staring out of the vast window overlooking the bay. Apart from the moon playing hide and seek with the clouds, there was only a sprinkling of lights below that marked every house in the village and the string of yellow bulbs that ran the length of the beach and the harbour walls. The sea was a vast, black mass with the odd pinpoint of light on its surface to show where a boat or a buoy bobbed on the wintry waves. The air outside the window was perfectly still and perfectly quiet, and even the rush of the waves on the beach was only a faint sound from here.

In her pocket, her phone beeped the arrival of a text.

Glad you got home OK. Missing you x

Clara read it and then locked her phone again without sending a reply. She'd messaged Logan hours before to let him know she'd arrived safely in Port Promise. He'd been busy, she supposed, though she still felt hurt by it. She'd thought of him often today, but had he thought of her at all?

Gripping the phone tightly in her hand, her gaze went back to the window. She had to shake whatever it was that had gripped her. She wasn't herself at all. Of course Logan had thought about her, of course Cormac and Betty ought to be making plans together – everything was as it should be. She was shaken by the upheavals of her life – the ones that had already happened and the ones yet to come – that was all. A good night's sleep would see her right again.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning Clara was back at work. Tanika was up to her usual trick of doing all the tasks that didn't need doing, and, on top of that she was complaining in a mildly passive-aggressive way about the shifts she'd had to do completely alone in Clara's absence.

Clara leaned her elbows on the counter, fists under her chin as she half listened. She hadn't slept well and she was still groggy.

'I might get coffee,' she said.

Tanika looked up from a drawer handle she was screwing back on. 'I'll have one if you're going.'

Clara went through to the tiny kitchen behind the reception counter and filled the kettle. She'd sent Logan a text first thing to ask how things were his end and how much longer he anticipated being in London, but as yet she'd had no reply. He never took this long to text her back – she could only assume he was snowed under there. She wished she knew why. The not knowing was the worst thing about it. Not knowing meant her imagination was running riot – and not in a good way. Her imagination kept on leaping to every worst-case scenario.

When the coffees were done Clara took them out to reception.

'Cormac and Betty are getting friendly these days,' Tanika said, reaching for her coffee and taking a slurp before going back to mending her drawer handle. 'I've seen them out and about together more than once. Are they an item now?'

‘I think so,’ Clara said. Her head began to swim. Overtired probably. She rubbed her temples as she watched Tanika plough on.

‘He used to have a thing for you, didn’t he?’

‘How should I know?’ Clara reached for her mug.

‘He did – everyone could see it.’

‘Well I couldn’t. And thank God he didn’t say anything.’

‘You were with Logan by then, of course. Shame that.’

‘Why’s it a shame?’ Clara asked, immediately regretting her question.

‘Well... you know...’ Tanika craned round and raised her eyebrows. ‘Your Logan is lovely, but Cormac... I mean, phwoar!’

Clara shook her head. She had no words to reply, so she didn’t. It wouldn’t make a bit of difference anyway – Tanika would see things how she wanted to see them.

‘If I was Logan I’d have made a bit more effort to come back with you instead of leaving you to your own devices here. He ought to watch out – someone would love to steal you away.’

‘Cormac?’ Clara asked, again immediately wishing she hadn’t dignified Tanika’s gossip with a response. ‘As you’ve just pointed out, he’s with Betty now.’

‘But you’re still helping him out at the shack?’ Tanika asked.

‘I expect he’ll say when he needs me,’ Clara replied, wondering why she felt so tetchy about this conversation all of a sudden.

‘See...’ Tanika stood back to inspect her handiwork. ‘Logan wants to watch himself.’

Usually, Clara let Tanika’s opinions wash off her like the tide off a rock, but today her patience was thin. She checked her phone again for messages from Logan.

Nothing. And if ever she needed some kind of reassurance from him, it was now.

‘I’m going to...’ She waved her phone at Tanika and then stepped outside to dial his number.

The air was damp and cold and Clara felt it creep through her sweater within seconds. She folded her arms tight against her as she listened to the ringing tone. It went on for so long she was about to hang up when Logan’s voice was at the other end of the line.

‘Hi! Is everything OK?’

‘Of course... It’s just that I hadn’t heard from you, so...’

‘Sorry, I was going to call later. I’m a bit busy today.’

‘That’s OK, I thought so, but I wanted to hear your voice. I miss you.’

‘I miss you too,’ Logan said, but then his words were drowned out by raucous laughter.

‘Where are you?’ Clara asked.

‘Oh, I’m just out.’

‘Sounds noisy.’

‘It is a bit.’

‘With your parents?’ Clara asked, though she didn’t think it sounded like their sort of place. It was certainly a lot livelier than Chez Xavier.

‘Actually, I’m out with...’ He paused. ‘James and Tom,’ he said finally. ‘You remember them, don’t you?’

‘Have I met them?’

‘Yes, I’m sure you have. It’s only a couple of lunchtime drinks... you know, because I haven’t seen them in ages and I happened to be in London this week.’

It wasn’t yet lunchtime, but Clara let it slide.

‘Listen, Clara, can I phone you back later?’

Clara felt irked. ‘I’ve got stuff on.’

‘Oh, right... stuff that means you can’t talk to me?’

‘Yes, I’m working for Cormac.’

There was a beat of silence before Logan answered. ‘Working for Cormac?’ he repeated.

‘Yes. I thought, as you weren’t here and we could do with the money I’d offer my services. That’s all right, isn’t it?’

‘But what about me calling you?’

‘Well, you can try but I can’t promise I’ll be able to pick up. If we’re busy I won’t be able to. Or I might but I wouldn’t be able to talk for long. Probably best if we leave it until tomorrow now. Unless you’ve got plans to see more friends, of course.’

‘Clara, don’t be like that.’

‘Like what?’ Clara chewed her lip as she gazed out across the caravan park. Perhaps she was being irrational, but she couldn’t stop herself. She wanted to punish Logan; she wanted to worry him as he’d worried her, and she didn’t know why she felt that way. And then, to make matters worse, when she thought about Cormac and Betty being together she felt even more vindictive, and that wasn’t right either. They’d certainly done nothing to deserve it.

‘Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was meeting up with the guys.’

‘I don’t care about that. I thought you were busy with your grandma’s estate and when I didn’t hear from you I was worried. Were you out with friends yesterday too, when you made me wait all day to hear from you?’

Logan let out a loud sigh. ‘Let me call you later – now’s not the time for this.’

‘I told you I’ll be out later.’

‘Clara, I don’t have time for this.’

‘No, I’m sure you don’t want to keep James and Tom whom I’ve never met waiting.’

‘I’ll call you later anyway,’ he said, and before she could argue he’d hung up.

Clara pursed her lips as she stared at the black screen of her phone. Perhaps she’d been unreasonable, but she was sitting here waiting for news, and he’d told her he had important things to do, and not once had he said he wanted to spend a few more days in London to go out drinking. Not that she’d begrudge him seeing old friends, but he could have been honest about it. He could have shown her the courtesy of letting her know.

Clara spent the morning dwelling on her conversation with Logan. She’d tried to brush off her annoyance and she’d tried to see things from his perspective – of course he was in London so rarely he’d want to catch up with old friends and there was nothing wrong with that. She couldn’t say why it irked her so, but however she looked at the situation, it did. It was the lack of transparency that bugged her. If he’d simply told her that was his plan she wouldn’t have minded.

At lunch she decided to go for a walk to clear her head. Her steps took her away from the caravan park and towards the harbour walls. The route passed Cormac’s shack just as he was opening up. Wondering whether she might not be in the right frame of mind to stop and chat, and as he was busy mixing something at the stove, she was about to walk on by when she heard her name being called. She stopped to see him wave and beckon her over.

‘How are you doing?’

‘Good,’ she said carefully. ‘You? Got a busy day ahead?’

‘Not sure yet. It’s midweek so usually a bit quieter. You’re at work today?’

‘Yes. So... you won’t need me tonight?’

‘Umm, I would say no. I’m sure you’ll be tired anyway after a day at your other job. And Betty can always give me a hand for an hour if I need it. Doesn’t seem worth getting you

out today for an hour or so. But if the offer's still there at the weekend I might need you.'

'Absolutely,' Clara said.

'If you don't mind me saying...' he began, regarding her carefully. 'Is everything really OK? Did something happen in London? I know Logan buried his grandma and that must have been stressful. If you ever need a friendly ear... well, it's easy enough to listen as I cook. Feel free to sit in the shack with me any time and sound off if you need to.'

'Thanks, but really, there's nothing to be done about any of it and no point in talking about it.'

'Respectfully, I think there is a lot of point talking about it.' His smile was pained. 'If not me, then please talk to someone. I like to think we're good friends now, and as a friend, I can tell when something is off. It's none of my business, I know, and maybe I have no right to say so, but it makes me sad to see you like this. You're always so kind and so mindful of others, it's only fair we see you right when you need help.'

Clara's eyes misted with tears. 'Thanks, Cormac, that means a lot to me. It's just...' She drew a breath and glanced at the seating area of the shack. The first customers of the day had yet to arrive.

'I've got all the time in the world for you,' he said gently. 'No matter how many customers want me. Come and sit awhile. Even if you don't want to talk about it, have a drink and take a breather.'

She gave a stiff nod and followed him into the shack.

He gestured to a high stool. 'Take a load off. I can't offer much in the way of a stiff drink, but I have bottles in the fridge and a kettle in the corner.'

'Some water would actually be great,' Clara said as she perched on the stool. 'Thanks.'

As he ran the tap she watched him. Now that she was here, though she wanted more than anything to offload, she felt silly. Would Cormac think she was overreacting? Would he think

she was making a fuss about nothing? Would he think she was the one in the wrong and Logan in the right? And would that make him think less of her?

‘It was kind of you to think of me for the manager’s job by the way,’ she said into the silence.

‘You mean the one that doesn’t yet exist?’ He turned with a wry smile and handed her the glass. ‘I’d love it to become a real opportunity for all of us, but there is a lot of distance to travel first.’

‘You must have impressed Betty to get her excited about the idea.’

‘It was her suggestion.’

Clara thought back to a conversation she’d had with Betty a few weeks ago, about doing more with her life. Perhaps she’d decided to seize the day after all. Perhaps asking Cormac out had opened the floodgates to lots of other possibilities. Good for her, Clara thought. At least someone was steering in the right direction.

‘I think it would be brilliant.’

‘She said you’d say that. She also said you’d be the perfect person to manage one of the sites, and I happen to agree with her. I wish it could be more concrete than that right now, but it’s something to think about, maybe?’

‘Yes,’ Clara said, and try as she might, she couldn’t stop the tears from falling again.

Cormac went to the stool and knelt on the floor in front of her. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I might not be here. I might have to leave Port Promise and then who would be your manager?’

‘You’re leaving?’ he asked, a note of incredulity in his voice.

Clara wasn’t surprised to hear that – she was as incredulous herself every time she considered the possibility that she might leave the home she loved so much. This had never been in her future – at least, not one she’d ever allowed

herself to dream of. This had come from nowhere and she didn't know how to deal with it.

She shook her head, so many tears in her eyes now she could barely see the glass in her hand. 'I don't know.'

'The house in London?' he asked shrewdly. 'The one we're not supposed to talk about?'

'Logan's set to inherit it.'

'Isn't that good?'

'No, because he'll want to live in it.'

'He said that?'

'Not yet, but I know it's coming. He's never been happy in Port Promise. He's tried his best to settle but I know how hard it's been for him, so if he wants to go back and there's a beautiful big house waiting for us in London, how can I refuse him?'

'Easy. Stop thinking about what everyone else wants and think about what you want. All you have to do is what feels right – you owe nobody anything more than that. Does he lose the house if you don't go?'

'No, but—'

'Then you're not taking anything away from him if you tell him you don't want to live there. If he loves you, he'll compromise. There must be a way you can both get what you want. Can't you buy a house here? He'll have plenty of equity in this one by the sounds of it.'

'I'd love that, but I know it's not what he wants. He says he can't have the career he wants here. I don't want to hold him back and I know he's frustrated with the gallery. But I want... I don't know what's going to happen. I don't want to lose him, but...'

'Aye, it's a tough call. Have you told him how you're feeling?'

'I wanted to, but... today he's out with some friends, so I couldn't.'

‘Ah...’

He laid a gentle hand on hers and from nowhere a sudden yearning ripped through her. She stared at her glass, not daring to look at his face, gripped by shock and guilt in equal measure. What the hell was happening to her?

‘Well,’ he said, taking his hand away again, allowing her to breathe once more, ‘I hope you sort it out. And I don’t mind saying, from a selfish place, I hope you persuade him to stay here. I’d hate to see you go.’

‘I’m sorry for putting all this on you,’ she said, her gaze still on the glass of water in her hand. ‘I didn’t mean to. I only meant to... You must have enough of your own to deal with.’

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘I’ve got the life of Riley right here, and I told you, I’ve always got plenty of time for you. Don’t think like that for another minute. Tell you what... why don’t we call Betty? If you don’t want to talk things through with me, maybe you can talk to her?’

‘It’s all right,’ Clara said, feeling wretched at the mention of her friend’s name, at the notion of how she felt right now about Cormac, a feeling she couldn’t shake no matter how wrong it was, a feeling that had come from nowhere and deserved no place in her heart. ‘I probably ought to be getting back to work.’

She handed the glass to Cormac and stood up. ‘Thanks for the water.’

‘Promise you’ll talk to someone.’

‘Yes, but... please don’t tell Betty. She’ll worry and she’ll ask why I haven’t said anything and I want... well, I want to figure out what’s going to happen first and then how to tell her. I know it’s Betty and it’s awkward, and I know I have no right to ask you to keep secrets for me, but could you? Just this once?’

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘It’s for you to tell when you’re ready.’

Clara let herself out of the shack and walked away, already second-guessing every single thing she’d said and wishing she

hadn't gone in.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maybe Logan was sulking, or maybe he'd recalled how she'd lied that she wouldn't be home and decided it wasn't worth trying to get through, but he didn't phone that evening. Clara had been for a bath and had then fallen asleep on the bed, and when she woke up shortly after ten, she checked her phone to see there were no missed calls and no messages, and at the same time marvelled that she was still so tired. She thought about going to bed and trying to catch him before work the following day, but quickly realised that she wasn't going to be able to settle without speaking to him and at least trying to clear the air.

Talking to Cormac hadn't really helped in the end; it had only confused things, but now she'd had some rest and had some distance from the situation, she was also beginning to see that it wasn't Cormac's fault, and that, perhaps, the things she'd thought she'd felt for him weren't real. She'd been emotional and lost and vulnerable, and he'd been there, an anchor, a place to shelter. No wonder she'd felt so strongly attracted to him – he'd represented safety and certainty and calm in a moment of confusion. She loved Logan; she was going to marry Logan, and that was that.

Pulling her bathrobe around her, she went to the living room and settled on the corner of the sofa. She reached for the throw she kept on the sofa and wrapped it around her legs, then dialled Logan's number.

'I'm glad you called,' he said as he picked up. 'You want to FaceTime?'

‘I kind of look like shit,’ she said. That was true, but she also didn’t trust that she could keep her emotions in check, and it was probably better he couldn’t see her face. Maybe her voice would do a better job at hiding them than her expression. ‘This is fine – maybe FaceTime tomorrow.’

‘Sure... if you want. You’re at the flat now?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK, cool. Listen, I have news.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘About the house...’

Clara’s heart sank at the new excitement in his voice.

‘Clara – it’s ours. It’s a done deal – we’ve got it. We have our own home! No mortgage, no rent... isn’t that incredible? Isn’t it the most amazing gift?’

‘When did you find out?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘Oh...’

‘I would have told you today but... well, you know...’

‘I know,’ Clara said, but still had to wonder why he hadn’t called her as soon as he’d had the confirmation. Was it because he knew that, no matter how he tried to sell it, she’d be unhappy? ‘So what now?’

‘We need to talk and we can’t do it like this. Forget FaceTiming; I’ll drive back tomorrow – my dad will let me borrow his car.’

‘Won’t he need it?’

‘I could take it back sort of soonish so I’m sure it’ll be fine.’

‘So you’re planning to head back to London straight away? You’re not staying?’

‘There are still things to do here.’

‘Like the builder you wanted to quote for work on the house? You’re still going ahead with that?’

‘It seemed like a good idea. No harm, you know. But I don’t want to get into that now – if we’re going to start this discussion then I think we need to be in the same room.’

Clara rubbed at her temple. ‘I can’t do this. I can’t keep thinking about it day and night and not know what’s going to happen. I need something I can get hold of, not vague ideas of what you might or might not want. I need to know what you intend to do. So please just tell me.’

‘This isn’t the time for—’

‘Logan, stop! If you feel the need to pussyfoot around then I think I already know the answer, because that’s the reason you feel you need to put off telling me.’

‘OK, yes, I want to keep the house and I want to live in it. Think about it for a minute – we could have the most fantastic life here. We won’t have to worry about money. I could have the most amazing career. You won’t have to work at the caravan park – you could take your pick of jobs; there are restaurants and cafes all over London begging for staff. We could make this work.’

She was silent as she stared at a spot on the opposite wall.

‘Clara? Say something.’

‘I don’t know what to say. I need to think.’

‘What’s there to think about? Why the hell would anyone want to stay in a one-horse town where the only shop is Marina’s hellhole of junk and the only restaurant is a shed that closes at nine or a chip shop run by the world’s oldest man? Why stay there when you can have everything you could ever need right outside your door here? Good company, brilliant nightlife, airports, trains, culture, art, history. What a brilliant place to raise our family when we have one. They won’t miss a thing living here; they’ll have such full and amazing lives. Just think about it for one minute, Clara! I don’t understand why there’s even a question hanging over this.’

‘I need to talk to my family at least.’

‘They’ll get it! They’ll understand. It’s not like you’re moving to the moon. They can visit any time they like and you can go to Cornwall any time. It’s really not that big a deal – I did it for you. Surely you can do it for me?’

And there was the sucker punch. It was no accident Logan had levelled that fact at her – he knew it would appeal to her sense of fairness. He knew if there was one way to win this argument, it would be to point out what he had given up for her and that it was now her turn. Looking at things objectively, of course he was right. Perhaps that was what really pained her about it. Perhaps she was pushing back because, in her heart, she knew she would have to give in and she wasn’t ready yet. Maybe the day would come and quiet acceptance would win, but it didn’t feel like today was it.

Did Logan always know this was coming? Knowing would have made it easier for him to move, aware that there was an escape down the road, that living in Port Promise wouldn’t be forever. But Clara pushed the thought out of her mind – surely Logan wasn’t that calculating?

‘We’ll talk tomorrow,’ Logan said into the gap. ‘When I get back we can discuss it properly. I’ll bring some wine; I’ll even cook if you let me. I need to have you with me on this, and I can’t if we’re at war over it, so let’s have a civilised discussion and let’s at least try to make it a pleasant one.’

‘OK,’ she said. ‘But I can’t promise an instant decision.’

‘I know; I understand. So I’ll see you at some point tomorrow.’

‘You will. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

‘I love you.’

‘I love you too. Logan, I—’

The screen went dark as Logan ended the call. Clara stared at it for a moment before curling into the corner of the sofa and leaning her head back on the cushions. She was exhausted, mentally and physically. Was this really worth the fight? It was taking so much out of her – in the end, wasn’t it just easier to

accept whichever version of her life she was about to step into and start living it?

Closing her eyes, she tried to picture herself in their new home in London, to imagine what every day might be like. She tried to see it in a positive light, with all the perks Logan had talked about, and she tried to imagine herself being happy. She could do it for him, couldn't she? If she loved him, surely she could do this.

‘What’s up?’

Gaby walked over the sand to where Clara was standing, feet bare, watching the inshore lifeboat on manoeuvres out in the bay. Clara turned with a small smile.

‘Sorry for being cryptic. I didn’t want to start something by text. I just need... well, I need your advice.’

The wind lifted Gaby’s hair into wild tendrils as she gazed out to sea. It was early morning and bitterly cold, but the forecast had given out higher temperatures later on and rain. The promise of it was in the damp air now. ‘My advice?’ she said. ‘Wow, something must really be wrong.’

‘Funny,’ Clara replied. ‘But actually, you’re the best person I could think of. I don’t want to worry Mum, and Ava wouldn’t really get it. But you’re the one person who knows about making sacrifices for the sake of a marriage, so I figured you’d have some useful thoughts.’

‘Ah... this is about the house in London?’

Clara nodded, her eye caught by the figures of Ava and Cormac in their waterproofs, striding out from the station doors and onto the beach. They would have been involved in the practice launch, undertaking shore-based tasks. Killian and Harry would be aboard the boat. Ava shielded her eyes and looked out towards it. Clara couldn’t help that stab of envy. Ava and Harry wanted exactly the same thing and they had a connection that nothing could rival. It must be amazing to be Ava or Harry right now, to be so in love, to be so united in their goals. They saw their futures not only together but in Port

Promise, committed to saving lives. There was no friction, no pulling in opposite directions.

‘Logan wants to go but you don’t?’ Gaby said.

Clara turned to her. ‘What do I do?’

‘I can’t tell you that.’

‘You didn’t want Killian to join the lifeboats, but you backed down, and you’re the most stubborn woman I know. It must have taken some doing. So how did you do it? How did you square it? Because I just can’t.’

‘I think your problem might be a bit bigger than mine was.’

‘I don’t think so really. You still live your lives differently than you would have done because of his volunteering.’

‘Well, we’d have more holidays, more daytrips, more evenings out if he wasn’t on the boats, I suppose. There would definitely be no pagers going off in the middle of the night and no having to turn down that extra drink at parties. I suppose it’s not what other couples do, but it’s our life and I have to accept it, because this is what Killian wants to do. I have to support him in that.’

‘You *have* to? Why? Who says?’

‘Nobody.’ Gaby turned back to the sea. The lifeboat was on its way to the station. ‘If I wanted Killian then that was the deal. I tried to make him see my point of view and he explained his and... Well, I suppose he won – if winning is the right way to see it. We compromised, only I compromised a lot more than he did. You love Logan, right?’

‘Of course. But does loving him mean I always have to roll over when I don’t agree with him?’

‘Nobody is saying that. How far are you willing to compromise? If the chips are down and this is a threat to your relationship, how far are you willing to go to save it? You might love him, but there isn’t just one level of love – at least, I don’t think so. You can love someone so much their happiness is everything to you. Or you can love someone, but

maybe not enough to become someone else for them. You've got to decide if you have enough love for Logan to give him what he wants. If the answer is no, then you should probably end it and cancel this wedding, because it's better to do it now and cut your losses. You both move on and meet people who will want the same things as you. It'll be painful in the short term but better in the end.'

'You never thought Logan was right for me, did you? None of you.'

'I never said that. If you think Logan is right for you, then he is. Doesn't matter what anyone else thinks.'

Across the sand, Ava looked round and waved as she caught sight of Clara and Gaby. They both waved back, and then Cormac turned and did the same. Clara's gaze went to where the terrace of Betty's Cafe overlooked the sand and the station. Betty was out on the balcony in her apron, watching the manoeuvres, just as they were.

Clara shook her head. 'I could move to London and I could make it work. The fact is, I don't want to. I love it here; why would I want to leave it? Is that selfish?'

'No, just honest. All you can do is be honest with him about what you really want. He'll have to do the same, and between you you'll work something out, for better or for worse.'

'I see what you did there...'

Clara turned to her with a bleak smile.

'When's he back?'

'Later today. Wants to talk it through.'

Gaby laid a hand on her arm. 'Then you know what you have to do.'

Clara would have liked far longer with Gaby, but she had a shift at work and Tanika wouldn't thank her for being late. With much more to say, she bid her older sister goodbye with a hug, aiming a wave at Ava and Cormac, who were still on

duty, and Betty, who'd now noticed that Clara was on the beach, and began her walk to the caravan park. The sea was sullen today, moody and unyielding, with grey stubborn waves clawing the beach and slapping against the harbour wall. Perhaps it was angry with Clara; perhaps it knew that she'd thought about leaving it. She'd still love it, whatever it did.

Talking to Gaby had confirmed what, perhaps deep down, she had already known. She loved Logan but it wasn't enough. She saw a future where there was blame and resentment whatever happened, and it scared her. Ten, twenty years down the line, she didn't want to look at Logan and hate him, and there was a danger that if she caved in, she might.

The conversation went round and round in her mind. She dreaded it and yet wanted him to be home so it could be had and be over with. Was it better to keep fighting, to try and save their relationship without giving in to his demands? Or was it better to accept that they'd never align on this, to step back and concede defeat with grace, to walk away knowing that doing so would ultimately set them both free?

By the time she got to the caravan park she was dizzy and breathless and her heart felt as if it was thumping in her ears.

As she opened the doors to the office, Tanika glanced up from an information leaflet she was editing. 'Jesus, you look like shit!'

'I don't feel so...'

Clara reached out for something to support her. Her hand grazed a chair, but it rolled away. It was no good – the ground was coming to meet her and she couldn't stop it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When she opened her eyes, Tanika's face was above her.

'Clara?'

'What happened?'

'You fainted. I think. You hit the ground with a right thump anyway. Can you sit up?'

'I think so.'

Clara pushed herself up. She still felt woozy and the change in position sent the room spinning once more.

'You're not going to pass out again?' Tanika asked.

'I don't... I don't think so.'

'I've called His Highness. He says to lock up and get you home.'

'I'll be fine.'

'No, I'm not scooping you up if it happens again. You should probably go to the doctor's.'

'I don't have time for that; Logan's coming home today. I need to see him.'

'I'm sure you've missed him, but I don't think you're in any state for whatever it is you were hoping to get up to later. You need an hour in bed, alone, asleep.'

'Probably. I have been shattered these last few days... Maybe I just need more sleep.'

Tanika narrowed her eyes. ‘Clara, you’re not pregnant, are you?’

‘*What?*’

‘I know it pisses us off when everyone assumes a woman of childbearing age must be pregnant as soon as she’s a bit off but... well, I don’t like to brag about it, but I have a sort of sixth sense about these things. I thought as soon as you came back from London you were different – call it an aura. And I’m rarely wrong. You haven’t done a test?’

‘No.’

‘Then I think you should.’

‘Oh...’ Clara’s head was still spinning and she could barely process what Tanika was saying. Pregnant? But she and Logan used birth control – they’d both said they were nowhere near ready for children. A family was a long way in their future... the future she now didn’t even know they had. How could she be pregnant? ‘There’s nowhere in Port Promise to buy a test.’

‘Marina will have one – she does some over-the-counter medicines, right? I mean, she does everything else.’

‘She might have a box of aspirin but a pregnancy test?’ Clara wasn’t sure she wanted Marina to know that much of her business, even if she did have such a thing in stock. ‘I don’t suppose we could nip out to the next village? There’s a pharmacy there.’

‘I’ll get you some water and then I’ll drive you over. No point in putting it off.’

Clara shook her head. ‘It won’t be that.’

‘We’ll see,’ Tanika said with the certainty of someone who has already seen the end of a movie. ‘But there’s no harm in checking, just to be sure, is there?’

Clara stared at the lines on the test while Tanika fussed in the kitchen of her flat.

‘You’re still drinking tea, right?’ she shouted through.

Clara confirmed she was.

‘Only lots of women go off tea and coffee when they’re pregnant. Have a bit, but you should probably cut down on your coffee anyway. And definitely don’t drink raspberry leaf tea! Guinness is good. And milk... probably...’

Clara was still mesmerised by the plastic stick in her hand. She could hear the sounds of Tanika filling the kettle and searching through cupboards, but she was somehow detached, as if they were happening in a different place to a different Clara.

A moment later Tanika returned with two mugs. ‘Cheer up,’ she said, placing one on the low table in front of Clara. ‘I thought you liked kids.’

‘I do,’ Clara said in a dull voice.

‘It’s going to be a shock at first if you weren’t planning it, but loads of people have kids without planning them and it’s all fine. I definitely wasn’t planning Zinnia and we were happy as Larry when she was born. I was only upset for a day or so when I found out. I actually loved being pregnant in the end – everyone’s so much nicer to you. Could have done without the stretch marks and stress incontinence, of course...’ Tanika sipped at her tea, watching Clara over the rim of her mug more carefully than her conversation would suggest. ‘I bet Logan will be made up. Whatever they say, they’re always chuffed – means their seed’s working. I mean, it is Logan’s, isn’t it?’

Clara stared at Tanika. ‘Of course! Who else’s would it be?’

‘I don’t know. I was only checking. You wouldn’t be the first to surprise everyone with the identity of the real daddy.’

‘It’s Logan’s,’ Clara said. ‘There’s nobody else.’

‘Well that’s all right then. And as your wedding is so close you might get away with a few tweaks to your dress and some clever camera angles to hide the bump. Unless you want to show it off, of course. Nobody would blame you for that – and

you could tell the kid in years to come they were sort of at the wedding.’

Tanika meant well, but Clara simply couldn’t listen to any more of this. She needed time and space to process the thing that had suddenly changed every one of the decisions she’d struggled to come to only that morning. She needed to decide whether it altered any of them and what it meant for her future if she continued on the course she’d set for herself as she’d walked to work. Logan would have his opinions too. Would it change things for him? Would he now stay in Port Promise for the sake of his child? Or would he push harder than ever to take her and the baby to London?

‘I really appreciate you bringing me home,’ Clara said. ‘But I’m kind of exhausted and I could really do with a lie-down. Do you mind?’

‘The first trimester is always the worst – it was for me anyway. You want me to leave you to it? I can wait in the living room for a bit if you’d rather; I’d be quiet as a mouse.’

‘That’s OK – I’ll call my mum if I need anything. You’ve done enough, thanks.’

‘All right, I’ll head back to work, but you know where I am if you want me.’

‘I do, thank you.’

As Tanika bustled out, Clara let go a sigh of relief. At last she was alone and could start to process her thoughts. And however torturous that might be, she was going to have to get to grips with them sooner rather than later.

Going through the motions rather than with any real intent, Clara showered and put some make-up on for Logan’s arrival. He’d called from the last service station before the motorway gave in to hedge-lined roads that twisted and turned through the landscape, letting her know he wasn’t far away. She wasn’t hungry but she’d put a casserole in the oven, and the flat smelled homely and inviting as twilight fell over Port Promise, swallowing the sea from view.

A while later she heard the key turn in the lock of the front door, and then Logan appeared. It was all she could do not to burst into tears at the sight of him. So many emotions competed for her attention: there was relief that he was home at last and they could finally get to grips with their issues, and sadness that she'd considered leaving him; fondness for what they'd had together, fears for what was to come, love for those grey eyes and that quick, curious smile, resentment for his stubbornness and his willingness to sweep her dreams aside to realise his own. All these and so many more, so complex and tangled she didn't even know where to start trying to separate them into something she could recognise. And there was the bombshell that she had to drop on top of everything else, the news of the life inside her. It was still so new to her she'd barely had a chance to work out what it meant, but with that uncertainty she had to tell Logan, and now, even more than before, everything would change.

His smile was uncertain as she came through from the kitchen. He had an overnight bag in one hand and a bottle of red in the other.

'It's a good one,' he said, holding it up. 'A very good one in fact. Nicked it from Dad's cellar – figured we deserved it.'

'I, um... sounds great,' Clara said. 'And we're having beef casserole, so...'

'Clara...' He let the bag drop to the floor and went to take her in his arms. 'I missed you.'

'I missed you too.'

He kissed her and then buried his face in her shoulder. 'You smell gorgeous,' he said in a husky voice. And then he started to nibble at her earlobe. 'How about we skip the casserole?'

Clara pushed him gently away and he frowned.

'What's wrong? You're still mad at me about James and Tom? Or is it about—'

'No, none of that.'

Those niggles seemed so small now, so far in her past she could barely believe she was still in the same week.

She took a breath.

‘I’m pregnant.’

Logan started to laugh. But when Clara didn’t join in, he stopped and stared. ‘You’re not... you’re not joking?’

‘I’m not joking.’

‘But we...’

‘I know, we’re so careful. Apparently being careful isn’t always enough.’

‘And you’re not mistaken?’

‘No.’

He flopped onto an armchair and set the wine bottle down on the floor next to it. ‘Shit.’

‘That’s kind of what I thought.’

‘And you want to keep it?’

‘What kind of question is that? Of course I want to keep it! It’s not a dog that we might drop off at the pound!’

‘God, I know, I’m sorry that was crass, I’m just... well I’m struggling right now. Whatever I was expecting to come home to, it wasn’t this.’

‘I’m sorry I snapped. I’m a bit emotional.’

‘I suppose that’s the hormones?’

‘No,’ Clara said, ‘that’s because I’ve just found out I’m pregnant with a baby I wasn’t expecting to have.’

‘Oh, right...’

Clara held back a frown. But perhaps her hormones had played a bigger part in all that had happened over the last few days than she realised. It would certainly explain a lot of her behaviour. She’d been very tired and unreasonably upset over things she’d usually shrug off. And then there was the weird moment with Cormac, and the irrational jealousy she felt

towards Betty. She'd been pregnant that whole time and hadn't known it, so was anything she'd felt actually what she really felt? Or had those emotions been influenced?

'How pregnant are you?' Logan asked.

'Extremely. Like the most pregnant you can be.'

'Sorry, you know what I mean. Do you know when you're due?'

'No, I... I can't be far along, not by my calculations. I think... Yes.' Clara did some quick sums in her head. 'Must not even be two months yet. I suppose I'll have to go to the doctor's and get scans and stuff. Gaby will know.'

'You've told them? Your sisters?'

'I haven't told anyone yet. Actually...'
'Tanika knows.'

'You told her before you told me?' Logan's voice had an edge of reproach.

'Not on purpose. I fainted at work and she guessed straight away – she brought me back here to do a test.'

'So the whole village will know now.'

'Does it matter?'

'I don't know. Does it matter to you?'

'I suppose... well, Gaby never told us until the three-month mark had passed. She said things were more certain after that and she didn't want to tempt fate. Maybe we ought to wait until then to announce it.'

'Good luck with that if Tanika knows.'

'I could ask her to keep it to herself for now.'

Logan raised his eyebrows and Clara couldn't help but smile.

'You'll never be able to keep it from your mum for that long. And my mum will kill me if she finds out we kept it from her even for a day.'

‘I need at least a couple of days to get my head around it,’ Clara said. ‘And to get the scans to confirm everything.’

‘I thought you said you were certain.’

‘I am, but...’ She shrugged. ‘I am, but it’s best to have a professional involved.’

‘OK.’ He got up and pulled her into his arms. But this was not lustful, as his earlier embrace had been – this was one of support and affection. ‘How are you feeling? I mean, in yourself?’

‘Tired mostly.’

‘And you fainted?’

‘I overdid it a bit this morning, that’s all. But now I know I’ll be more careful. Tanika says the first trimester is challenging.’

‘The what?’

‘The first third of the pregnancy.’

‘Oh God. I suppose I’ll have to learn all this stuff now.’

She looked up at him. ‘You’re not upset?’

‘Shocked, maybe, but how can I be upset? Are you?’

‘I’m the same as you really. I think I might be happy about it. Life’s going to change a lot.’

‘Isn’t it already? It’s one more thing to add to the list.’

‘I suppose so. We still have to talk about all that too.’

‘We do, but not now. This is enough for one evening.’

‘We have to – if anything, this news has pushed that issue up the agenda. We need to sort this, Logan. I need certainty now more than ever.’

‘Can we at least eat first while I catch my breath? I still had my suitcase in my hand when you bowled up and told me I’m going to be a dad. It’s a lot.’

‘I can’t stand it hanging over me.’

‘It’s hardly the sword of Damocles.’

Clara frowned. ‘This is serious. Don’t treat me like I’m stupid because I don’t have your education. I’m not; I just don’t know the things you know. You can’t surf but I don’t treat you like you’re stupid.’

‘You’re right, I’m sorry.’

One thing was certain, if Clara and Logan were going to do this then things would have to change, including their attitudes to one another. Perhaps this was the turning point for them; perhaps she’d been looking in all the wrong places to see where their future was really going. This child might be the making of them. Clara had very nearly thrown it all away with one impetuous decision, and perhaps this pregnancy was a sign that she needed to give it another shot and really mean it this time. They had so much more at stake than they’d had twenty-four hours ago and a life other than theirs to consider now. She couldn’t get excited about motherhood, not yet, but she had a creeping feeling that she might, one day.

Leaving his arms, she went through to the kitchen and took the casserole dish from the oven.

‘Smells good,’ he said, following her.

‘Shame I can’t have the wine with mine.’

‘I won’t drink it if you’re not.’

‘You’re going to be waiting a long time to open it then.’

‘I guess I am,’ he said. She turned to see him smiling. ‘The more I think about it, the more OK I am.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, really.’

‘It’s going to interfere with things. Your work, for example. It won’t be like it is now, where you disappear into your studio when inspiration strikes. I might be at work and you might be caring for the baby and you’ll have to wait. Our focus is going to shift – everything will be about the little one. For a while, at least. And all those parties and exhibits and gallery openings and the things you’ve been talking about for

your career... you won't always be able to go. Sometimes we'll need you and you'll have to give up one of those things.'

'I know.'

'Do you?'

'Of course. But we'll have my parents, don't forget.'

'*Your* parents?'

'Well, yes...'
Logan seemed genuinely confused by her question, as if they'd had the discussion about where they were going to live already and he'd won.

'We might not be near to them,' she said carefully. 'It might be my mum who does the babysitting. And if I'm honest, she's going to be the best person for that.'

'Why?'

'Your mum is *not* maternal. Can you imagine her cleaning up baby sick? Or putting those little plastic things in the sockets around her perfect house?'

'She brought me up no problem.'

'You had a nanny!'

'She'll be thrilled when she finds out she's going to be a grandma – trust me. You'll see a different side to her.'

Clara would never forget how damaged Logan had been when she'd first met him. He'd been quick and entertaining, and she'd loved how different he was from the local men she'd dated over the years, and yet he'd struggled with the very basic human attributes, like empathy and kindness. She liked to think she'd helped make him better and that living in Port Promise had too, and she often blamed his upbringing for how he'd arrived there, with a sense of arrogance and entitlement that often rubbed her friends and family up the wrong way. She'd seen something in him, though, something that was good and wonderful, and she'd worked hard to help others see it too. Though sometimes he still had to be told when he was patronising or inconsiderate, he wasn't the same man he'd been back then.

Did she want that for her child? Did she want the woman she considered to be the architect of Logan's bad traits to be anywhere near her baby? She loved Logan now, but she didn't want her child to grow up one bit like the man he was when they'd met.

'Get me some plates?' she said, stirring the casserole. 'This is ready.'

Despite his earlier promise, Logan fetched two plates from the cupboard, along with a single wine glass, and placed them all on the table. Then he opened the wine and sniffed the bottle. 'Bloody hell that's a good vintage.'

'Hmm... it's a shame I can't have any.'

'It is. I suppose you could have a sip to taste it?' he asked as he filled his glass.

'I could but I won't. Can't say it's appealing to me at the moment anyway. I suppose my tastes will change for a while.'

'Do you think you'll eat weird things?'

'No idea.'

'I bet that's one of those urban myths.'

'No, I don't think so. Gaby said she wanted to lick pebbles off the beach when she was expecting Elijah. I don't think she did, but she said if she'd gone down there and thought nobody was looking she might have been very tempted to give it a go.'

'That's disgusting!'

'I don't think being pregnant is big on dignity in general,' Clara said.

She brought the plates of casserole to the table and sat down across from where he'd settled. The kitchen was so quiet and so calm and ordered, but in a few months it wouldn't be like this at all. Was she ready for her life to change so drastically? Yesterday her biggest worry was winning an argument about where they were going to live; today there was so much more at stake. Where they brought up their child would dictate who that child would grow up to be.

‘It’s good, as always,’ Logan said, putting a forkful of beef into his mouth and then wafting his hand because it was too hot to eat. ‘Better. Maybe the best you’ve made.’

‘Thanks. It’s an old recipe but I added some cumin.’

‘Cumin? A bit left field. Works though.’

They were skipping around the issue. Clara started to eat her meal, but she knew they were going to have to address it soon. She was tired and she didn’t want to fight anymore.

‘If we go to London and I can’t settle, what are the chances of coming back here?’ she asked.

His fork hung in mid-air as he looked up at her. ‘There’s every chance!’ he said. ‘I don’t think that will happen, but if it does, of course we’ll talk about it!’

‘I don’t want to just talk about it. If I’m unhappy I want to know the option of coming back is open to me. You can’t change your mind – if you say now there’s an escape route then you can’t take that away from me later on.’

‘I’m not going to let you be unhappy – not for one second; you won’t want to escape.’

‘But if I did... promise me, Logan. Promise we’ll come back if I hate living in London. I need to know.’

‘We’ll come back if you hate it that much. But you need to give it time.’

‘And we’d obviously have to come back for the wedding, considering that’s all booked and organised.’

‘Of course!’ He put down his fork and reached for her hand across the table. ‘Does this mean you’ll come?’

Clara looked into his eyes, so full of excitement and hope. This morning she’d been ready to call off their wedding, but things had changed. She wanted to stay in Port Promise, but she also wanted the father of her child to be in their lives, and there was no guarantee that would happen if she did. He might stay, but he might feel trapped and might resent them eventually, and she couldn’t stand the thought of that either. And Logan had made the move for her once. She owed him

this, didn't she? With a baby to think of she'd be busy all the time and she wouldn't be able to dwell on how much she missed her home because she'd have so much else going on. Besides, she still loved Logan, despite everything. Wasn't he worth one last shot? And as for her own ambitions – she could hardly run a restaurant with a baby to care for. She might as well support Logan's career while hers was on hold, and if he said he had to be in London to really launch it, then she supposed she had to be there too.

She was about to reply when her phone started ringing from the kitchen counter.

'Ignore it – they'll call back,' Logan said.

'Let me see who...' Clara went to see who the caller was. 'Gaby... I probably need to... I'll tell her to call later.'

Gaby would be checking up on her after their morning conversation. She would want to know what Clara had decided and offer support if she needed it. Clara needed to tell her something to stop her worrying or, even worse, turning up at the flat while she was trying to sort things with Logan.

'Hi...' she said, taking the call while looking at Logan to see his disapproving frown. 'It's a bit—'

'Clara? Is what Tanika says true?'

Clara held in a groan. 'What's she told you?' she asked, knowing perfectly well it could only be one thing.

'She says you're pregnant. Are you?'

'Yes.'

'Why didn't you tell us?' Gaby yelled.

'I literally just found out and I was kind of hoping Tanika would keep it to herself for at least an hour,' Clara said in a wry tone. 'I can't be far along – you didn't tell us until you got to three months.'

'That's different – Tanika didn't know. You might as well have told Marina and have done with it if you wanted to spread it around the village.'

Clara smiled, but she'd have to phone her colleague as soon as she could to ask if she could keep the news to herself for a few weeks. Clara still wasn't sure how she felt about any of it, and it was all happening so fast – she needed time to adjust before everyone found out. 'Can we come over?'

'Who's we?'

'Me and Killian and the kids?'

'Well, it's kind of difficult at the moment—'

There was a knock at the door of the studio. Logan gave an impatient shake of his head as he got up to answer it. If Tanika had told Gaby, then she'd probably told their mum or Ava, and it was very likely one of them knocking.

A moment later Clara heard laughter and squealing from downstairs. Ava and Jill had both turned up by the sound of things, and they knew.

'Mum and Ava are here so you might as well,' Clara said wearily. 'But please, don't tell anyone else yet. I want to keep it to myself for a while.'

'Yes, of course. I'll see you shortly!'

Clara put the phone back on the counter and stared at the half-eaten meals on the table. She could hear Jill and Ava on the stairs, firing questions at Logan. It looked as though dinner and the accompanying discussion would have to wait.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘I almost forgot!’ Ava said as she hugged Clara goodbye an hour later, having seen Gaby and her tribe off half an hour before that. ‘Cormac wants to know if you’re free at the weekend. He could do with your help.’

‘You’re not going, are you?’ Logan asked sharply.

Ava and Jill looked at him.

‘I mean,’ he continued, ‘you’re pregnant.’

‘I’m pregnant, not dead,’ Clara said. ‘I’ll still have to work, and we could do with the money.’

‘We have a house; we don’t need—’

‘Not yet we don’t,’ Clara said. ‘And we still have a wedding to pay for, not to mention all the new expenses a baby will bring.’ She turned to Ava. ‘I’ll text him as soon as I get a minute.’

They bid her goodnight and left.

Clara let out a sigh. ‘I’m shattered. I’m sort of glad my family know, even though it wasn’t the way I’d have wanted to tell them. And as long as Tanika keeps her mouth shut – which is probably a big ask – we’ll be able to keep the news from the rest of the village until we’re ready to announce it. I probably ought to have a word with her.’

‘Yeah...’ Logan said vaguely.

Clara shot him a sideways look. ‘What’s wrong now?’

‘Why do you have to go and work for Cormac? I told you we don’t need the money.’

‘We do, and it’s not just about the money. I said I’d help him and he’s relying on me.’

‘So tell him you’re pregnant and he needs to start relying on someone else. He’s going to have to sort it sooner or later because you won’t be here. And it’s about time he stopped sniffing around you.’

‘*Sniffing around me?* Logan, have you heard yourself? You sound like an idiot!’

‘Why does he keep asking you to go over there then? I’m not stupid; I see what’s going on. Well he can forget it now, because it’s over for him; you’re having my baby. You need to tell him.’

‘I’ll do no such thing!’ Clara snapped. ‘And in case you forgot, he’s seeing Betty now, so I’m quite sure he’s not *sniffing around* anyone else; he’s not like that.’

‘So why can’t she go and help him?’

‘Because she has a bloody cafe to run!’

‘Then someone else. He can advertise like everyone else does. So if it’s nothing to do with fancying you, it’s because he thinks he can get away with paying you next to nothing?’

Clara scowled. ‘I’m not having this discussion with you; I’m going to bed.’

‘What about the other discussion we were meant to have?’

She spun round from the doorway. ‘You’re joking, right? You think I’m in the mood to talk about moving to London with you when you’re being such a dick?’

‘But we are going? You said earlier—’

‘I don’t care what I said earlier! Until you can sort out your attitude I’m not going anywhere.’

‘But tomorrow—’

‘Save it.’

‘But what about dinner?’

‘You eat it,’ Clara said, slamming the door shut.

Not going to work for Cormac? They’d see about that!

Logan was still sleeping when Clara slipped out to work that morning. He’d be tired from his long drive back from London the day before and then all the excitement that had followed, but besides that, the other main reason Clara saw no point in waking him was that she wanted to get to the office without having endured an argument first. If she woke him they were bound to pick up where they’d left things the night before and that was no mood to go to work in.

Robin’s trawler was moored up as she went past the harbour, Robin himself scrubbing the deck. Clouds of steam rose into the air around him as he dipped his brush into a bucket of boiling soapy water. He must have been exerting himself, Clara thought, because he’d taken his thick jumper off, and he was rarely seen without it, even during the summer. He looked a lot thinner in the T-shirt he was now wearing, his arms taut and wiry, muscles and bones standing proud beneath his tanned skin.

Clara stopped to say good morning, but he didn’t look up from his task. She could see, on closer inspection, that he had earbuds in and so probably hadn’t heard her. She hovered for a moment, wondering whether to shout again or to let him get on with his work in peace, when he stopped and looked up.

‘Ah,’ he said, taking a bud out. ‘Clara. Back from London then?’

‘Yes. Sorry, didn’t mean to disturb you.’

‘It’s no bother.’

He leaned on his brush and regarded her silently. He didn’t ask how London had been or how she was or what she’d been up to because that wasn’t what he did. But Clara and her sisters knew that just because he didn’t ask, it didn’t mean he didn’t care.

‘What you listening to?’ she asked, pointing at his earbuds.

‘Bit of Thin Lizzy.’

‘Ah, the old ones are the best. “*Whiskey in the Jar*” still makes me think of being out on the boat with you and Dad when I was little.’

‘Aye,’ he said. ‘Good times.’

‘They were.’

Clara was transported, for a moment, to a sunny morning when she was perhaps eight or nine. Her sisters and her mum had all been ill with flu and her dad, the only member of the family apart from her to escape it, had woken her gently and asked if she wanted to go fishing. It was nothing special, only a few hours out on Robin’s cramped old trawler, sitting amongst the pots and the nets as the boat rose and fell and the sea crashed against the bow, soaking her hair and settling droplets on her eyelashes, but it had been special to Clara. The middle child, she’d always felt stuck between the assuredness of Gaby as the oldest and the needs of Ava as the youngest, and she often felt overlooked. But this was her day, just her and her dad, and he’d trusted her on Robin’s boat. He’d shown her how to sort through the fish that came aboard in the nets – which ones to throw back and which to keep – and he and Robin had made such a fuss of her that despite the smelly old cabin and the radio playing old rock tunes and the wind throwing spray into her face, she’d felt like the most special, the most privileged girl in the world.

Robin had a flask of hot sweet tea that his wife, who’d still been alive back then, had made for him, along with a pack of Jammie Dodgers, and he’d shared them with Clara as the boat cleaved a path through the waves, and she’d marvelled that it was the best tea and the best biscuits she’d ever tasted. It was the little things like this that had made her childhood feel so special, so unique and amazing, memories so vivid she’d carry them to her last day on earth as if they were newly made.

‘You all right?’ Robin asked, and Clara realised she’d been staring at him for goodness knew how long, a lump in her throat, her eyes misting up.

‘Yes, sorry... it’s early; still knackered, you know?’

‘Teatime for me,’ Robin said, going back to his brush. ‘Used to being up with the lark.’

‘I’d better get to work,’ Clara said. ‘See you, Robin.’

‘Aye, expect so.’

Clara went on her way, stopping briefly to rub her sleeve over her dad’s plaque and spend a moment thinking of him, and then past Cormac’s shack – still closed and dark – and past the office where Ava worked during the summer months when the tourists flocked for fun on the sea, and along the coast until she came to the gates of the holiday park where she worked. She paused to look up at the sign:

Port Promise Holiday Park. Where memories are made.

So many days she’d looked up at this sign and rolled her eyes. Not today. Today, she understood what it really meant. The people who came here were seeking an escape from their lives in grey towns, a few days of freedom in a place that was breathtakingly beautiful, and if they had to live in a little tin box for a week or so to get that escape, it was worth it. They moved hell and high water, rearranged their lives and saved all year for a taste of it. She saw their faces, filled with expectation and excitement and often relief as they checked in, and saw how much more relaxed and fulfilled and content they were when they left. How could she complain about a job like that when what she did meant so much to others?

Tanika came up behind her. ‘Morning! Another day at the prison camp, eh?’

Clara fell into step, smiling sadly. If only Tanika knew.

‘Morning... Listen, I don’t want people to know about the baby yet. I mean, I don’t mind that you told Gaby, but until I’m a bit further along, I want to keep it to myself... and the other people who already know. You don’t mind, do you? Not mentioning it to anyone else?’

Tanika gave a nonchalant shrug. Clearly, she didn’t see what she’d done already as a problem. ‘If that’s what you want.’

‘For now, I’d appreciate it.’

‘I won’t say another word about it then.’

Clara headed over to the shack on her Saturday off to help Cormac. As she arrived Betty was leaving him with a kiss and a coy look. And she ignored that stab of jealousy, knowing now that it was all in her mind – or at least, in her hormones, and she smiled graciously as Betty had a word before she headed off.

‘Clara!’ Betty gave her a warm smile and a hug, and Clara felt like the most traitorous friend in the world. ‘How’s things? Logan’s back, so I hear.’

‘Yes, a couple of days ago.’

‘And... any news you want to share with me?’

Clara hesitated. News? Did she know? It wouldn’t be surprising – Clara was more shocked that the news of her pregnancy wasn’t already all over Port Promise, despite asking those in the know to keep it a secret for a while.

‘You know,’ Betty prompted. ‘About the inheritance?’

‘Oh!’ Clara relaxed into a smile. ‘That! Well, apart from the fact that he has the house and... Listen,’ she said, glancing at Cormac as he went to and from the shack with boxes of produce he’d just brought in on his little van. ‘There’s a lot to tell – can I come and see you to talk properly?’

‘I’d love that! Feels like ages since we spent some time together – my fault, I know, always out with a certain someone else...’ She grinned in Cormac’s direction. ‘How about the Spratt one night this week?’

‘Um... sure,’ Clara said. ‘If I can make some time. Things are a bit mental right now....’

‘Of course – they must be. Well, let me know.’

‘I will.’

Betty left her with a hug, and Clara turned towards Cormac, who was taking in the last of his crates. ‘What’s the

plan, boss?’

He grinned. ‘I can’t tell you how weird that sounds! Never been anyone’s boss.’

‘Enjoy it while it lasts – I’m not very good with authority so I’ll be telling you to shove your orders by the end of the day.’

‘I thought it was Ava who wasn’t very good with authority.’

‘It’s a family thing – in the genes. We can’t help it.’

His grin widened. ‘That so? Well I wouldn’t dream of ordering you about; I’m just grateful to have you here. There’s a lot of veg to chop – I hate to give you the commis chef job, but it would do me a massive favour if you could start on that.’

‘What will you be doing?’

‘Oh, I’ll be gutting the fish.’

‘In that case, I think I might actually have done quite well out of this!’

‘Yeah – it’s not the nicest job. It’s lucky Betty works in food too – not many women who’d put up with the smell of fish on me after a day here. You can shower as much as you like, but it’s still there under your nose.’

‘I’m sure it’s not,’ Clara said with a smile. ‘Betty’s never complained to me anyway. So...’ Clara followed him into the shack. ‘It’s going well – you and Betty, I mean.’

‘I think so,’ he said carefully. ‘It’s early days.’

‘You’ve lasted longer than all the ones she’s dated recently.’

‘Have I? She doesn’t talk much about past dating.’

‘She wouldn’t, would she? Nobody wants to hear about ex-boyfriends when they’re on a date with someone.’

‘Wouldn’t bother me.’ Cormac hauled a crate of shellfish onto the counter. ‘Everyone’s got a past. No good pretending they don’t.’

‘But you must be getting on well to be talking about business merging.’

‘Not exactly merging, just making a sort of cooperative arrangement work. But that’s separate from anything else. Even if we weren’t dating we’d have probably figured out we ought to be working together at some point. It makes a lot of sense. Actually...’

Clara was searching in the drawer for the right knife, but she glanced up at his pause.

‘I wanted to talk to you about the job we said we’d offer you. I realised... you’re hugely overqualified for it and it was a bit of an insult, and you’re so nice you’d never have said.’

‘I didn’t think that at all! I was flattered you’d think of me!’

‘But Betty reminded me how frustrated you’ve been over the years and how you’ve barely used your training and that what you’d really want is to set up on your own and it got me thinking... well, if you’re still in Port Promise and it’s what you’d like, perhaps you could be more than a manager. Perhaps you’d consider being my partner.’

‘Partner?’ Clara repeated in a dazed voice.

‘Business partner. We work as equals, fifty-fifty on the profits. We’d have to iron out the details, and I guess you don’t know what’s in your future yet, but...’ He went back to the shellfish. ‘Something to think about,’ he concluded lamely.

‘I’m... I’m happy and grateful you’d think of me for something so important,’ she said evenly, holding on so tight to her emotions there was a danger she might burst. ‘But you might as well be one of the first to know – I’m leaving Port Promise. Logan and I are moving to London.’

‘Ah...’ he said, not looking up from his task. ‘I suppose it was always on the cards.’

‘I suppose it was,’ Clara replied, concentrating very hard on topping and tailing a bunch of organic carrots so that she wouldn’t have to look up and see the disappointment that was so evident in his voice.

‘Well... congratulations. I mean, if it’s what you want.’

‘It is,’ Clara said, though every emotion in her was screaming the opposite. All she could do was keep reminding herself how important it was to compromise for Logan in the way he’d done for her, that she needed him more than ever, that they had to stay together as a strong family for the child now growing inside her. She needed Logan to be the best version of himself if he was going to be the great dad she knew he could be, and that would only happen if he was happy and fulfilled. Much as she’d love to believe otherwise, that was never going to happen while he was in Port Promise.

‘When...’

Clara stopped chopping as the sounds of him sorting through the shells stopped for a moment. A strange, charged silence descended over the shack.

‘When are you going?’ he asked finally, resuming his task.

‘We don’t see any point in delaying things,’ Clara said. ‘I’m going to give my notice in at work. The house needs a lot doing to it, but Logan wants to oversee that, so we’ll probably stay in it, or perhaps with his parents when things are too messy there. He wants to crack on as soon as possible so we can move in – hopefully before Christmas.’

‘That’s... wow, so soon?’

‘Hmm...’ Clara started to chop again.

‘I guess... there’ll be time for a proper send-off?’

‘Like a party?’

‘Something like that. Drinks at least.’

She shook her head before realising he wasn’t looking. ‘I don’t want a fuss, to be honest, and it’s not like I’m never coming back. I’ll visit as much as I can.’

‘You can’t go without saying goodbye properly.’

‘That’s just it...’ Clara’s voice finally cracked. ‘I don’t want to say goodbye.’

The sounds of Cormac working ceased again. ‘You don’t really want to go.’

It was a statement rather than a question, and everything about her must have screamed as much. But she shook her head anyway.

‘No, I do. It’s going to be hard though.’

This time she dared to look round and saw that he was looking at her with such sadness and regret she barely knew how to react.

‘It won’t be the same without you here,’ he said. ‘Every day will be a bit greyer than it was before.’

‘Don’t be daft—’

‘Clara! You have no idea, do you? No clue how...’ He leaned on his hands and looked down. ‘There’s something about you, something that you leave a trace of everywhere you go and it’s... it makes people happier. I only hope the people of London will realise how lucky they are when you take it there.’

She rubbed a hasty hand over her cheek where her tears had fallen and went back to her carrots. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, taking a breath and bracing herself in a way that seemed to require all the strength she possessed. ‘I don’t want to talk about it right now, if you don’t mind.’

‘Sure,’ he said, and then went to switch on the radio.

Their conversation ceased entirely and the sounds of throwaway chart music filled the space. Though it made Clara sad that they’d clearly come to a point where they couldn’t talk, perhaps it was for the best.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Clara had begged her family to keep everything low-key around her departure from Port Promise. In the end, they'd shared a family meal, Jill scurrying off every half hour or so to cry privately somewhere when it all got too much, and Ava and Gaby forcing such cheerful demeanours they started to look a little mad. Jill had been devastated when she'd been given the news, even though she'd guessed it would come, but she'd understood why Clara needed to leave.

Clara had ended the night by taking a peek at the bedroom she'd shared with her sisters growing up. It was so small, it was hard to believe the three of them had managed in there without killing each other. But they'd had good times, comparing shopping hauls, doing each other's hair, listening to music, lying awake at night giggling over something one of them had said or done, sharing secrets, straining for the sound of the key in the front door when their dad had been called out on a rescue. She'd sat on the guest bed that now occupied the space where their three had once been and shed some silent tears of her own before putting on a smile and going back downstairs to say her final goodbyes.

She'd been in London for a couple of weeks when Betty called to see how she was getting on. Clara had just left Vetiver and Julian's house, where she'd been staying with Logan since their arrival. She did this most mornings, either to stay out of the way or, on a couple of occasions, to enquire about jobs in restaurants, in spite of Vetiver's insistence that the idea of her working before the baby was eighteen was ludicrous.

‘Hey!’ Betty greeted. ‘Just checking in! What are you up to today? Is London still exciting? Have you found a job yet? Managing not to strangle your future mother-in-law?’

Clara smiled. ‘It’s good to hear your voice! How’s everything there?’

‘It’s much the same.’

‘Cormac still the man of your dreams?’

‘Oh, he is lovely,’ Betty said. ‘He’s lasted longer than anyone for the past year, so...’

‘So that’s good!’ Clara forced some enthusiasm into her voice.

It was good, wasn’t it? It was what she’d wished for the two people she considered – apart from her sisters – to be her best friends in the world. So why did the idea that they were getting along suddenly irk her?

She shook it, afraid that she might know why and unwilling to acknowledge it, even to herself. What was the point – to dwell on it when she’d committed to another life entirely was pointless and wouldn’t help her adapt to being in London at all. She had made a promise to Logan to give this a fair go and, besides, she had Logan’s baby growing inside her. She loved Logan, didn’t she? Yes, she’d had her doubts back in Port Promise, but they hadn’t come from not loving him. Thoughts of anyone else were just silly and unhelpful now.

‘But I didn’t call for that,’ Betty said. ‘How are you getting on?’

‘Good,’ Clara said carefully. ‘Really good.’

That wasn’t quite true. Staying with Vetiver and Julian was driving her mad. Despite her initial reluctance, Clara was now begging to move into Logan’s grandma’s old house, no matter what state of disrepair it was in or what stage the renovations were at. She was sick of the disdainful looks and sniping, of the covert criticism and patronising lectures.

At first, Clara had been pleased and hopeful that she’d been allowed to stay at their house after being forced into a

hotel last time they'd come to London, but she quickly realised their charity had been extended only because she'd bent to theirs and Logan's will and had agreed to relocate. How different from her own mum, who had welcomed Logan without question on his arrival in Port Promise, even if she didn't really approve of him.

As for Logan's ambitions for their new home to be ready by Christmas, that was looking more unlikely with every day that passed. But once they were in and settled, Clara could devote her time properly to finding a new job and Logan could begin making the connections he needed to further his art career, and so, the sooner the better as far as they were both concerned.

'I bet you've got loads going on?'

'Yes. Mostly job hunting. And of course there's a lot to be done on the house. It'll be great when it's done, of course, so I can't complain about that.'

'I bet it'll be incredible. You know I want to be your first visitor, right?'

'Of course! I'm going to make sure there's a spare room with your name on it before we do anything else.'

'That's what I like to hear. So you're happy?'

'Yes,' Clara said.

'Only I know you weren't convinced about the move before, and—'

'I wasn't,' Clara said, an involuntary hand going to her belly, almost as if to remind herself of the necessity of the move and how she owed it to her child, if nobody else, to make it work. The baby needed both parents and a stable home, and Clara could get used to this for the sake of her new family, couldn't she? If she could move past her doubts, she could be happy married to Logan with her baby and her house in London – she had to believe that.

One thing was for certain, Chez Xavier would be handing bumper bonuses out this year, because Vetiver had insisted all four of them dine there almost every evening since Clara's

arrival. Clara had offered to cook more than once, and every time Logan's mum had found an excuse not to accept. Clara was beginning to think she was afraid she might actually like Clara's cooking and be forced to admit that Xavier wasn't the only person in London who could cook a steak properly.

Vetiver had also decided that Clara ought to sit in a chair and do nothing, ever since Logan had told his parents she was pregnant. Clara hadn't wanted to disclose this until she absolutely had to – to avoid exactly this sort of thing – but as her family knew, she couldn't very well deny him the same information. As far as she was aware, nobody in Port Promise other than her family and Tanika knew about the baby yet, and that was just fine. She wondered now whether she ought to come clean with Betty but was distracted by a call waiting from Logan showing on her screen. She clicked to decline it and messaged him to say she'd phone him right back when she could.

The distraction stopped her in her tracks. She needed to tell Betty about the baby, and she wondered if her friend would be hurt that she hadn't been one of the first to know, but somehow, she couldn't right now. Though she wanted the baby and there was no issue there, in a way, the baby was the reason she'd agreed to try to live in London. She still hadn't figured out how she felt about that.

'Sorry, Clara,' Betty said into the gap. 'I know I phoned you but I've just seen an email come through from my veg supplier and it needs sorting. Can I phone you back?'

'Of course you can. I've got to crack on anyway, so...'

'Speak to you later. Have fun in that there London!'

'Bye, Betty. Thanks for phoning.'

She ended the call and then scrolled for Logan's number. It would be some nonsense his mum had asked him to sort with her – these days it seemed as if that was all he ever phoned for. Clara was sure that wasn't true, but it certainly felt like it. Even more so now that she knew about the baby, because Vetiver seemed hell-bent on having as much influence on the pregnancy and birth as possible. She'd booked a scan at a

private clinic which had confirmed that the baby was healthy and developing how they ought to, though Clara had put her foot down about knowing the sex, insisting she wanted a surprise for her first.

Vetiver seemed convinced it would be a boy, and was already ordering prospectuses for all-boys boarding schools and scrolling through the CVs of nannies stored at online agencies.

Logan thought it was all hilarious and said he couldn't wait to see the look on his mum's face when Clara squared up to her to refuse all of this, but Clara only saw a future conflict she could do without. Still, at least they seemed to like her a bit better these days, though it was probably down to her new status as a potential future prime minister incubator and nothing more.

All of this meant Clara had taken to wandering around the capital during the day, saying she was job hunting, in order to get off Vetiver's radar for a few hours. She'd tried the excuse that she was shopping for furniture or baby products, but that had resulted in her future horror-in-law insisting she ought to accompany her, then taking her to some hideously old-fashioned shops and doing her best to persuade her to buy the ugliest items she'd ever had the misfortune to see. One exclusive wallpaper shop was so bad Clara felt as if she needed an eye bath afterwards to wash away the images.

Christmas was around the corner on the day Clara's wanderings took her back to Tower lifeboat station, the capital full of magical and vibrant illuminations, towering fir trees in every square, the smell of roasting chestnuts from the street vendors, and the shops full of bright window displays. The weather was wet and windy, but it was mild, and the tides of the Thames lapped against the banks of the river as she walked along, dodging out of the way of joggers and tourists and people hurrying to work or appointments or Christmas shopping.

Pregnancy wise, she'd been lucky so far – aside from her one fainting fit and needing some very early nights, she'd been fairly well – none of the raging morning sickness that had

plagued Gaby with Fern. It might yet come, Gaby had warned her, but as the weeks went on it seemed less likely she'd suffer in the same way. And she wasn't yet showing, so she was happy to be able to go about in her usual clothes at the pace she'd always done things. That would change, but she was in no hurry to see it happen.

A group of people were leaving the station as she arrived. They looked like tourists, and she knew they showed members of the public around, but it had never happened at Port Promise in quite such huge numbers. There had to be at least fifteen people. A woman in a blue polo shirt with the familiar lifeboat institute logo was waving them off.

Clara gave the station a closer look. The boats moored there were different, of course, designed for the fast-moving river traffic rather than the open sea. And then her gaze fell on a recruitment poster pinned to a noticeboard outside the station. She'd totally forgotten about the photos Cormac and Ava had been chosen for.

She stared at it, her smile wavering between pride and loss. She missed Port Promise so much already, and seeing them standing by her beloved beach with the station in the background made her feel as if she could leap on the nearest train and go straight back. They looked so good. Ava looked so confident and capable and like the very best version of the sister Clara knew, and Cormac was handsome and dependable, with the face of a man who would arrive on a boat to rescue you, and instantly you'd know you were safe.

As she made for Vetiver and Julian's house, dusk was falling over the city. The crowds were building and soon the underground would be packed. She hated that, but seeing the lifeboat station had been worth the inconvenience of a commute. Not that she wanted to go back there at all, and if she walked in and anyone mentioned Chez Xavier, she was quite sure she'd throw the nearest plant pot at them.

As she was weaving through the crowds, Logan called her.

'Where are you? You've been gone ages.'

‘I’m on my way back now but it’s busy. What’s wrong?’

‘Nothing, I just need you to sign something.’

Clara’s forehead creased. ‘Me? What do I need to sign?’

‘It’s for the estate agents. We both need to sign for the studio to go up for sale.’

Clara stopped dead. Someone shoved her as they hurried past, but she barely noticed.

‘You’ve done that already?’ she asked finally. ‘I thought we’d agreed to wait until we were certain about your grandma’s house? You said we’d go back if we didn’t settle here – how can we do that if we don’t have anywhere to go back to?’

‘We could rent if it comes to that... but we are settling here, aren’t we? I didn’t see the point in dragging it out – the money from the sale could come in handy, and why would we carry on paying a mortgage on somewhere we’re not using?’

‘We could rent it out while we’re not there if that’s your issue.’

‘We could, but it really seems like too much hassle right now. We’ve got a lot going on without landlord responsibilities.’

They were really doing this. By selling the studio, Logan was taking away the safety net he’d promised. But then, maybe she needed that. Maybe if there was no safety net she wouldn’t keep looking for it and she’d be forced to succeed here. Every tiny thread he cut took her further and further from her home and her family, and even if it was necessary, it was still painful.

‘I’ll leave the document on the dresser in the bedroom – you can sign it when you get home.’

‘Leave it on the dresser? Why, where will you be?’

‘Oh, there’s this thing... James and Tom... I said I’d meet them.’

‘So you won’t be in when I get home?’

‘No, that’s why I thought I’d better call you to let you know about this document, so you could do it straight away when you get back. And don’t be too long – Mum is hassling about dinner. She wants to know what time you’ll be ready.’

‘They want me to go to dinner with them without you?’

‘Look, you need to get to know them because you’re going to be having a lot more to do with them from now on. I know they’re not like your mum, but they do care, and they want to be a part of our lives, especially now their first grandchild is on the way. Make an effort, please, for me.’

‘I am making an effort – it’s you who’s not making an effort.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘You’re never around! Ever since we got here you’re doing something at the house or networking or seeing old friends or whatever... I’m lonely, Logan! I hate it here, but I thought as long as I have you I could make it work, but now you’ve got me here and you’re always missing and I have no one.’

‘That’s crazy. You’re feeling extra emotional because—’

‘Don’t! Don’t blame this on my hormones because if you do I might just pack my stuff and go home.’

‘This is your home. I know it’s hard at Mum’s house but it’s not forever. When Grandma’s is ready and we can move in properly we’ll have our own life there and you won’t have to spend so much time with my parents, but until then we need them, and I need you to at least try to get along with them.’

‘I am trying!’

‘Look... I’ll see if I can cut this thing short and I’ll come back and we can talk about it properly. In the meantime, go back and have dinner with my parents, just this once. I’ll figure something out for the future.’

Clara rubbed away a tear. She was sick of crying all the time but that didn’t stop it from happening.

‘Fine; I’ll do it. But don’t you even miss our life in Port Promise a little bit? It felt as if we had loads of

responsibilities, but compared to now it was idyllic, wasn't it? Don't you miss all that freedom, all that space and nature?'

'Honestly? Sorry but I don't. To me, my time there was like a holiday that went on for too long. I felt as if my life had stood still, but now... here there is so much possibility I feel as if I'm finally on track again. Here I can be the man I was always meant to be – I can be someone.'

'You were someone there!'

'No. I was always an outsider.'

'Because you made yourself that person. You made sure you kept a distance from everyone and everything; you never got involved in the community.'

'I did. I did the triathlon in the summer and I went to every single thing for your dad.'

'Those things were token gestures, things you did so you could use them against me, exactly like you've just done. They don't mean anything.'

'I'm not doing this now; I have to go—'

'You never had any intention of coming back with me if I couldn't settle, did you?'

'Clara, I mean it, I don't want to get into this now; there isn't time. I'll talk to you later.'

Logan ended the call. Clara stared at the now dark screen of her phone for a moment before putting it away. It was the last thing she wanted, but she'd told Logan she would go to dinner with his parents and Vetiver would be watching the clock, probably in the hopes that Clara would give her yet another thing to be critical of. Clara wasn't going to give her the satisfaction, so she started to hurry for the nearest underground station.

'Why on earth would you want to do that?'

Vetiver reached for her wine while Julian studied the menu. Clara shrugged, feeling like a child who'd asked the

most stupid question in the world.

While dinner was every bit as excruciating as she'd predicted, at least they weren't in Chez Xavier, and Clara had to be thankful for small mercies. She'd suggested, in fact, when Vetiver announced that Xavier had no tables free, that she cook for Logan's parents, because she liked cooking and she'd never cooked for them and perhaps it would get her some brownie points. But Vetiver had looked horrified at the prospect, told Clara she didn't want to tire her out and had ordered Julian to find another suitable restaurant. So now they were sitting in a dining room that was even stuffier than Xavier's. Clara hadn't imagined it was possible for anywhere to be stuffier than Chez Xavier, but Vetiver and Julian had truly outdone themselves with this place. Not only was it stuffier, but the food was worse, and the food had been the only redeeming feature of Vetiver's favourite restaurant.

'My family has always served on the lifeboats, and after seeing the station today I thought I might be able to offer some time. They always need volunteers and I have time on my hands. I could speak to them about it at least.'

'You're in no condition to do manual labour. You're already so frail I don't know how you're going to get through this pregnancy without dying. There's a lot to be said for confinement, in my opinion.'

'Confinement?' Clara took a sip of her water, choosing not to address Vetiver's death comment.

'Yes, women taking to their beds. Women used to take care of themselves and their unborn children, now it's all going to the gym and drinking until they're sick and expecting the baby to pop out at the end of it all perfectly healthy.'

'Darling, nobody does things that way anymore,' Julian said mildly.

'That's what's wrong with the world now,' Vetiver said tartly.

Despite her situation, Clara tried not to laugh. She often wondered how Logan's mum managed to navigate the real

world when she so clearly belonged in 1882. And she also wondered how Logan had turned out so normally. Then again, he'd been educated away from his parents, so perhaps he had the boarding school to thank for that.

'The work wouldn't be physical at all,' Clara said, trying to keep her face straight.

'I don't think I should allow it,' Vetiver said with a testy shake of her head. 'I've been indulgent ever since you arrived here, allowing all the little eccentricities you've brought from that quaint village of yours, but this time I simply have to voice my opposition to this... plan.'

'But I'd be doing a good thing! It's a public service!'

'Public service is to be undertaken by public servants, not my daughter-in-law.'

'I'm not—' Clara began, but then her phone started to ring.

Vetiver stared at her as if she'd unveiled a hand grenade and was about to pull the pin. 'We do not have our phones at dinner!'

'I'm sorry, I...' Clara glanced at the screen. 'It's my sister. It won't take a second. It might be... Excuse me...'

Clara left the table, clutching her phone as she strode to the exit. Any opportunity to get away from Logan's parents was one she was going to seize gratefully, and especially now, when she was on the verge of saying something she might regret – certainly something that would piss Logan off when he got to hear about it.

'Ava,' she answered as she got outside onto the street. It was noisy, but being on a side street and not a main road it wasn't so bad. She could still hear the panic and worry in her sister's voice at the other end. 'What's wrong?'

'There's been an accident.'

'What kind of accident?'

'Don't get stressed... it's not good for you or the baby.'

'Ava, what kind of accident?'

‘And Elijah is fine—’

‘Elijah! What’s happened to Elijah? Is Gaby OK? Should I come home?’

‘Elijah’s got a broken arm from where he fell. It was lucky... Well, not for Cormac it wasn’t—’

‘What’s Cormac got to do with it?’

‘The car hit Cormac when he pushed Eli out of the way. Clara, I don’t want to stress you out, but it’s not good.’

CHAPTER NINETEEN

‘Where the hell are you?’

‘Not sure... somewhere in Devon.’ Clara held the phone to her ear with one hand and a disposable cup containing tea in the other. It was getting late, and the car park of the services she’d stopped on to answer his numerous missed calls was dark and cold and largely empty, other than a few lorries and a broken-down car being shackled to a tow truck.

‘Mum’s not impressed with you running out on them like that.’

‘I’m sure she’s not.’

‘What’s happened? What’s going on?’

‘Your parents didn’t tell you?’

‘They told me some friend had been hit by a car, but they couldn’t understand why that would need you to drive there tonight.’

‘I wouldn’t expect them to understand. Elijah was involved; I have to be here for Gaby – she’s going to need all the support she can get.’

‘Shit. Is he badly hurt?’

‘Eli? Ava said something about a broken arm, but I don’t know until I get back – Gaby and Killian are at the hospital and I haven’t been able to get hold of them. Mum or Ava will be able to fill me in.’

‘So what’s this got to do with... Who’s this friend my mum mentioned?’

‘Cormac.’

‘How’s he involved?’

‘I’m not sure about that either, only the bit that Ava told me. She says he pushed Elijah out of the way and took the full force of the car. Hit and run – the guy sped off. I think the police are going to put out an appeal.’

‘And is Cormac badly hurt?’

‘I don’t know... Ava thinks so. She hasn’t been allowed to see him and she’s struggling to get much information. I think his parents are on their way over from Ireland, so we might know more when they get here.’

‘OK...’ Logan let out a long sigh. ‘Well, I don’t like the idea of you driving down there in the dark like this, but I can see why, I suppose. Couldn’t you have waited for me?’

‘You’d have come? But I thought... I didn’t think you’d want to.’

‘Listen, turn around and come home and I’ll try to carve out a few days in the schedule next week so we can go—’

‘Next week! I can’t leave it that long! I need to be there, never mind fitting it in the schedule! If you want to come, then I’d love you to be with me, but if you don’t then I’m capable of doing it myself.’

‘It’s not that I don’t want to—’

‘It’s that you don’t think it’s a priority,’ Clara finished for him. ‘Clearly, because if you did you wouldn’t ask me to wait to see if you could free up a couple of days, like you’re scheduling a quote from a carpet fitter or something. I don’t know what I’m going back to, but I know it must be bad or Ava wouldn’t have called me and said the things she did. I have to go back and I can’t wait. It could be... By next week things could be far worse.’

There was a pause. Clara was about to say something else when Logan finally spoke, his voice full of resignation. ‘Be

careful, won't you? And call me when you get there so I know you're safe. You have keys for the flat, don't you?

'Yes, though I might stay with Mum, just to be on hand, you know?'

'If you have keys and you're down there anyway, maybe you'll be able to show people around the studio and the flat. I suppose that might kill two birds with one stone. Shall I tell the agents? You did sign the document, didn't you?'

'No, I didn't sign the document because I had more important things to think about.'

'Couldn't you have done it before dinner?'

'I didn't have time! Does the fact you don't know mean you're not home?'

'I'm... James wanted to carry on drinks at his place, so...'

'Oh, right... Then you'd better get back to your party.'

'It's not like that—'

'Logan, it's fine; I don't really care. And as much as I appreciate your call, I'm fine and I'm perfectly capable of driving home. I'm going to get back on the road now – don't want to take any longer than I have to and the not knowing anything is torture. The sooner I get back the sooner I can find out exactly what's gone on.'

'Right, then... Don't forget to call me when you get there.'

'Yeah.'

Clara ended the call and began to march back to her car. Maybe she wouldn't call, just to teach him a lesson.

Jill wrapped her arms around Clara and held her tight. 'It's so good to have you home.'

'It's good to be home – I only wish it was under better circumstances.'

Clara broke off to study her mum's features. 'How are you? How's everyone? I heard a police appeal for information

on the car that hit Cormac on the radio. I mean, they didn't give his name out, but I guessed it was about Cormac from the information they did give. They said he was in a critical condition.'

'Then you know about as much as we do,' Jill said. 'Thank God for that man, though, because it could have been bad for Elijah. If Cormac hadn't seen the car and shoved him out of the way...'

Jill sniffed back fresh tears. Clara could see she'd shed a lot of them from how swollen her eyes were.

'But Elijah's all right?'

'Some bruises, a broken arm – I'd say that was a lucky escape. But Killian and Gaby are beside themselves. Elijah's home – didn't take too long for the doctors to fix him up, which is something. Of course they're relieved Elijah is OK, but they're both distraught about Cormac. Killian blames himself, says he should have been the one in the firing line.'

'Killian is always going to do that; it's in his nature.'

'Where's Ava?'

'Still at the hospital. She's not sure if she'll be allowed to see him because she's not family but she's going to try, otherwise there's only Betty on her own there.'

'Poor Betty,' Clara said. 'This must have been hard on her.'

'Yes.'

'And Ava's gone over alone?'

'Well, Harry would have gone but he thought it was better to be on standby here in case there's a shout – they're already two people down at the station as it is – three, if you count Killian, who's in no state to go out.'

'He would if his pager went off.'

'Yes, and Gaby's terrified of that happening because he's not thinking as rationally as he usually would be. Was told him

to turn his pager off, but if we know one thing about Killian it's that he won't have done.'

'Probably not,' Clara agreed.

'You look tired,' Jill said. 'I've made a bed up if you want to get some sleep.'

Clara glanced up at the clock. She was exhausted, but most of the night had already gone – she wondered how much point there was trying to sleep when she'd probably be too wired.

'I ought to go and see Gaby,' she said. 'Do you think she'll still be up?'

'I would imagine so. I'll come with you if you're sure you're not too tired.'

'I won't be able to settle. Not until we have some concrete news. Hopefully Ava will be able to find out more soon and we'll know Cormac's condition.'

'Hopefully. Oh, Clara, I don't think we're strong enough to lose someone else, are we? I feel as if this last twelve months has been filled with more pain than any family deserves.'

Clara forced the bleakest of smiles. 'Well, if that's the case, then surely our luck has to turn soon.'

Killian had decided to visit with Clara after all, but he was largely silent during the hour's drive to the hospital. Port Promise was such a small place they were lucky to have even a GP surgery, and there wasn't much else in the way of healthcare. There was a cottage hospital closer, but for the kind of injuries Cormac had sustained – or at least, from what they could gather he'd sustained – something much bigger and more sophisticated was needed.

Clara barely noticed the silence. As the landscape rushed by she knew he'd be doing what she was doing: wondering what they were going to find when they got there, fearful for the worst and not daring to hope for anything else. Ava hadn't been able to give them much to go on other than what a rambling Betty had given her over the phone.

Clara had to wonder, in all honesty, why they were even driving over at all, because it was likely they'd get the same short shrift from the hospital staff as Ava had. Cormac was in ICU and they weren't family and it wasn't possible for them to see him – not while his condition was so perilous. They went, despite this, because there was nothing else to do. The alternative was inaction, sitting around waiting for news and slowly going mad in the process.

It took a while to park when they arrived on site, and then more time to find the right building and the ward, and when they finally got there, despite Killian's best efforts, they were told they couldn't go into his room.

'I could pretend to be his sister,' Clara said helplessly as they left the ward.

'They said only one at a time anyway, and Betty's in there,' Killian replied. 'For now let's find Ava – she said she'd be in the canteen when we got here.'

Clara considered arguing for a moment before deciding Killian was probably right. Perhaps if they went back later Betty could come out and she could go and see Cormac in her place – if Betty was OK with that. Clara could understand why she might not be – in the absence of any family in Port Promise, Betty was probably about the closest thing he had.

'I should probably feed you anyway,' Killian shot her a sideways glance.

'I'm not a budgie who needs her seed tray filling.'

'Yeah? OK, but when was the last time you ate?'

'I don't know... maybe lunchtime.'

'Yesterday?' he asked sharply.

'I haven't been hungry. There have been a lot of things going on and I got in the car to drive home before I had chance to eat dinner last night.'

'Great – that's all I need, you passing out on top of everything else. For God's sake let's get a biscuit in you.'

His tone was terse but Clara didn't let it bother her. He was looking out for her, and Gaby had probably made him promise he would. He'd have done it anyway; like Cormac and like Ava and everyone else who served at the lifeboat station, looking out for others was in their DNA – they couldn't help it.

Clara checked her phone to see if Logan had called or messaged, but there was nothing, and she didn't know how to feel about that.

They found Ava in the canteen, and almost as soon as they'd exchanged heartfelt greetings, Betty arrived. The desperate exhaustion was evident on her face, as was the lack of sleep, but she brightened at the sight of her friend, rushing to hug her.

'Oh my God, it's so good to see you!' she cried.

'You too,' Clara said. 'How are you holding up?'

'I'm not sure. I don't feel as if I'm doing great... I feel so helpless and pointless.'

'Have you been here all night?'

She took a seat at their table. 'There's nobody else, is there?'

'There's us now,' Clara said, reaching across the table for her hand to give a reassuring squeeze. 'We can take a shift or two if the nurses will let us. I'm going to say I'm his sister.'

'They'll probably be OK with that,' Betty said. 'They were fine with me; I told them I was his girlfriend and his parents are on their way over from Ireland. They don't seem to check too thoroughly; I think it's just the numbers they have to keep a lid on.'

Her turn of phrase struck Clara as odd, but it was a vague thought that she soon let go.

'They wouldn't let me in,' Ava said. 'Not at this stage of his care apparently. I should have said I was his sister – didn't think of that.'

‘Is he awake?’ Killian asked.

Betty shook her head. ‘They put him in an induced coma. It’s supposed to help him heal or something.’

‘It sounds as if there might be some swelling on the brain maybe,’ Killian said.

‘He hit his head then?’ Clara asked.

‘When he landed, I would assume,’ Killian said grimly. ‘He went... well, the car threw him quite a way.’

‘Do we know what else is affected?’ Clara asked.

‘It’s easier to ask what’s not affected,’ Betty said.

A sudden chill crept over Clara, even though the canteen was warm. ‘It’s that bad?’

‘Cormac is strong,’ Killian said. ‘He’s fit and he’s healthy, and if anyone can overcome this, he can.’

‘He’s not just strong, he’s like at the peak of fitness,’ Ava added. She forced a smile at Betty. ‘He’s got a head start on most people in this situation. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t up and back at the shack this time tomorrow and wondering what all the fuss was about.’

Killian nodded. ‘Have we heard from Darragh and Sinead? Any idea when they might arrive?’

Betty looked at her watch. ‘Their flight’s arriving any time now and they’re coming straight from the airport at Newquay.’

Clara let out a long breath and the table fell silent.

‘I’ll get coffees,’ Ava said finally.

‘Not for me,’ Clara said. ‘I’m starting to go off it – get me a tea.’

‘And get her some toast,’ Killian added, giving Clara a meaningful look.

‘I’m not hungry—’

‘You may not be, but you have to eat. If not for your sake, then...’

Betty shot a quizzical look at Clara as Ava nodded and went to the counter to order. Clara caught it and wondered why she was keeping her news from Betty, of all people. Perhaps it might even give her the smallest crumb of cheer.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she said.

Betty gave a smile that lit her face only for the briefest instance, a tiny light in the darkness of their current situation. ‘That’s fantastic. I mean, you’re happy, right?’

‘Yes,’ Clara said, her hand going to her belly. Still flat, for now, but she was conscious of the life growing there, as if her baby was somehow projecting its presence into the world already. ‘It’s not how I’d planned to start a family but I’m happy.’

‘I bet Logan is thrilled.’

Clara forced a smile of her own, but it was far less certain and even briefer than Betty’s. She felt sure he was – he’d certainly said so – but she’d never been quite sure he totally understood what fatherhood meant. Maybe that would change in time – when the baby arrived perhaps he’d step up to the plate. But he’d gone about his life, more or less, as if there was nothing more to think of than his immediate future, and he couldn’t continue doing that when the baby came.

And then there were his parents – they had very different ideas on how the baby ought to be raised and Clara couldn’t help but feel that, ultimately, Logan would side with them. It was, after all, how he was raised and so it would seem obvious to do the same. But she’d given it a lot of thought over the weeks since she’d found out, and she was increasingly worried about what was in store. She didn’t want boarding schools and private tutors and nannies and severe dinners at Chez Xavier for her child. She wanted to give her child the wonderful freedom she’d had growing up in Port Promise, surrounded by love, not expectation, to be endlessly curious, to wonder at the natural world and to love the sea in a place where they’d feel safe and she’d feel safe that they were able to express themselves fully.

But Logan had already started the ball rolling on their life in London, and the longer he was there, the more he integrated into it, the further away the prospect of ever getting him back to Port Promise. Being here now, with people who loved her, who pulled together for one of their own, who accepted her for who she was and didn't want to change her, was making her question her decision. She'd started to question it as soon as she'd pulled up at her mum's house, and the question grew stronger and bigger with every minute. She hadn't realised just how unhappy she'd been in London until she'd come home. Not only that, though she tried not to think about it, she had to acknowledge the fact that she'd been convinced they weren't right for each other before she'd found out she was pregnant. She'd wanted to make a go of things for the sake of her baby, but was a child really enough to change what she'd felt about her and Logan? Was a baby enough to fix that?

'I think so,' she said. 'It was a shock for us both.'

'But a nice one?'

'Yes. A lovely one.'

Killian's phone began to ring.

'Gaby,' he said, looking at the screen. 'I'd better nip outside to speak to her – signal's not great in here.'

Clara and Betty watched him go.

'Poor Killian,' Betty said.

'What happened?' Clara asked.

'I'm not sure exactly. Killian and Gaby were on the beach with the kids. I think they were playing football and the ball went off towards that little road that runs near Cormac's shack. And it's crazy, isn't it? Any other time you could have a literal party on that road and wouldn't be bothered by a car the whole time, but this time, when Elijah ran to get the ball, a car came from nowhere. Cormac must have been close by, close enough that he thought he could do something, and he jumped in the way. Managed to knock Elijah out of the path and got hit, and the bastard driver just kept on going.'

'The police will get him,' Clara said.

‘They probably will, but it’s not going to help Cormac now, is it? I’m scared, Clara. I don’t mind admitting I’m scared he’s not going to come out of this.’

‘You must be; it’s only natural when you have such strong feelings for someone. But he’s tough – everyone says so. He will make it, and then you can get back to your lives together and all those wonderful plans you were making.’

Betty glanced at the counter, where Ava was scrolling through her phone as she waited for their food to be ready, and then looked back at Clara. ‘We’re not actually together anymore.’

Clara stared at her, unable to find the words for a moment. ‘What? But you...’

She shrugged. ‘We split the day before the accident. We decided to call it a day and when this all happened... well it seemed like telling people was the last thing to worry about. Crazy, huh? Talk about timing.’

‘And you sat at the hospital all this time?’

‘What else was I going to do? I couldn’t abandon him in his hour of need just because we weren’t together as a couple; he’s still a lovely guy and he’s still a good friend. I have feelings and fond memories for our few weeks together – we had some great dates and we had fun, but it just wasn’t to be.’

‘I don’t understand... I thought it was going well.’

‘It was... well, it was chugging along. And you won’t be the first person to say I must be mad to let him go, but it seemed like the kindest thing to do.’

Clara frowned. ‘Kind? In what way?’

Betty shrugged. ‘He’s not really into me – I could tell. And I came to a huge decision, so it didn’t seem fair to drag things out with Cormac.’

‘What decision?’

Betty’s smile was suddenly brighter and so full of anticipation that Clara had to wonder what could be so exciting.

‘I’m selling up!’

‘What? Selling the cafe? Why would you do that?’

‘Well, you can’t run a cafe if you’re not there, can you?’

Clara stared at her. ‘You’re leaving Port Promise?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘I don’t actually know yet; I only know I’m getting out.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It’s so ironic, isn’t it? While you were devastated at having to leave, I envied you. For years I’ve dreamed about getting out there, living a totally different life, but I was too scared to make the move. All this now, what’s happened to Cormac has only made me more determined... life really is that short, and it can be over in the snap of a finger, there one day and gone the next. I can’t spend mine in a cafe I never wanted in a place that doesn’t excite me. I want to see what else is out there. One day I might decide to come back, but at least I’ll have seen what was worth seeing, and right now, I’m not doing that at all.’

Clara sat back in her seat. ‘Wow. I never saw that coming.’

‘Neither did I. But you have to seize the chance of the life you want, don’t you? I understand that now – even if it’s scary, you have to do it or you’ll spend your life getting older and more bitter about it every day, and then when it’s too late you’ll hate everyone and everything about the life you had just because you were too scared to change it. You must understand that. You have this amazing opportunity now in London and I’m so jealous.’

‘Betty...’ Clara paused. ‘I hate London.’

‘You do? But I thought—’

‘Isn’t that an irony? You want to get out of Port Promise and I want to come back. Before I found out I was pregnant I wanted to call off the wedding. I didn’t want to go to London and I realised Logan and I weren’t right for one another.’

‘Oh my God!’ Betty gave Clara a look of pained sympathy. ‘Oh, Clara! So what are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know. Knowing we have a baby coming changes everything, doesn’t it?’

‘I don’t know about that. I can’t talk from experience, of course, but I’d say you still have to consider what’s best for you both. I think what you decide on is probably best for the baby too in the long run.’

‘That’s not what Logan would say. I’m sure he thinks everything is hunky dory just as it is.’

‘But you have to tell him! When you decided to call it off, was it because you didn’t want to leave Port Promise or because you didn’t love him anymore?’

‘I...’ Clara hesitated. She hadn’t even dared think the truth, let alone say it out loud. ‘I’m not sure. If I was in love, I ought to do anything to make it work, right? But I don’t want to... I’ve just realised it sitting here talking to you. Sitting here now, I feel more strongly than ever that I’m making a huge mistake settling in London and even marrying Logan at all. So what does that say?’

‘Only you know, but if you feel strongly it’s the right thing to do, no matter how hard it will be, you need to tell Logan. You need to sort this out before you fully commit to life in London – it will be much harder to unpick later on.’

‘I know – you’re right as usual. What am I going to do without you?’

‘Goodness only knows,’ Betty said with a smile.

‘But you’re still determined to leave Port Promise? I haven’t given you doubts, have I?’

Betty nodded. ‘I think so. My situation is way different than yours.’

‘So where are you planning to go?’

‘I don’t know yet. I suppose a lot depends on what I can get for the cafe. Maybe I’ll go to London too. Maybe I’ll even spend some time abroad – who knows? I only know I have to

get out and I have to do it now while I still can. I might end up back in Port Promise one day, and that will be fine, as long as I can say I saw some of the world first.'

'Have you told everyone? What does your family have to say about it?'

'I've only told you and Cormac so far. I actually hoped Cormac might want to buy the cafe, but he said he didn't think he could afford it – not alone anyway. He said he was going to do some working out and give it some thought, but... well, I suppose that's not going to happen for a long time now, if it ever happens at all.'

'Was he upset, that you finished things with him?'

'He was lovely about it. I think, and don't tell me I'm imagining it, because I could see the signs, it was a relief that I did it first. I feel as if he'd been wondering how to tell me the same thing. It was nice, but it was never going to be true love.'

Betty stopped talking as she noticed Ava return with a tray full of drinks, toast for Clara and three packs of sandwiches.

'I know you'll say you don't want anything, but I got a sandwich for you,' she said, handing a pack to Betty. 'I bet you've hardly eaten today.'

Betty gave her a grateful smile. 'Thanks. Actually I didn't realise I was hungry until you brought these over.'

'Do you think one of us ought to be with Cormac?' Clara asked. 'In case he wakes up?'

'He won't be woken up yet,' Betty said. 'That's what the nurse told me, which is why I came here for a break. They said it's likely to be later today, or maybe tomorrow.'

'That soon?' Clara took her toast from Ava.

'Yes, they keep it as short as they can when they put someone in a coma. Once the swelling goes down on his brain enough, they'll be able to wake him.'

They looked up as Killian strode back over to the table.

'Everything all right?' Clara asked.

‘Fine at home. Gaby’s still frantic of course, but she’s got Marina and your mum there with her. I’m going to head back soon if it’s OK with you lot. Vas has told Gaby to tell me not to worry – sea’s calm and the forecast is good so the chance of a shout is low – but I still don’t like the idea of being this far away just in case. And if we’re not going to get to see Cormac...’

‘Sure, of course,’ Ava said, and the others nodded agreement. ‘Makes sense as you’re on the boat crew and there aren’t so many of you. Sinead and Darragh will be here soon anyway – there’ll be enough of us to manage here.’

‘Gaby did send me this link too,’ Killian said, getting his phone out and turning it to show them the screen. ‘Vas sent it to her, said it was doing the rounds this morning. He was wondering what he ought to do about it.’

‘And what did Gaby say?’

‘Same as I would have – there’s probably not much we can do about it unless the police see it and decide to step in...’

He tapped on the link and it opened to show a video and a tagline:

Captured on CCTV! Moment hero saves boy from hit-and-run driver!

Clara looked up at the others. ‘I’m not sure I want to watch this. Who on earth recorded it?’

‘There’s a camera on one of the lampposts on the front,’ Ava said. ‘Nobody actually thought it was connected up, but we were wrong.’

‘No idea how this footage got into the public domain, though,’ Killian said grimly. ‘Ought to be a law against this sort of thing.’

‘There probably is,’ Ava said. ‘But since when did laws ever stop people?’

The video had already started playing when Clara looked at Killian’s phone again. There was no sound, only a grainy

image of the road. In the corner of the screen Clara could just make out the edge of the seating area of Cormac's shack. She watched, unable to see the face of the boy but knowing it was Elijah as he ran onto the road, and she watched, her heart almost stopping as the car came into view, and from nowhere, Cormac sprinted into shot and barged Elijah out of the way, sending him flying off the road. Her nephew landed awkwardly and squirmed at the side of the road, but Clara didn't see that. She was transfixed, not wanting to look but unable to stop, as Cormac bounced from the bonnet of the car and flew into the air before landing, feet away, instantly motionless as the car sped off.

'Jesus...,' Ava breathed. 'I can't believe this is being spread all over the internet – it's horrific.'

'I know,' Killian said. 'But at least it exists; it's something for the police to go on, right?'

When Clara looked at Betty, she had tears in her eyes. Clara didn't know what she felt herself, only a deep sense of horror and a strange kind of detachment, as if she couldn't equate the figure she'd seen tossed into the air like a rag with the solid, strong, dependable Cormac she knew.

'We have to try and get that taken down,' Ava said.

'I think Vas is probably on it.' Killian put his phone away and reached for his coffee. 'Thanks for this, Ava.'

'I got you a sandwich too,' she said, pushing the pack towards him.

'Right, thanks. I'll take this with me if it's all the same to you. As soon as I've had this coffee I'll head back.'

He looked at Clara. 'You'll be all right to come back with Ava or Betty later or do you want to come back with me now?'

'I want to try and see Cormac if I can,' Clara said. 'I'm fine here for now – not like I have a job or anything to get to.'

'I suppose not,' Killian said, tipping his cup to his lips and draining it. 'I'm off then. Keep me updated, won't you?'

‘Of course,’ Ava said. She looked at Betty. ‘You could go home for a while, if you like. I know you probably want to be here, but if you need to check on the cafe or anything we’ve got this.’

Betty hesitated. ‘Without sounding callous, I could do with opening up for a few hours.’ She glanced at Clara with a knowing look, perhaps mindful of their recent conversation. ‘I know I wouldn’t be missing a huge amount of trade at this time of year but I’m still losing money I can’t afford to lose.’

‘Nobody would think any worse of you for going to work for a few hours,’ Clara said. ‘Like Ava says, we’ve got this, and I certainly don’t need to be anywhere else. If he wakes and you’re not here, we’ll tell him that you were here in the beginning, all by yourself, when it really mattered.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind about that,’ Betty said. ‘As long as someone is here when he wakes.’

While it was just her and Ava, Clara took the opportunity to try to get in to see Cormac. The ward sister was either too busy to ask or content that she seemed like no trouble, because when she said she wanted to see him there were no awkward questions.

The buzzer went and the door to the ward pinged open. Clara went to the reception desk while Ava waited in the corridor outside, checking her phone and waiting for Cormac’s parents to arrive. A nurse directed her to Cormac’s room.

‘I can’t let you stay long,’ she said, checking a list on her computer. ‘He’s due treatment.’

‘Will they be waking him up?’ Clara asked.

‘I don’t know, but you’ll have to vacate when we ask you.’

Clara nodded and went to find the room. She took a breath, half afraid of what she was about to see and desperate to know all the same, and then pushed the door open.

Everything was perfectly still and perfectly quiet, apart from the clicks and whooshes of the machinery that kept him

breathing while his body couldn't do it for him. The curtains were closed and a lamp was burning in the corner of the room. Clara had been fortunate in her life never to have needed a hospital stay, and she hadn't been in many either, but the smell hit her straight away, of cleaning products and disinfectant and the dry heat from the radiators, and took her back to one of the few visits she'd made as a little girl when her grandfather was dying. She hadn't known he was dying at the time, only that he was ill, but it was the last time she'd ever seen him.

It wasn't the best memory to come flooding back at a time when she was already so full of pessimism, and she tried to push it out of her head.

Cormac was propped on white pillows, and if it wasn't for the visible injuries that made her catch her breath, and for the tubes and pipes attached to him, he might be taking a nap.

She hadn't meant to cry but seeing him like this unleashed a surge of pent-up emotion and she burst into tears as she flopped into a seat next to his bed and took his hand, pressing it to her face. It was so warm and solid, she couldn't quite believe he wasn't pretending and that he'd sit up any moment and laugh that wonderful rich laugh of his and tell her he was only joking.

She sat for a few minutes, simply staring at him while she tried to stop her tears, until a text message came through on her phone. Sniffing hard, she took it out to check. It would probably be Ava, letting her know his parents had arrived. But it wasn't – it was Logan.

What's going on? You didn't call me.

Clara typed a hasty reply.

Sorry, at the hospital. Things are bad. Can't talk right now.

OK, sorry to ask but did you get an email from the agents? They sent you another copy of the agreement

to sign so we can get the studio on the market.

I'll get to it when I can.

Can you do it today? And can you be there this afternoon? They have someone who wants to come and look but they need the agreement first.

Clara scowled and put the phone back in her bag. Sometimes Logan could be so... so... she couldn't think of the phrase she wanted, but she could think of how it made her feel, like he was emotionally colourblind. Her phone beeped again, and she thought about ignoring it but decided not to and took it out to see that this time it was Ava.

Cormac's parents are here. X

Clara looked at Cormac, her eyes filling with tears again. She kissed his hand and then set it back onto the bed before standing up. 'I'll see you later; you've got more important visitors than me waiting.'

CHAPTER TWENTY

Dusk had fallen over the hospital grounds. Clara and Ava had stayed to help out in the best and only way they knew how, by being there for Darragh or Sinead, whoever wasn't sitting with Cormac at that time. Ava had gone into the nearest town to get food that was less expensive and better quality than they had at the canteen for them all, and Clara had taken Sinead outside for some air while Darragh sat with his son, who wasn't yet awake despite their hopes.

The air outside was sharp. There would be a frost later – the haze was already settling onto cars and blurring the orange glow of the lights in the grounds. Christmas wasn't far away now and workers at the hospital had made an effort to cheer the place up a bit with tinsel around the insides of windows and the odd string of lights, but such an uncoordinated effort seemed only to make it all look a bit tragic. Far from cheering her, it made Clara feel worse. What kind of Christmas was this going to be? Perhaps not as bad as the one they'd faced only weeks after losing her dad, but with Cormac close to death and her future in the balance, certainly not the best one she'd ever had.

They took some steps away from the building and Sinead got a pack of cigarettes from her bag.

'I didn't know you smoked,' Clara said as she watched Sinead light one.

'I don't. At least, I haven't for the last twelve years. But my da used to say to me, once a smoker always a smoker – it only takes the right conditions for that craving to kick right in

again. I think that was his way of trying to stop me from even picking up my first cigarette...' She took a long drag and gave Clara a bleak smile. 'Didn't really work out. Nice try though, Da.'

'I suppose you could be forgiven this once,' Clara said.

Sinead looked at her. 'You don't smoke?'

'Never have.'

'Aye, you've the look of someone who's never smoked – clear skin.' She took another pull of her cigarette and then blew out a long plume of smoke.

Clara watched it rise onto the frosty air until it dissipated.

'I'm grateful for all you've done,' she said finally.

'It's only what Cormac would do for any of us.'

'That's true. It's a wonderful trait but also a failing in him – he doesn't know when to step aside. If someone had told him he'd end up here if he jumped in front of that car, he'd have still done it. Sooner or later something like this was going to happen; I'm only surprised it took this long.'

'It's just who he is, right?'

'He's...' Sinead paused, taking another pull on the cigarette as she looked across the car park. 'Did he ever tell you about his cousin?'

'I don't think so.'

'Shane, his name was. Two years younger. Idolised Cormac, he did. That was all fine until Cormac got to seventeen, and then Shane turned into a little nuisance. Cormac wanted to go off with his friends and chat up girls and the like, and Shane was always there, following him around. Until one day, when they were both spending the day at their grandma's house, and she asked Cormac to go out on an errand for her. I don't even remember what it was she wanted, but Cormac didn't want to go because he was meant to be meeting some friend and he'd be late. So he asked Shane to go instead. Shane was made up, of course, because he'd do

anything for Cormac. Our Cormac went on his way and Shane went on the errand.’

Sinead sucked from the last of the cigarette and stubbed it out on the wall. ‘Shane never came back. He was hit by a car in town – hit and run, just like this one. Cormac never got over it. The way he saw it, he might as well have thrown Shane under that car himself. He’d been meant to go on that errand and if he had, he’d have been dead, not Shane. I think everything he’s done since has been him trying to put it right. It’s why he joined the lifeboats, and it’s why he threw your nephew out of the way and took the hit instead. He’d do the same thing every time, no matter how it might end.’

‘Because he’s a hero.’

‘Perhaps. Or perhaps he’s riddled with guilt for something that was never his fault. We tried to tell him it wasn’t his fault, that it was all a twist of fate, that Shane’s time was up, that it was God’s will, but none of it ever made a difference. In Cormac’s head, now and until the day he dies – and God please that it’s many years from now – he killed Shane.’

‘He’s saved people since then. He must feel a little bit like he’s made up for his mistakes.’

‘I don’t know about that. I don’t say this to make you feel guilty, of course, because I know you must be relieved that your nephew is all right. If Cormac were to die—’

‘Don’t say that!’

‘I’m being realistic. If he were to die in that room tonight, he’d go willingly knowing that. He wouldn’t want anyone to feel bad about it, least of all your nephew, which is ironic when you consider he’s carried his own guilt his entire adult life.’ Sinead plunged her hands deep into her pockets. ‘He never was the same boy after Shane died.’

‘He’s still a man you can be proud of,’ Clara said gently.

Sinead nodded. ‘He is. And we are.’ She looked at Clara. ‘I never asked, what happened with you? Last we met, your fella’s grandma had passed. Are you all right? Cormac told us there was a house and you were moving away.’

‘We did,’ Clara said. ‘Logan is in London now, trying to get the house in a state fit for us to live in.’

‘But you’re here.’

‘I got the call and I came straight down. I wanted to be here for Gaby and Killian of course, but Cormac means a lot to me too. I couldn’t stay in London knowing what was going on here. I mean, I’m not doing anything of any use, but I feel better knowing I’m here if anyone needs me.’

‘It’s good of you. Cormac always talked so highly of you and he mentioned you a lot. It’s funny, for a while there...’ She paused and gave a strained and fleeting smile. ‘Doesn’t matter now.’

‘What do you think will happen to the shack?’

‘I suppose it will have to close while he’s recovering.’

‘But it could be months before he’s ready to go back.’

‘It could, but what else can we do?’

‘Will he have to leave? Port Promise, I mean?’

‘Who knows? I’d like him to come home if he’s going to need caring for, but I’m sure he’ll have something to say about that. Money might be a problem if he’s not earning, and then he might have to come home whether he likes it or not. At least until he’s back on his feet... *if* he’s ever back on his feet.’

‘He will be,’ Clara said. ‘I know it.’ And she was struck with a sudden impulse, and without thinking it through at all, she blurted it out. ‘I’ll run the shack!’

Sinead turned to her. ‘You?’

‘Why not? I know what needs to be done; I’ve worked for Cormac before, and I don’t have a job right now. I can keep it running until he’s ready to come back. It’s a perfect solution.’

‘Won’t your man have something to say about it? I thought you’d moved to London.’

‘I have, but we’re hardly settled yet. Logan can carry on with the renovations at the house and I can stay here until

either Cormac is well or we get someone else to run the shack. And then I'll join Logan. By that time—'

Clara stopped. She'd been getting ahead of herself, forgetting one very important detail. She was pregnant. Would she even be able to work at the shack for as long as it took? She might give birth before Cormac was well if things were as bad as they feared. And then what? And she hadn't even considered what Logan might have to say about her plan. At the end of the day, she'd made promises to him too, and perhaps she ought to. She needed to talk to Logan and, despite her dread of the conversation, she needed to do it soon, if only for the practical aspects of the situation. Weddings weren't cheap and a lot of people were already involved, if she was going to call it off...

Oh God! Was she really about to call off the wedding they'd worked so hard to make happen? The wedding that had already cost them so much of the money they barely had? What about poor Logan – he'd be humiliated! Whatever else had happened, he didn't deserve that. And she was having his baby! Could she actually go through with this? She couldn't quite believe it was even going through her mind.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sound of Sinead's phone ringing.

'Hi...'

Clara watched as she listened to the caller, her furrowed brow clearing a little.

'That's good news... I'll be there shortly.'

Putting her phone away, she turned to Clara. 'They think it's time to wake him up.'

'That's brilliant!' Clara said, relief flooding through her.

'It's progress, sure, but I dare say he's not out of the woods yet, not by a long chalk.'

It was only right that Darragh and Sinead would be the ones to stay with Cormac when he first came round, and as Ava had

pointed out, he probably wasn't in much of a state to talk, even if they had tried to visit him. So she drove Clara back to Port Promise for some rest, reminding her that she had another little life to think of other than her own now, and that they'd go back to the hospital the following day if he was up to seeing them.

Clara's mind had been a whirlwind of thoughts as they'd followed the dark, winding roads towards home. The radio was playing quietly in the background, and Ava was quiet too, perhaps occupied by her own thoughts. Logan would have something to say for sure about her staying in Port Promise to run the shack until Cormac was well, but she was already here now and it seemed stupid not to. Besides, being in London was proving next to useless – most days all she was doing was wandering the streets aimlessly or suffering the covert insults of Vetiver. Being here, despite the sadness and desperation of the situation that had brought her back, she felt useful again; she felt like someone who mattered. She could make a huge difference, and if she could save Cormac in her own way, by saving his business, then she wanted to try.

Her phone showed missed calls from Logan. She hadn't returned them, nor had she replied to the last text he'd sent about the sale of the studio. She didn't want to think about any of that now, and if she called him she'd be forced to.

But as they pulled up at Seaspray Cottage, noting that the lights were on, despite the fact it was gone midnight and that Jill would be waiting up for them, Clara's phone began to ring again. Ava watched as Clara took it from her bag and stared at the screen.

'Whoever that is, you don't seem keen to talk to them.'

'It's Logan.'

Ava killed the engine and raised her eyebrows at Clara. 'Don't you think you ought to answer it then?'

'It's going to be about that stupid agent.'

'What agent?'

‘He’s putting the studio on the market and wanted me to show some people around today. But I wasn’t about to rush back for that when there was far more important stuff to think about.’

‘He’s just going to keep phoning, you know,’ Ava said. ‘Until you pick up. I would.’

Clara sighed as the phone stopped ringing and the screen went dark. ‘You’re right. I’ll see Mum first and then I’ll call him back.’

‘You’re doing *what?*’

Clara tried not to let her rising temper get the better of her. It had been a very long and trying couple of days, she was tired, emotional and hormonal, and so, frankly, it was already asking a lot, and Logan’s attitude wasn’t helping.

‘It’s only for a couple of weeks... probably. I’m not doing much in London and you know your mum and dad absolutely hate having me stay with them. There’s no reason for me to come back yet.’

‘No reason? What about me?’

‘You’ll hardly even notice I’m not there, you’ve got so much going on right now. I’m only distracting you anyway.’

‘You’re my fiancée! You ought to be here with me!’

Clara bit off a ragged fingernail and pulled her coat tighter around her. It was cold in her mum’s garden, but it was worth suffering it for the amazing view of the bay. It was dark now, but the lights of the promenade glinted like stars against the black of the night-cloaked hills, and out at sea the dots of the boats moved back and forth.

‘I’m sorry but I’m needed here more.’

‘How the hell can you say that? He’s got plenty of people there! Why can’t Betty run the shack? She’s his girlfriend!’

‘She’s got her own place to run – there’s no way she could manage both,’ Clara said, deciding not to break the news of

Betty and Cormac's break-up to Logan.

'His parents then? Ava doesn't have much on... there must be someone else!'

'And if I'm here then I can show people around the studio all the time, can't I?'

'That's another thing – you made me look like a right dick. I told the agent you'd be there and they said that couple were keen and then you don't show up.'

'I didn't tell you to send them over; I never said I'd be here.'

'You said you'd be back in the afternoon.'

'How could I stick to that? Haven't you been listening to a word I've said? And I thought they weren't coming until I signed the agreement?'

'I had to sign it for you.'

'You did what?'

'I couldn't keep waiting for you, so I did it.'

'You mean you forged my signature?'

'No one is going to check – relax, it's no big deal.'

'You had no right, Logan!'

'What else could I do?'

'You could have had some patience and waited! What would a day more have mattered? There was a man's life hanging in the balance and all you could think about was your stupid buyers!'

'Well, you being there wasn't going to save his life, was it? What was the difference? He's awake now. I don't even know why you have to be there. Why can't you come home?'

'I am home!' Clara snapped. 'That's not home, that's... I don't even know what that is.'

'But we agreed! You agreed to come; I never forced you!'

'You didn't force me, but I certainly felt pressured.'

‘Then why didn’t you say so?’

‘Because I thought we could make it work. I thought it might be different than it’s turned out to be. I thought we might spend so much more time together.’

‘I can’t be home all the time.’

‘I know. And it’s great that you get your social life back and there’s always something to see and something to do and all your friends are there, and I get why you’re happy about that, but what about me? What do I do?’

‘You’ll make your own friends. You can come out and socialise with mine – some of them have girlfriends.’

‘I’m going to have a baby – how am I meant to do that?’

‘Having a baby doesn’t knock your social skills out of your head, does it?’

‘No,’ Clara said, her hackles rising at his sarcasm. ‘But it does stop you from going out.’

‘We’ll get sitters. There are agencies; they’ll have great references—’

‘I don’t want my baby brought up by people with great references! I want my baby to be brought up by a loving family – I want my baby to be surrounded by people who actually care about them and not the pay cheque they’ll get at the end of the month!’

‘What are you trying to say, Clara?’

‘I don’t know— Actually, maybe I do. Maybe you were never ready for a child, and, you know what, that’s fine, really it is. But I don’t have that choice. I’m having one whether I like it or not, and I have a responsibility now. I owe it to this baby to do my best, and if I have to do it on my own, I will.’

‘I don’t believe what I’m hearing! This was supposed to be a conversation about showing some people around the studio and now what? You’re leaving me? Is that what’s happening here? You’re ending it? I don’t understand what you’re saying. I don’t understand what you want from me!’

‘And that’s exactly the problem. I know exactly what you want from me because I listen and I try to see it from your perspective. But you don’t. You haven’t listened to me at all.’

‘Try saying what you mean.’

‘I shouldn’t have to! If you know so little about me then maybe we ought to call the wedding off!’

‘But the baby—’

‘Will have the best life here. Will be loved and cherished and given the most amazing childhood, and won’t be palmed off to the nearest stranger whenever they’re in the way.’

‘That’s not how it will be if you’re here! God, you can be so...’

‘Stupid?’ Clara cut in. ‘Thick? Uneducated? A bumpkin?’

‘I was going for infuriating,’ Logan said coldly.

‘I just need to know – how much do we mean to you?’

‘Everything – you know that!’

‘But not enough to sell your grandma’s house and come back here?’

‘You can’t ask me to give up on my ambitions, surely?’

‘I never would. I never have, even though you never supported mine.’

‘We talked about this – we agreed you could find a restaurant job in London!’

‘But that’s not what my ambition really is, and the fact you don’t know that says everything. I want my own place!’

‘You can have your own place.’

‘Yes, with a baby and a husband’s career to support and Vetiver sticking her oar in – I’m sure that’s going to happen. You know as well as I do that my dreams will fall by the wayside, and I’ll let them because I always give in. But not this time. I love you, Logan, but we don’t want the same things at all. If this week has taught me anything, it’s that life

really is shorter than we think, and far too short to settle for second best.’

‘It’s not second best; it’s a compromise. You’d do it if you love me like you say you do.’

Clara was silent for a moment as she mulled over his words. Perhaps he had a point. For the first time in months, she was struck by a sudden sense of clarity.

‘Perhaps I don’t then,’ she said finally. ‘At least, not enough to give up my life here.’

‘Clara, don’t—’

‘Sorry, Logan, but I think... I think this might be it.’

‘I’ll drive over – we’ll talk.’

‘We do need to talk, but I need some time to think. You pushed me once before when I asked for more time – please don’t do it now.’

‘OK, time to think. And then we’ll get back on track.’

Clara looked out across the bay, and in her head she made the choice. A single life here, with her baby, surrounded by all the people she loved. She pictured herself living it, and she asked herself how it felt. And she felt relief. She felt optimistic and positive. She felt strong and capable and safe in the knowledge she’d have everything and everyone she needed, and she saw so many possibilities. She saw her child growing up, running along the beach, poking about in rock pools, watching the lifeboats launch and hearing stories of the heroic grandfather they’d never met. She saw her child eating fruit from their grandmother’s allotment and fresh fish they’d picked up from Robin, breathing air so clean it was like the world had just been born. She saw her child marvelling at the moods of the sea and learning to live alongside it.

She made the choice and she asked herself if she was happy with it. And her heart answered: yes. And once she’d had that answer, she realised there was no way back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Cormac was smiling when Clara walked into the hospital room. He'd already been moved from the intensive care unit, though his injuries were extensive enough that he still needed specialist care and a ward to support that. But at least he wasn't tubed and wired anymore, apart from a few bits and pieces, and it made him look a whole lot further away from death than he had the first time Clara had visited him. She'd been every day that week, but until now he hadn't seemed well enough to talk about his shack. Today, however, Clara was keen to discuss her proposal.

She'd been over there to poke about, having been given the keys by Sinead, and it had worried her to see it already getting damp from not being used. The ovens needed firing up and the heaters needed to go on and the place needed life put back into it again. Not only that, but Christmas was only a couple of weeks away and she didn't want Cormac to lose all the money that the Boxing Day beach walk might bring him. Everyone in the village would be out on the beach and many from surrounding villages, and after their walk they'd either head to Betty's or to the Spratt. Salty's Chips was never open that day because Nigel wanted to make the most of his Christmas break and, until now, the shack had never been open either, but Clara could see huge potential there that they'd miss if she didn't get the place up and running again. If nothing else convinced Cormac that he ought to accept her help, perhaps that would.

'Are you a sight for sore eyes,' he said.

Clara laughed. 'You say that every time I come.'

‘Well it’s always true. How are you doing?’

Clara sat on the seat next to the bed and showed him a stack of novels she’d brought for him to read. ‘Shouldn’t I be asking you that?’

‘And you got me new books,’ he said. ‘You must be heaven sent after all.’

‘If you’re good I’ll read you a bit to save you holding the book up,’ she said.

‘I’m always good. I can’t be much else in here, can I?’

She laid her hand over his and smiled at him. Physical contact like this had become second nature, and at first Clara had thought it strange that she needed to feel his skin beneath her fingertips in this way. Perhaps the intensity of the situation had brought them close in a way few other friends became close, but it felt so normal and unremarkable now that she’d stopped questioning it.

‘It’s not what the nurses tell me.’

‘Snakes,’ he said, and Clara laughed.

‘Listen, I have a proposition for you.’

‘Look, I’m flattered, Clara, but I don’t think I’m in any state.’

‘Stop it!’ She giggled. ‘I’m being serious!’

‘So am I – have you seen me?’

‘It’s about the shack.’

‘Ah, remind me that I have no money coming in, why don’t you?’

‘I know you don’t, and that’s why I’m going to open it up again.’

‘But I can’t pay you—’

‘That’s a problem for another day. I don’t want paying yet; maybe we can come to some arrangement later, when you’re on your feet. For now, I don’t want you to think about it. I just want you to say you’re OK with me doing it.’

‘I can’t ask you to do that – it’s too much.’

‘How many times have you gone out of your way to help others? Might I remind you that a certain nephew of mine is alive right now because of you? So, for once in your life, let someone else help you.’

‘But what about London? What about Logan – he’ll have something to say, surely? You’ve talked to him about this, haven’t you?’

‘No...’ Clara paused as she took her hand away from his. ‘We...’

It was time to come clean. Clara had kept the news to herself, mostly because she didn’t know how to deal with it yet. With her split from Logan and her pregnancy, it seemed as if she was keeping a lot of secrets these days. The time to say it out loud – the Logan thing, at least – was now, and perhaps doing so would make her finally come to terms with it.

‘Logan and I split up. A few days ago. Sort of. At least, I think we did. There’s a lot... well, we need to talk about stuff, but that’s about the size of it.’

‘Clara, I’m sorry.’

‘No need for you to be sorry!’ She forced a bright smile, even though she wanted to cry. It had been her decision in the end, one that felt right, but that didn’t mean it didn’t still hurt. ‘You didn’t do it.’

‘What happened? I mean, if you don’t want to talk about it, then...’

She shook her head. ‘Nothing really. No big drama anyway. He wants his life in London and I want my life here, and... Well, we’re working it out, but I think we’re both coming to the conclusion that our lives aren’t destined to be together after all.’

She didn’t mention the baby. For now, it was still news she wanted to keep under wraps, especially given the current circumstances, but she also kept it from him because if he knew he’d never let her run the shack for him.

‘So, you see,’ she continued, ‘letting me open the shack will actually be doing me a favour. I don’t have my job at the caravan park now and I have nothing else to do, and I want something to take my mind off things, so...’

‘I can’t ask you to do this for me.’

‘You’re not; I’m asking you to let me.’

‘Wait, does this mean you’re back? You’re staying in Port Promise? For good?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then that’s brilliant!’ he said. ‘I mean... that’s the best news!’

‘Stop trying to change the subject. So, the shack...’

‘Clara...’ He winced as he tried to move. ‘I forget it’s not so easy to be expressive right now,’ he said with a rueful grin. ‘I don’t feel right letting you do this for me, but at the same time I’m learning fast that it won’t matter how many times I say it, you’ll do it anyway. Is that about right?’

‘In a nutshell. So you might as well stop making a fuss. You’ll recover quicker, knowing at least your livelihood is taken care of. You might have to give me a brief overview of the things you do that I don’t know about, numbers for suppliers and that sort of thing, but I’ve done it before, right, so the day-to-day stuff should be simple.’

‘Then can we at least make an agreement that when I’m able to I can somehow give you something for taking it on?’

‘No need. I told you, I’m not doing anything else and I need something to occupy me. What I need from you now is for you to concentrate on getting better.’

She looked at her watch. ‘I probably ought to get going soon – the next visitor shift will be arriving and I don’t want to hog all the time with you for myself. Betty drove over with me – she’s in the canteen having a drink.’

‘She closed up already?’ he asked with a vague frown. ‘What time is it?’

‘Six. But I don’t think the cafe is her number one priority these days.’

He paused, watching her carefully for a moment. ‘So you know?’ he asked. ‘Of course she would have told you.’

‘She told me you’d split up and she’s going to sell the cafe. I wish I had the money to buy it; I’d snap her hand off.’

‘I thought the same. I was even trying to find a way to do it before... well, it’s not going to happen any time soon.’

‘You’re all right? About the Betty thing, I mean?’

‘Yes,’ he said, giving her a strange look. ‘We both felt it was for the best. I’m sad she’s leaving but... well, at least you’re not now, so that’s something. I don’t know what I would have done if both my favourite girls were gone.’

‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she said, reaching for his hand again.

‘How can you be certain of that?’ he asked with that strange look again. What was it? Was there something he wasn’t saying that he wanted to?

‘I’m as certain as I can be. I mean, nobody can know for sure, right?’

She got up and kissed him carefully on the cheek. ‘See you tomorrow? And if you can move your arms to write or record on your phone or something, maybe put together a few pointers for me about the shack. I’m planning to have it open by the end of the week at the latest.’

‘I could do it now—’

‘No, I don’t want you overdoing things, and Betty’s waiting to see you. Tomorrow will be fine.’

A few days later, Cormac’s fish shack was open again. Clara was strangely nervous at first, but she soon realised she needn’t be. Most were thrilled to see it reopen and supportive of what Clara was doing for Cormac, and they were patient customers. Many wanted to pitch in, like Betty, who seemed

keener to run Cormac's place than her own since she'd decided to sell. It was like she'd detached herself from that part of her life already, simply going through the motions at the cafe until she could leave it behind.

Gaby would come down from time to time and pick up an apron, happy to do menial tasks like pot washing and sweeping the floor or whatever else Clara needed. Killian offered his services too, though he and Gaby were even competitive there, trying to outdo each other in the number of plates they could carry at once. Ava would pop by every now and again and think she was being useful but was actually more of a hindrance, and Robin would stop by with a fish delivery already cleaned and filleted so she didn't have to worry about it. As for his bill, he said, he was happy to wait until Cormac was out of hospital and could look at it.

Clara's exhaustion disappeared overnight. She woke every morning now with a new sense of excitement and purpose, and, despite the hard work and her pregnancy, hardly stopped at all. And when she eventually did fall into bed at the end of a day, it felt like an honestly earned tiredness, something that came from a place of fulfilment. In her daydreaming moments she imagined that this place was actually hers, and that she was working to build a bright future for her and her baby, and it made her so happy that even though she knew it wasn't, she was content to live in that moment and enjoy it for as long as it lasted.

The only darkness in her light was Logan. There were still many phone conversations with him that seemed to go round and round. He wavered between acceptance of her decision, wanting her to change her mind, between deciding he'd come back to Port Promise for her and then being resentful and determined to stay in London. In a lot of ways she felt desperately sorry for him, because he seemed to have lost all sight of who he was and what he wanted. They'd agreed they should sell the studio regardless and that Clara was going to find somewhere else to live. Where was a different matter, but they couldn't afford to keep their old place on now that they weren't together. Jill had told Clara she could stay at Seaspray

Cottage for as long as she liked, of course, but even she could see it wasn't a permanent solution.

Sinead and Darragh had been back and forth across the Irish Sea in the weeks of Cormac's hospitalisation. He grew a little better, a little stronger every day, but his injuries were so extensive it was going to take time. They'd caught the driver a few days afterwards, not a local but a man passing through, high on something or other. At least there would be some kind of justice, though it did little to help Cormac in the short term.

Christmas came and went. It was a quiet affair, Clara staying with her mum at Seaspray Cottage and making regular trips to the hospital with Darragh or Sinead, or whoever could spare the time to go.

Logan had told her he'd come to Port Promise to see her, but in the end he hadn't. Clara had to wonder whether this was because he was too angry to face her, whether he'd given up on their relationship, or whether his parents had influenced him. After all, Vetiver was probably throwing a (very refined) party at the thought of finally getting her out of the picture. Not out of Logan's life, of course, because they still had to work out parenting arrangements for when the baby came.

In the end, Clara was relieved not to see him. She was also glad to be doing so much for Cormac – solving his problems (as far as she could remove such huge obstacles) occupied her mind and left her little space to dwell on her own. And she couldn't deny it made her heart swell to see his face light up whenever she walked into his hospital room, like the sun had just risen after a stormy night.

Shortly after Christmas Darragh was finally allowed to bring him back to Port Promise. Some of his nurses had seemed quite put out that he was leaving them, which made Clara tease him endlessly and Cormac hugely embarrassed at the fuss. His parents had wanted to take him back to Ireland for a few weeks, where they could care for him, but Cormac was determined to be living independently in his own house as soon as he was able. He refused to go with them, and so, instead, Sinead decided to stay there with him a while longer and Darragh would return to Ireland to get back to work.

Clara was working at the shack that day. There had been no warning that Cormac was going to be discharged – there had been some discussion but a wait-and-see policy that meant she had no idea he was coming home until he actually turned up at the shack on crutches, moving so slowly and in obvious pain, but beaming as he appeared at the hatch.

‘What’s the soup today?’ he asked.

‘Cormac!’ Clara cried. ‘You’re home!’

‘Thank God!’ he said.

She wanted to rush from the shack and throw her arms around him and hold him so tightly he might never break free, but he seemed so fragile still, so delicate and pale that she resisted the urge. She simply stared at him with a smile so broad and bright it might power the lights that strung the length of the bay.

‘When did you get back?’

‘A couple of hours ago. Ma’s at the house. She wanted to walk down with me, but I need to start doing things for myself, so... well it took a while longer than it used to but here I am.’

‘Here you are...’ She smiled. ‘Right then, grab an apron and get peeling potatoes.’

He let out a warm chuckle. ‘I actually can’t tell you how much I want to do that.’

‘Well it’s good to have ambitions. Sit down... I’ll bring you a cup of tea.’

‘You’re busy—’

‘I’m never too busy for you,’ she said, mirroring words he’d once said to her when she’d needed to hear them. ‘And besides, what are you going to do, sack me for sitting down on the job?’

‘It would be good to sit for a while. Only problem is I might not be able to get back up again.’

Leaving the kettle to boil, she dashed around to the seating area and helped Cormac to settle, while the curious eyes of a couple of customers watched. Had they been local, they'd have known all about Cormac and his heroics and how he'd almost lost his life, but they weren't, and Clara had to wonder what they were making of it all. Cormac clearly didn't feel comfortable being looked after, but he allowed Clara to fuss over him with blankets and heaters anyway. She emerged a few moments later with two mugs of tea.

'I can keep an eye on the hatch from here in case we get any customers,' she said, turning her seat slightly, 'but it's pretty quiet today.'

His approving gaze went to the shack. 'Looks good. I don't mind admitting there were times when I wondered if I'd see it again.' He looked at Clara. 'Or you.'

'I would have visited from London all the time,' Clara said, knowing that wasn't what he'd meant at all but not daring to address it.

'How are you doing since...?'

'The break-up? I'm happy actually – happier than I thought I'd be. I feel as if I've suddenly been set free. I guess it can't have been my path after all, even though I was so convinced of it at the time. I think, secretly, Logan feels the same but he's having a harder time admitting it. But he's got everything he wanted now – the house in London, a brilliant social life, on the cusp of a dazzling career. I'm not envious, because I've got everything I want too... Sort of. I'm glad for him. I hope he makes it work. And I'll still be seeing a lot of him, so we're determined to stay friends.'

Cormac sipped at his tea. 'Why will you be seeing a lot of him?'

Clara paused. She needed to tell him about the baby, and she wouldn't be able to keep it to herself for much longer anyway – she was beginning to show ever so slightly beneath the baggy sweaters she wore for work. But if she said it now he'd insist she quit working for him. He'd be doing it from a place of concern because it was heavy work sometimes and

cold and she was largely working alone, but she loved it so much here she didn't want to give it up. Here she wasn't mulling over a failed engagement and the fact she was back with her mum with no proper job when she ought to be making her way in life. Here, she felt useful and needed and she was right next to her beloved sea, and it didn't matter how cold or windy it got, she was happy.

‘Still a lot of stuff to sort out,’ she said.

‘Can't you do that over the phone? I'm guessing it's hard enough without having to see each other all the time.’

‘We'll work it out; it's not that bad. I think because it's mutual now, we both understand that we have to work together to sort it.’

‘It's a very mature way of looking at it.’

‘No less mature than you and Betty. It's a shame all break-ups can't be like that.’

‘True.’

He took a long breath and put his cup down. ‘Clara...’ he began. ‘I actually came down here because there is something I need to ask you. And it's a bit... well, I don't know how welcome it will be.’

She frowned and put her own cup down.

‘While I've been in the hospital I've had a lot of time to think – more than one man should have in a lifetime, if I'm honest. But I got to looking at my life and where it's going, and... well, I feel as if I've been given a second chance, another go at living. And I want...’

His sentence tailed off as his gaze went to a spot over Clara's shoulder. She looked round to see Gaby, Elijah and Fern coming to the shack. Seeing Cormac, Fern broke into a run, Gaby yelling at her to watch the road, while Elijah, his arm still strapped, walked with his mum. But despite her worry for Fern's safety, when Gaby got to them she was beaming.

‘It’s so good to see you home!’ she said to Cormac, giving him the lightest kiss on the cheek.

‘It’s good to be home,’ Cormac said. He nodded at Elijah. ‘How’s that arm?’

‘It’s OK,’ Elijah said.

‘Sorry I broke it for you.’

Elijah couldn’t help but grin. ‘That’s OK.’ He looked up at his mum and then back at Cormac. ‘Are you better?’

‘Getting there. I liked your cards, by the way,’ he said, smiling at both Elijah and Fern. ‘Cheered me up no end. Got them on the wall in my kitchen now.’

‘What brings you down here?’ Clara asked her sister.

‘Came to see if you wanted a break. I could mind the place for a bit – the kids have got their books so they’re both happy to sit on the benches under the heater for a while.’

‘We want to decorate the shack!’ Fern said. ‘For Christmas!’

Cormac frowned.

Clara laughed lightly. ‘You do know we just had Christmas?’

‘Oh, yeah, this is Fern’s brainwave.’ Gaby held up a carrier bag. ‘As you didn’t get a proper Christmas, Cormac, Fern has decided we should do it again now that you’re home.’

Cormac looked at Fern. ‘Is that so? Well, aren’t I one spoiled old man? I think that’s a brilliant idea.’

‘And,’ Gaby said, ‘now that I have you both here, I wanted to ask about a repeat Christmas lunch. Everyone is coming to our house on Sunday if you’re up for it, Cormac. There’s going to be turkey, carols, a film on the telly we’ve seen twenty times already... the whole works.’

‘Sounds like fun to me,’ Clara said.

Gaby turned to Cormac. ‘I know you have your mum here and she’s more than welcome too.’

‘I’ll talk to my ma, but that sounds amazing. Thank you.’

‘Well,’ Gaby sniffed, ‘it’s the least we could do.’

She set her carrier bag down and went to the door of the shack. ‘So... is that kettle still hot? Might as well have a cup with you before I start on these decorations.’

‘Should be,’ Clara said. ‘And if the kids want something they can grab it from the fridge – I’ll put the money in the till.’

‘I’ll put the money in the till!’ Gaby said, laughing as she went.

Clara watched as all three went inside and then turned to Cormac. ‘They’re so happy to see you. Killian and Gaby were turned inside out by all this. I mean,’ she added quickly, ‘I know you came out worst of all, but they felt so guilty about it.’

‘Wasn’t their fault – I keep saying that,’ Cormac said. He reached for his mug, a flicker of pain darkening his features as he shifted position.

‘You’re uncomfortable?’ Clara asked. ‘You need something – a cushion to lean back on?’

‘No, I’m fine.’

‘Not that I don’t want you here, but maybe you ought to go home and rest. You’re only just out of hospital and it must be tiring getting around on your crutches like that. You’ve done amazingly to be here today.’

‘Aye, maybe you’re right. I’ll stay a few more minutes.’

‘You’d better – Gaby will be furious if you don’t!’

She sipped at her tea. It was lukewarm already, the chill of the wind taking the heat rapidly from it.

‘Do you still want to ask me that thing?’

‘Huh?’

‘Before Gaby and the kids got here you said you’d come down to ask me something. Sounded a bit important.’

‘It’s not,’ he said, the slightest hint of frustration in his features. ‘At least, it will wait.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Killian's paper crown was slipping down his head as he snoozed on the armchair.

'God, what a catch, eh?' Gaby said with a wry smile as she cleared the plate of half-eaten mince pie from his feet. 'I'm the luckiest woman in the world.'

To emphasise her point, he started to snore.

'Let's hope there's no shout tonight,' Ava said. 'He won't be in any state to go.'

Harry grinned at her. And then raised his eyebrows, and suddenly Ava cleared her throat loudly.

'We're um... going to get some air... just to walk off a bit of that pudding...'

Harry leaped up and followed her out of the room.

'Walk, my arse,' Gaby said.

'I'd rather not know,' Clara said absently, her hand resting on her tummy as she lay back on the sofa.

Cormac was on a high-backed chair that Killian had brought through from the dining room but he didn't look comfortable. He'd tried just about every chair they had – armchair, sofa, even a lounge from the garden – and this had been the best of a bad bunch. But he still wriggled and winced and it was plain to see that, even though he denied it, he was struggling. He seemed to have enjoyed his lunch though, and, despite his discomfort had been in high spirits as they all retired to the living room to watch the evening film and drink

sherry and snowballs. Gaby had made an alcohol-free snowball for Clara without anyone else knowing it was different from theirs, but she had accompanied it with a quiet word saying she thought it might be time to tell everyone who didn't yet know about the baby, because she was definitely beginning to show and people might not like being left in the dark.

‘They seem very happy together,’ Sinead said.

‘Ava and Harry? They are,’ Jill replied with a fond smile. ‘They’ve been good for each other too, much better together than they ever were apart.’

Sinead turned to her. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, they’re more grounded as a couple. I think they were both adrift in their own way before. And it was obvious to everyone else that they were crazy about each other but neither of them would admit it. Silly, I call it. What’s the point in that? I knew they’d end up together, but it would have happened a lot faster if they’d been straight with one another. People as a whole ought to be straight with one another when it counts – things would run a lot smoother all round.’

Sinead raised her sherry glass. ‘Amen to that!’

As they talked, Clara suddenly became aware of Cormac watching her, but when she looked he turned away as if he felt guilty about it. But she didn't have time to dwell on it, because a second later her phone began to ring. She reached where she'd left it on the sofa and looked at the screen with a groan.

‘I'd better get this.’

‘Logan?’ Jill asked shrewdly.

Clara nodded. ‘I'll take it in the garden.’

She went outside and closed the door gently. The upstairs windows were open and she could hear the kids playing on their new computer game as she took a seat on a garden bench.

‘Happy New Year!’ Logan said. ‘What are you doing?’

New Year felt like a distant memory now, even though it had only been a couple of weeks ago, but Clara didn't mention

it. 'I'm at Gaby's,' she said. 'Where are you?'

'At my parents'. I miss you.'

'You're drunk,' she said, immediately seeing the signs.

'I know but I want you back! It's a new year, a new start... can't we make a new start too, try again? Whatever you want, I'll do for you...'

'We've talked about this,' she said, with patience that she didn't know she had. 'A million times. You will never be happy here and I'll never be happy there. We could get back together and we'd only end up exactly where we are now somewhere down the line. There's no point in dragging it out.'

To her horror, he began to cry. 'Did you love me? Like ever?'

'You know I did! Logan, I loved you so much... I still love you, but it's not the same. You're the father...' She lowered her voice as she glanced towards the house. 'You'll always be family now; we'll always be connected, but I can't be with you.'

'Have you got another boyfriend?'

'No.'

'Do you want one? Single male, artist, London, good sense of humour?' He'd swung from tears to manic laughter in the space of seconds.

'Stop it, Logan, please. Please don't do this. I've moved on; you have to do the same. Things will be so much easier once you do – for both of us.'

'But... whatever. I just rang to say... never mind.'

'I'll call you soon, I promise; maybe you can come to the next scan with me.'

'I'd like that.'

'Me too. I'm going to ring off now – got a lot of people here.'

'Oh, right. Say hi from me.'

‘Bye, Logan.’

Clara didn’t wait for his reply. He was drunk and there was no point in trying to communicate with him. If he called back she’d just have to ignore it.

Clutching the phone, she looked out towards the starlit bay. It was cold, but it was good to get some air, so she resolved to take advantage of the moment for a bit of peace. She wasn’t stressed by Logan’s calls anymore – she was already over it – but they did make her sad. She wanted him to move on, like she was doing. As she’d said, it would be easier on both of them, and they’d work so much better as parents if they could get past this.

Her thoughts turned to the life she had now. It was far from complete and yet she was happier than she’d been in ages – possibly happier than she’d been since before her dad died. That was more than a year ago, and a year was a long time to feel as if something was missing. Gaby was right – she did need to tell everyone. She hoped Cormac wouldn’t stop her from running the shack any time soon, but he might when he found out about the baby. He would do it because he was Cormac, who always wanted to keep everyone safe. She’d learned so much about him since the accident, and it had started to build a picture in her mind of a man who...

She shook off the thought. Perhaps he *was* the man she’d always been looking for without realising, but what was the point in dwelling on it now? She’d just gone through a messy break-up, she was pregnant and she was still working out who she was. Even if it were a possibility, it wasn’t the time for a new relationship. Besides, he’d enough to worry about.

Throughout lunch they’d shared easy laughter and easier conversation, and when he’d looked at her, she’d felt... she almost knew. He had feelings for her; she was certain of it. And she was now certain, more with every day that passed, that she had feelings for him too. Wasn’t it just typical that there would be an obstacle at every turn? Wasn’t it just typical that the moment she realised her feelings, the possibility of anything with Cormac seemed further away than ever. She

couldn't be with him, not now, and maybe, once he found out about the baby, she'd never be with him.

The back door opened and Clara turned to see Cormac standing in the doorway on his crutches.

'Hmmm. Didn't really think this through,' he said, looking at the step down to the garden.

Clara smiled and went to him. 'Here, let me...'

'No,' he said. 'I can do it – I just need to work it out first.'

She knew better than to push it. If nothing else, Cormac hated being fussed over, and even though he'd been forced to accept quite a lot of it recently, the stronger he got, the less he wanted help. So Clara stepped back to give him space and turned her face to the vista of the bay so he wouldn't feel as if she was scrutinising him.

'Mind if I muscle in on your quiet time out here?' he asked, and when she looked back round he was standing in the garden.

'Of course.' She gestured to the bench. 'Want to sit down?'

'If it's all the same to you, I've had enough sitting down for a while. Everything's seizing up.'

'I know the feeling, and I don't have your excuse.'

He moved to stand beside her. They looked out to the bay together.

'I forget what an amazing view Killian has up here,' he said.

'Me too. One of the best in Port Promise really. Mum's is pretty good too.'

'I don't think I've ever been up there.'

'You should visit one day – the view from Mum's living-room window is stunning. There's no way my parents would have been able to afford a view like that if the house hadn't been handed down to them, and Mum never takes it for granted because she knows it.'

‘How’s it living back there?’

‘Good. It’s not ideal long term, but I’m enjoying it. Feels like a haven, you know, a shelter from all the stuff that’s happened this past few months... more than a year really, when I think about it. Mum’s loving it too; I think she sometimes gets lonely up there.’

‘And Logan... he just called you?’

‘Drunk as a lord,’ Clara said with a rueful smile. ‘He does this when he’s had one too many, but he’ll stop eventually.’

‘You sound certain of that.’

‘I am. He knows deep down we’re not that good for each other.’

‘Do you still love him?’

Clara turned to him. What did she see in his expression? Was it hope? Hopelessness? Fear?

‘Not anymore. But you can’t wipe out three years and an engagement and—’ She stopped herself. She needed to say something about the baby, because it mattered, more and more as time went on.

‘So you won’t get back together?’

‘No. Do you think you might get back together with Betty?’

‘No. We’re mates and we both like it that way. And she’s leaving, so...’

‘Hmm. You thought any more about putting an offer in on the cafe? I think she might sort have been hanging on for you in case you want to.’

‘I might talk to a few people about getting the money together when I’m back to full fitness, but I don’t think I’m in a position to do it right now – I can’t even run the shack yet. What about you? You must have thought about putting an offer in.’

‘Don’t have the money.’

‘But you could get it? A business loan or something?’

She shrugged. ‘It’s not the right time for me either.’

He took a breath. ‘I need to get something off my chest and God help me, if I don’t do it tonight I don’t think I ever will. And I’m terrified of how it might change things because you’ve been my rock since this happened...’ He gestured to his crutches. ‘I don’t want to lose you, and I’m afraid I might when I say this.’

‘You’d never lose me.’

‘Can I remind you of that in another couple of minutes when this is all out?’

‘Cormac... don’t.’

‘You don’t know what I’m going to say.’

‘I think I might, and I don’t think you should.’

‘You don’t feel the same way? But I thought—’

‘It’s not that. If you’re going to say what I think you’re going to say, then I do feel the same way, but it’s not the right... the timing is shit! I can’t even tell you how bad it is, and I don’t want to lose you either, and I’m afraid I will when you find out what I’d be asking of you if I let you say this thing I think you might be about to say.’

‘I don’t care. Clara, if you feel it too then why are we ignoring it?’

‘I’m not ignoring it; I... I can’t do anything about it.’

‘Why not? Is it because of Logan? You just said you weren’t going to—’

‘I’m pregnant.’ She heaved a sigh, almost of relief to finally say it out loud. ‘I’m pregnant with Logan’s baby.’

She looked to the bay and everything seemed to stop as her words echoed on the air. They were silent. That was it – she’d blown it, but what else could she do? Gaby had warned her, everyone had warned her that she ought to come clean sooner and they’d been right, and now he’d be angry that she’d kept it

from him and she'd allowed feelings to grow in them both that they simply wouldn't be able to act on.

She waited for him to go back inside, but he didn't. And when he answered, his voice was soft and calm.

'Clara, I know.'

She turned sharply to him. 'What?'

'I already know about the baby.'

'How?'

'I heard you talking to Gaby in the kitchen... well, it didn't take much working out. I don't care about it. I mean, I care, but it doesn't change the way I feel about you.'

'It should! It will in the future; I know it.'

'It will never change anything. The first time I met you I phoned my ma that night and I said, "I've found her; I've met the girl who's the one." I didn't know who you were, only that you were one of the first people to welcome me and you were... well, my ma laughed. She said I'd better find out a bit more first, and, of course, I found out someone had beaten me to it. Stupid of me to think there wouldn't be anyone else. I had to make do with your friendship, because even that was better than nothing, even that was worth having in my life. And you've been such a good friend to me it's like I already know you, heart and soul. That's why I can say now that I love you. I think I always have.'

'Cormac...' She let out a long sigh. 'I don't know what I'm meant to say to that.'

'Is there any way you could love a gnarly Irishman with more broken bones than whole ones and who isn't really much use to anyone anymore?'

Clara wiped away a tear as she turned to him. 'Maybe I could. But could you love me with my stretch marks and saggy eyes from two hours' sleep and baby sick down my top?'

'I can't think of any sexier image.'

She laughed through her tears. ‘You’re such a liar.’ But then she was serious again. ‘You’d really do this, baby and everything? Even though we’d have Logan in the equation too?’

‘I’d put up with Logan’s sniping across the dinner table when he visits, the sleepless nights and the baby sick and the gossiping when people find out—’

‘Oh, you know they’ll gossip.’

‘—and I’d strap that bairn into a papoose and take him to work—’

‘Sexist – might be a girl.’

‘—and I’ll be happy. Clara, I’ve always wanted a family.’

‘Even someone else’s?’

‘Another biological father doesn’t stop me from caring. And if we call ourselves a family, then surely that’s what we are? Surely it’s only our definition that matters? I want to be with you and I want to be there for you. When the baby comes, it won’t matter to me one bit where he or she started out.’

‘You love me that much?’

‘That’s what I’m saying. And if we have that, we can make everything else work.’

‘You really think so?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Maybe, in my dafter moments.’

He turned to her and leaned in. ‘There’s nothing daft about love. How about it? How about we do this thing? If I’ve learned one thing from the past few weeks, it’s that life’s too short to sit on your hands. And I can’t sit on my hands anyway – it hurts too much.’

Clara’s smile was bright and giddy as he moved closer, so close she could...

She pressed her lips to his and they melted into a kiss.

‘I’ll take that as a yes?’ he whispered.

‘Yes.’

‘I love you, Clara Morrow.’

Lost in his eyes, there was only one answer she could give.
‘I love you too.’

‘Knew it.’

‘Well, trying not to love you was just so exhausting that I gave in.’

‘So we’ve got ourselves a thing going?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Can we go inside and announce it?’

Clara hesitated. ‘Seriously? You want to tell people now?’

‘Why the hell not? I love you and I don’t care who knows it.’

She was thoughtful for a moment, and then her smile returned. ‘Can we do more kissing first?’

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Anything you want.’

In an ideal world, Cormac would have taken her in his arms and swept her off her feet like they did in romance movies. But she was pregnant and he was on crutches, and so she made do with pressing her lips to his once more, her hands in his hair, an explosion of desire burning her up, and as compromises went, it was pretty bloody spectacular.

* * *

If you loved *Second Chances for the Lifeboat Sisters*, you will love the next in the series, [*A Secret for the Lifeboat Sisters*](#), a beautiful and emotional read about losing everything and piecing yourself back together.

[**Get it here!**](#)

A SECRET FOR THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS

THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS BOOK 3

As the sun warms the sand of Port Promise bay and the sea is stained turquoise, Gaby Morrow is about to discover that her life is going to change forever...

As she looks through the window of Thistledown Cottage, her perfect home with its flower-filled garden and views of the sparkling, white-tipped waves, Gaby Morrow should feel like she has it all. She watches her two gorgeous children race down to the golden beach and waves goodbye to her husband Kilian, his chestnut hair tousled as he heads off for another day working on the lifeboats. To her friends and family Gaby's life looks wonderful, but deep down Gaby knows that this is a lie.

Recently Kilian has grown distant, a terrible tragedy at sea causing him to withdraw. Try as she might, Gaby can't get her beloved husband to open up, and she knows Kilian has been lying about where he has been going. Gaby wants to believe she can trust him. But when she discovers that he has been keeping a secret that will change all their lives will she ever be able to feel the same again?

Gaby's sisters rally round in her hour of need and remind her of everything she has that is worth fighting for. But just as she makes her decision, she sees helicopters circling the sea and the call she has dreaded her whole life comes in. Kilian's

rescue mission has gone wrong. Will Gaby's life be turned upside down all over again? And has she only realised what is truly important when it's too late?

A beautiful and emotional read about losing everything and piecing yourself back together. Fans of Nicola May, Jo Bartlett and Jessica Redland will lose their hearts to *A Secret for The Lifeboat Sisters*.

[Get it here!](#)

HEAR MORE FROM TILLY

If you'd like to be kept up to date with Tilly's new releases, you can [sign up here](#) to receive an email when the next book is out!

We promise to only email you when a new book is out, and we won't share your email address with anyone else.

BOOKS BY TILLY TENNANT

THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS SERIES

The Lifeboat Sisters

Second Chances for the Lifeboat Sisters

A Secret for the Lifeboat Sisters

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS SERIES

A Very Vintage Christmas

A Cosy Candlelit Christmas

FROM ITALY WITH LOVE SERIES

Rome is Where the Heart is

A Wedding in Italy

HONEYBOURNE SERIES

The Little Village Bakery

Christmas at the Little Village Bakery

Christmas in Paris

A Home at Cornflower Cottage

The Cafe at Marigold Marina

My Best Friend's Wedding

The Hotel at Honeymoon Station

The Little Orchard on the Lane

The Time of My Life

The Spring of Second Chances

Once Upon a Winter

Cathy's Christmas Kitchen

Worth Waiting For

The Waffle House on the Pier

The Break Up

The Garden on Sparrow Street

Hattie's Home for Broken Hearts

The Mill on Magnolia Lane

The Christmas Wish

The Summer Getaway

The Summer of Secrets

Available in audio

Christmas in Paris (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

A Home at Cornflower Cottage (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Cafe at Marigold Marina (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

My Best Friend's Wedding (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Hotel at Honeymoon Station (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

The Little Orchard on the Lane (available in the [UK](#) and the [US](#))

A LETTER FROM TILLY

I want to say a huge thank you for choosing to read *Second Chances for the Lifeboat Sisters*. If you did enjoy it and want to keep up to date with all my latest releases, just sign up at the following link. Your email address will never be shared and you can unsubscribe at any time.

[Sign up here!](#)

I'm so excited to share this book with you. I can't stress enough how writing it gave me new insight into how incredible the RNLI is and how lucky we are to have it.

I hope you enjoyed *Second Chances for the Lifeboat Sisters* and if you did I would be very grateful if you could write a review. I'd love to hear what you think, and it makes such a difference helping new readers to discover one of my books for the first time.

I love hearing from my readers – you can get in touch on my Facebook page, through Twitter, Goodreads or my website.

Thank you!

Tilly

<https://tillytenant.com>



THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS

THE LIFEBOAT SISTERS BOOK 1

Escape to candy-coloured Seaspray Cottage on the Cornish coast, with its stunning views of honeycomb sand beaches and aquamarine seas, where Ava is about to make a brave new start...

When **Ava Morrow's** beloved father **Jack** is killed on his lifeboat at sea, the Cornish village of Port Promise unites in grief. Jack's twinkling eyes and warm smile are remembered by the whole village, and Ava is determined that he will never be forgotten.

Inspired to follow in her father's footsteps, Ava quits her job and begins to train as a lifeboat volunteer, alongside her best friend **Harry**, who was with Ava's father the night he died. As they work side by side every day, Ava begins to see Harry, with his sea-green eyes and his sandy blonde hair, in a different light. Ava's mother and sisters are worried about Ava's safety and want her to stop, and Harry is the only person who really understands what she needs to do. Still, she pushes her feelings to one side, afraid to risk their friendship.

But when, one summer's evening, Harry reveals a tragic secret about the night that Jack died, Ava's world is turned upside down once more. Will his secret drive her away from him and the new life she loves?

**If you love golden sands and crystal waters, picture-perfect
Cornish villages and books by Jessica Redland, Jo Bartlett
and Nicola May, you will fall in love with this romantic,
heartbreaking read.**

[Get it here!](#)

A VERY VINTAGE CHRISTMAS

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS BOOK 1

The fairy lights are up and shoppers are flooding the snowy seaside promenade. It's going to be a busy month at Forget-Me-Not Vintage, a magical shop with a warm heart where every item has a story to be told.

With bright red hair and an infectious smile, **Dodie** is a hopeless romantic and absolutely one of a kind, just like the pieces in her shop.

When Dodie finds a love letter in the pocket of an old woollen coat, she makes it her mission to deliver it to its rightful owner. Following the address, she manages to persuade the handsome but reluctant new tenant, **Edward**, to help her with her search.

As the story of the letter unfolds, Dodie is there, as always, to pick up the pieces and make things right. **But who will be there for her when her own love story needs a helping hand?**

Is it too much to dream of a happy ending like the ones in the black and white movies she adores?

If you're looking for a sweep-you-off-your-feet romance that will warm you through and through then the door to Forget-Me-Not Vintage is always open. Perfect for fans of Jane Linfoot, Debbie Johnson and Jenny Colgan.

[Get it here!](#)

A COSY CANDLELIT CHRISTMAS

AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS BOOK 2

All Isla wants for Christmas is to be left in peace, but in the Alps there's potential for romance in every snowflake that falls...

It's the week before Christmas and **Isla McCoy** has just received an unexpected gift: a letter announcing she is due a life-changing inheritance, but *only* if she's willing to make peace with the father who abandoned her.

She has absolutely no intention of making amends, but who could resist an all-expenses-paid trip to the French resort of St Martin-de-Belleville?

There she meets smooth-talking **Justin** and nerdy glaciologist **Sebastian**; two very different men, with two very different agendas. Torn between her head and her heart, Isla finds herself utterly lost in a winter wonderland of her own feelings.

Surrounded by twinkling candles and roaring log-fires, Isla's resolve finally begins to melt. But will she learn how to reconnect, not only with a whole new family, but with herself and her heart?

A gorgeously heart-warming festive read to help spark a little romance in those long winter nights. Perfect for fans of Jane Linfoot, Debbie Johnson and Jenny Colgan.

[Get it here!](#)

ROME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

FROM ITALY WITH LOVE BOOK 1

Can a holiday romance ever have a happy ending? Escape with Kate to the sun-drenched city of Rome where a love affair is just about to begin...

When **Kate's** husband **Matt** dumps her on Friday 13th she decides enough is enough – it's time for her to have some fun and so she hops on a plane to Rome. A week of grappa and gelato in pavement cafes under azure blue skies will be just what the doctor ordered.

What she doesn't count on is meeting and falling for sexy policeman **Alessandro**. But the course of true love doesn't run smoothly – Alessandro has five meddling sisters, a fearsome mama and a beautiful ex Orazia. They're all certain that Kate is not the girl for him.

Can Kate and Alessandro's love last the distance? Or will she return home with the one souvenir she doesn't want – a broken heart...

Fall in love with the colourful cafes and the cobbled piazzas of Rome and follow Kate's dreams and her heart in this enchanting escapist read. Perfect for fans of Debbie Johnson and Carol Matthews.

[Get it here!](#)

A WEDDING IN ITALY

FROM ITALY WITH LOVE BOOK 2

Sun, spaghetti and sparkling prosecco. When it comes to finding love, there's no place like Rome...

Kate is living the dream with her gorgeous boyfriend **Alessandro** in his native city, but the reality is sometimes a little less romantic than she'd hoped. Every day in her new home is a fight against leaking pipes, her cantankerous landlord and her less-than-perfect grasp of the Italian lingo.

All around her there is talk of weddings, but when a secret from her past is thrust out into the open, Kate must fight to prove to Alessandro's Mamma – and the rest of his formidable family – that she truly is Italian marriage material.

With the women in Alessandro's life on a mission to break them apart, the cracks begin to show and Kate starts to question if Alessandro really is the man of her dreams. Can love and the city of romance conquer all, or is that just a fairy-tale?

Let Rome steal your heart this summer in this gorgeously romantic escapist read. Perfect for fans of Jo Thomas and Abby Clements.

[Get it here!](#)

THE LITTLE VILLAGE BAKERY

HONEYBOURNE SERIES BOOK 1

Help yourself to a generous slice of Victoria sponge, a perfect cup of tea and a big dollop of romance. Welcome to the Little Village Bakery.

Meet **Millie**. Heartbreak has forced her to make a new start and when she arrives at the old bakery in the little village of Honeybourne she is determined that this will be her home sweet home. Her imagination has been captured by the tumbledown bakery but with no running water and dust everywhere, her cosy idea of making cakes in a rural idyll quickly crumbles.

Luckily the locals are a friendly bunch and step in to help Millie. One in particular, **Dylan**, a laid-back lothario, soon captures her attention.

But just as Millie is beginning to settle in, an unexpected visitor from her past suddenly turns up determined to ruin everything for her. It's time for Millie to face the skeletons in her closet if she's going to live the dream of running her little village bakery, and her blossoming romance with Dylan.

A charming heartwarming novel about love, life and new beginnings perfect for fans of Milly Johnson and Debbie Johnson.

[Get it here!](#)

CHRISTMAS AT THE LITTLE VILLAGE
BAKERY

HONEYBOURNE SERIES BOOK 2

It's time to get toasty by the fire with a glass of mulled wine and a slice of chocolate yule log sprinkled with a little romance. Welcome to Christmas at the Little Village Bakery.

Snow is falling in Honeybourne and **Spencer** is bringing home his American fiancée **Tori** for a traditional English Christmas with all the trimmings. But when his hippie mum and dad meet her high-maintenance parents, sparks of the wrong sort start to fly. Then Spencer bumps into his first love **Jasmine** and unexpected feelings come flooding back.

Millie is run off her feet with Christmas orders at the Little Village Bakery and new baby **Oscar**. Thank goodness her cousin **Darcie** is here to help her. Although she does seem to be rather flirty with Millie's boyfriend **Dylan**.

Will Darcie ever find true love of her own? And is marrying Tori a terrible mistake for Spencer if his heart is with someone else?

A heartwarming Christmassy romantic comedy, perfect for fans of Carole Matthews and Milly Johnson.

[Get it here!](#)

CHRISTMAS IN PARIS

As the snow flutters down on the Eiffel Tower and fairy lights sparkle on the pavement cafés of Paris, meet the girl determined not to fall in love in the most romantic city in the world...

When **Brooke** arrives in Paris at Christmas, it feels like the perfect place to escape after being dumped by her long-term boyfriend. And while her head might be turned by the romance of couples strolling arm in arm along the riverbank, and the air scented with *chocolat chaud*, her heart remains firmly under lock and key – this trip is going to be about *her*.

Brooke might be able to resist the charms of one persuasive Frenchman who takes her to some of Paris's most romantic spots, but when a chance encounter leads her to green-eyed **Armand** with his dark wavy hair and warm smile, she is annoyed to feel her heart skip a beat...

Still, what's the harm of a holiday romance with no strings attached? Brooke is sure she can play it cool. But when Armand opens his heart to her in a candlelit restaurant and kisses her at the top of the Eiffel Tower, she throws caution to the wind. Armand isn't her ex – and doesn't she deserve a second chance at love?

But when Armand begins to blow hot and cold, she wonders if she has been taken for a fool. Why does he never answer his phone? Who is the mysterious tall blonde French woman who always seems to be watching Brooke? And when Armand leaves Paris without warning as Christmas Eve approaches, should Brooke try and find out more about the stranger she has found herself falling for?

A completely gorgeous romantic read that will warm you from head to toe and have you booking a trip to Paris! Fans of Sarah Morgan, Josie Silver and Carole Matthews will be swept away by *Christmas in Paris*.

[Get it here!](#)

A HOME AT CORNFLOWER COTTAGE

Escape to the flower-filled fields and hedgerows of the Cotswold countryside, to a tiny cottage and a summer that could change everything...

Amelie has lived in Cornflower Cottage since she was born. She did her homework at the scrubbed kitchen table and helped her mum hang washing from the line on the old oak tree in the garden. And when her beloved parents died, Cornflower Cottage became Amelie's armour against the world.

The trouble is that Cornflower Cottage is too big for just her. With a broken boiler and a leaking roof, Amelie knows she must do something to make ends meet. When she meets **Xander**, a scruffy, brown-eyed nature documentary maker living out of his backpack in a nearby hotel, Amelie rents him a room, hoping a lodger will solve her problems.

She soon realises that her troubles are only just beginning. Xander's muddy clothes all over the cottage and early morning jaunts to photograph otters are going to take some getting used to. But when an argument turns into a heart-to-heart, she finds herself confessing how lonely she has been.

Before long, laughter echoes round the cosy farmhouse kitchen once more and sparks begin to fly. But when a face from Xander's past appears at Cornflower Cottage Amelie's happy home is shaken once more. Xander has changed Amelie's quiet country life forever. Should she open her heart to someone who has hidden things from her? Or let him leave, and lose the love that makes her house a home?

A completely beautiful romantic comedy about being brave, following your heart and moving on. Fans of Holly Martin, Jessica Redland and Nicola May will be swept away by *A Home at Cornflower Cottage*.

[Get it here!](#)

THE CAFE AT MARIGOLD MARINA

Welcome to the café on Marigold Marina, where the smell of freshly baked cakes fills the air, the boats bob merrily in the mellow evening sun and an unexpected meeting means the chance to love again...

When **Rosie** inherits the café on Marigold Marina after her husband's tragic death, she is determined to pour her heart into his dream. Nine months later, as she serves coffee and cakes to customers, she is all smiles and laughter. But when the sunshine-yellow doors of the café are closed, she allows her heart to break all over again.

Rosie doesn't have much room in her life for anything but the café. But when **Kit**, the owner of a bookshop barge, starts to come by regularly for lunch, she finds it difficult to ignore his dark eyes, dishevelled curls and warm smile. As the pair grow closer, and Kit teaches Rosie how to swim in the sparkling marina waters, Rosie begins to hope that she might get a second chance at happiness.

But just as she is letting herself open her heart for a second time, she discovers the shocking secret that the husband she loved for so many years kept hidden from her. And when Kit disappears when she needs him the most, she closes her café for good and leaves the marina. But has she cut herself off too quickly? Will moving away allow her to move on? Or can she only find true happiness if she learns to trust again?

An absolutely gorgeous and heartwarming read about what can happen when you leave your comfort zone and listen to your heart. Fans of Shari Low, Heidi Swain and

Nicola May will fall in love with *The Cafe at Marigold Marina.*

[Get it here!](#)

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING

Falling snow, sparkling champagne and an ex that Libby would rather forget...

Everything was in place for **Libby's** own wedding day – the ancient church with roses around the door, the frothy white wedding dress of her dreams... That is until her Mr Right, **Rufus**, turned out to be Mr Wrong and dumped her out of the blue. For her cousin.

Six months later, Libby is the chief bridesmaid for her best friend Willow in a Christmas Eve wedding at stately home Lovage Hall. Despite having to wear an enormous fuchsia dress, Libby knows she has to look her best, as the wedding is the first time she will see Rufus again...

As the guests sip champagne at the beautiful reception, and Libby does her best to avoid her ex, the snow outside falls faster and faster, making it impossible for the guests to leave.

Snowed in at Lovage Hall, Libby is charmed by American **Noah** with his dark cropped hair and dimpled cheeks, and the two of them share their dreams and a very passionate kiss.

But when the morning comes, and the snow melts, a shocking revelation about Noah comes to light and Rufus reveals a devastating secret. Can Libby trust her heart to make the right decision for her own happy ending?

A gorgeous, romantic heart-warming read with characters that will find their way into your heart and stay there.

Perfect for fans of Jill Mansell, Shari Low and Jenny Colgan.

[Get it here!](#)

THE HOTEL AT HONEYMOON STATION

Run away to the Dorset countryside, to the sleepy village of Honeymoon, where rose-adorned thatched cottages soak up the sunlight and Emma is risking everything for a brave new start on life and love...

When **Emma's** useless fiancé tells her a lie she cannot forgive, she decides enough is enough. She leaves him, quits her dead-end job and travels hundreds of miles away to the ancient village of Honeymoon in the Dorset countryside, to help her friend Tia turn the old train station into a boutique hotel.

Tia has told Emma that it will be a project, but when Emma arrives in Honeymoon and sees a weed-choked crumbling ruin, her vision of an idyllic life in Dorset begins to disintegrate. But when she meets twinkly-eyed builder Aiden in the village shop, and sparks fly between them, she can't help but feel that the stars have for once aligned.

As work begins on the hotel, Emma and Aiden grow closer, and on sun-dappled evening walks, he tells her the secrets of the village. But there are some villagers who wish that Emma had never arrived in Honeymoon... And when Emma is involved in a terrible accident on site, and then discovers what Aiden has been keeping from her, it feels like the universe is telling her to leave Honeymoon for good. What if she was wrong to say goodbye to all that was safe and familiar? Will she ever be able to find her happy-ever-after in Honeymoon?

A completely gorgeous and romantic read about being brave and taking chances on love and life. Fans of Shari

**Low, Jill Mansell and Milly Johnson will be enchanted
by *The Hotel at Honeymoon Station*.**

[Get it here!](#)

THE LITTLE ORCHARD ON THE LANE

Sip a cold glass of cider on a sunny Somerset terrace, overlooking golden fields and wild meadowland, and watch as romance beckons and long-hidden secrets are revealed...

When **Posy** arrives at picture-perfect Oleander House in the Somerset village of Astercombe, she is enchanted. Adopted when she was just a baby, Posy is excited to re-connect with her birth family. And with bees buzzing in the hedgerows, roses climbing up old stone walls, and patchwork fields as far as the eye can see, she can't help but feel at home.

The sting of being sacked from her job in London quickly disappears as Posy helps out on the cider farm and grows close to her new family. Her life in the city soon seems like a faraway dream, and it feels as if she's been in Astercombe forever.

There's just one tiny problem – her new next-door neighbour, haughty, handsome vineyard-owner **Lachlan**. Lachlan has taken an instant dislike to Posy, and after a furious argument when she ventures on his land, she's pretty certain there's not a heart of gold beneath his frosty exterior.

But when Posy discovers the heartbreaking secret that is tearing Lachlan apart, she understands why he has shut the door on the world and vows to help him, as well as the vineyard, which has fallen on hard times. Yet just as Lachlan lets Posy in, a dangerous accident threatens to destroy everything she has begun to care about. Will her dream life in the country come at a terrible price?

If you love Nicola May, Debbie Macomber and Milly Johnson, then you will adore *The Little Orchard on the Lane*. An enchanting summer romance about new beginnings, second chances and trusting your heart.

[Get it here!](#)

THE TIME OF MY LIFE

She's given up on love. But one little letter might change everything...

Single mum **Bonnie** is a born romantic. But she's been seriously let down by love. Her good-for-nothing husband walked out on her and daughter **Paige** two years ago, and hasn't been heard from since.

Between trying to make ends meet, managing teenage mood swings and the serious lack of eligible bachelors in her small town, Bonnie has all but given up on finding her happily ever after.

Although if real-life romance is in short supply, it doesn't mean Bonnie can't indulge in a harmless imaginary one. She's started writing to her totally unattainable dream man, baring her soul before screwing up the pages and tossing them straight in the trash...

But when fate intervenes and Bonnie actually meets the man she never thought she could have, events take an interesting turn. Envelopes addressed to her start mysteriously arriving on her doorstep. Although Bonnie never sent him any of the letters she wrote, he has now begun writing to her.

Is Bonnie about to discover that dreams really do come true?

A fabulously funny and warm romantic comedy that fans of Josie Silver, Holly Martin and Lindsey Kelk will absolutely love!

[Get it here!](#)

THE SPRING OF SECOND CHANCES

Twenty-seven-year-old Phoebe has spent the last year living under dark clouds. This spring she is determined to embrace blue skies and new beginnings. But will she have the strength to open her heart to love for a second time?

Heartbroken after losing the man she was about to spend the rest of her life with in a tragic accident, **Phoebe** is finally ready to let herself heal and embrace a second chance at happiness.

She's landed her dream job in the toy shop she's loved since she was a girl and when single dad **Jack** brings his five-year-old daughter along to story time, it seems the stars have aligned to bring them together. He's funny, handsome and his devotion to his daughter shows Phoebe he has a heart of gold.

But just when it seems she has everything she's ever wanted, Phoebe discovers the shop is in deep financial trouble. She'll need every bit of creativity and passion she has to save it.

As spring blossoms to summer sunshine, Phoebe works to turn things around, while her feelings for Jack deepen. But after taking the big step of meeting his parents, Phoebe is left questioning everything. They make it clear Phoebe doesn't measure up to Jack's late wife and she can't help but worry that he feels the same. Maybe this wasn't meant to be her second chance after all.

Can Phoebe save the place she loves and the future she's been dreaming of?

An absolutely heart-warming and uplifting story of second chances. Fans of Holly Martin, Sarah Morgan and Heidi Swain will be enchanted by this feel-good read.

[Get it here!](#)

ONCE UPON A WINTER

Hannah loves festive surprises. But the arrival of a handsome stranger on Christmas Day is much more than she bargained for...

Snow is falling heavily on Holly Way. Inside her cottage, **Hannah** is trying to fake some holiday cheer. Freshly dumped, just in time for Christmas, her sister and niece have come to share the day with her and she owes it to them to put a brave face on things.

But as they sit down to open their presents, they are interrupted by a knock at the door.

On their doorstep is a handsome man with a nasty cut on his forehead, no coat, and no memory of who he is or how he came to be there.

Once their unexpected guest is safe by the fire Hannah starts asking him questions to jog his memory. But although she learns nothing about his identity, Hannah can't ignore the warm feeling she gets when he smiles at her. And it has nothing to do with the mulled wine.

When the snow finally melts and spring flowers bloom, will the man who arrived at her door be just a funny story for Hannah to tell next Christmas? Or will he be the key to mending her broken heart?

Let yourself be swept away on a snow flurry of romance, laughter and festive cheer with this delightful story from Tilly Tennant. Fans of Josie Silver, Heidi Swain and Holly Martin will be totally enchanted.

Get it here!

CATHY'S CHRISTMAS KITCHEN

As the snow flutters down in the little village of Linnetford, escape to a cosy farmhouse kitchen, scented with the rich aromas of fruitcake and gingerbread, where a love of baking is about to unite two lonely hearts...

Cathy cooked at her mother's side her whole life and could bake a fairy cake before she could ride a bike. Now she is facing her first Christmas without her beloved mother, she's determined to use her memories for something positive. She decides to organise a weekly cooking class, sharing her mother's precious recipes with other lonely souls.

There's just one small spanner in the works: teenager Tansy, who attends Cathy's classes even though she's rude to everyone there and seems to hate every minute. Cathy is poised to ask Tansy to leave, but her uncle, physiotherapist **Matt**, begs her to give the teenager another chance. And Cathy can't resist Matt's sparkling hazel eyes and incredibly kind heart...

But just as Cathy is feeling she might find joy again, her ex returns to Linnetford, desperate for a second chance. With Matt becoming distant as his life gets more complicated, it seems so easy to return to the safe embrace of someone she knows so well. Can Cathy avoid the temptation of falling back in love with the man who broke her heart and let Christmas bring her the greatest gift – that of happiness?

Filled to the brim with sweet Christmas treats, *Cathy's Christmas Kitchen* is the perfect book to enjoy curled up by

**the fire. An emotional feel-good read packed with heart
and hope.**

[Get it here!](#)

WORTH WAITING FOR

On an ordinary, grey day a little bit of magic is about to happen on a street corner near you...

Ellie Newton's life revolves around telling other people's stories. As a journalist for the *Millrise Echo*, she's always a phone call away from the latest goings-on in her hometown. But school fundraisers and shopping trolley thefts have started to feel slightly, dare she say it, *boring*. Until she hears about a story that definitely has something special.

Ben was heartbroken when his girlfriend **Gemma** walked out on him without a word. But rather than mope around the house and eat his body weight in cookie-dough ice cream, he's decided to do something about it. This calls for a grand gesture, and a bunch of flowers just isn't going to cut it. Ben has set up camp on the street outside Gemma's house and is determined to stay there until she explains why she left and offers him a chance to fix things.

The story has everything Ellie loves – local interest, romance, a rather handsome man – and she decides to do everything she can to help Ben win Gemma back. But as Ellie and Ben join forces to reunite him with the girl of his dreams, could their story lead them somewhere more unexpected, after all?

Previously published as *The Man Who Can't Be Moved*.

A perfectly feel-good romantic read that will move you to laughter and tears. Fans of Josie Silver, Lucy Diamond and Jill Mansell will be totally enchanted by this heart-warming tale.

Get it here!

THE WAFFLE HOUSE ON THE PIER

Run away to Sea Salt Bay, where the sand is warm and soft, the sea is a perfect blue, and a candy-coloured waffle house is about to change Sadie's life...

For as long as she can remember, **Sadie's** grandparents have run the waffle house on the pier at Sea Salt Bay. With its pretty painted chairs, sweet smells, and the warm advice of her beloved grandparents, the waffle house is like a second home.

But when Sadie's grandfather dies, leaving her grandmother without an anchor, Sadie must make a difficult decision. She quits her job and moves back home, determined to keep things going. The trouble is, she knows nothing about running a business, and learning at a million miles an hour with a shop full of hungry people isn't easy. When she nearly burns the waffle house down, she has to admit she needs to get some help.

Her ex-boyfriend **Declan** promises to be there for her but Sadie worries that getting too close is a mistake – especially as he has a new girlfriend now. And anyway she's just met newcomer **Luke**, with his gorgeous suntan and mellow voice...

Sadie's family have always loved Declan and they're not too sure about Luke, leaving Sadie unsure which way to turn. A terrible accident at sea forces her to look into her heart, but what if it's already too late to tell the right man that she loves him?

If you love stolen kisses under the pier, walking along spray-capped shores eating ice cream, and books by Lucy Diamond, Jill Mansell and Jenny Colgan, you will fall in love with this romantic, heart-breaking read.

[Get it here!](#)

THE BREAK UP

What happens when Mr Right goes rogue?

Lara doesn't have a back-up plan. So when her safe-bet boyfriend Lucien dumps her for her best friend, Lara's world implodes. Life after the break up stretches bleakly ahead, lonely evenings on the sofa with only a bottle of wine and her grey cat Fluffy for company...

Down the road, **Theo** loves his job as a jazz musician, giving other people great nights out before coming home in the early hours and unwinding with his loyal cat Satchmo.

What they don't know is that it's the same cat.

And when they find out, standing in the streets in their pyjamas, both on the hunt for their lost pet, sparks of the wrong sort fly.

Lara can't deny that Theo is one of the most gorgeous men she's ever met, but she can see exactly why he's still single. They do say opposites attract... but is she ready to move on? And when Lucien comes back into the picture, will she be tempted back to her life before the break up, or risk everything on the chance of something new?

A wonderfully warm will-they-won't-they romantic read that will have you laughing one minute and crying the next. If you're a fan of Jill Mansell and Carole Matthews, *The Break Up* is the love story you've been waiting for.

[Get it here!](#)

THE GARDEN ON SPARROW STREET

As the cold winter nights draw in, escape to the sleepy town of Wrenwick, where the streets sparkle with snow and a lonely young widow is about to find that true love really can strike twice...

As Christmas cheer fills Sparrow Street with excitement, grieving widow Nina is having a hard time. December is always a difficult month to face without her beloved husband Gray, the days feel long and bleak, and to cap it all, she's just lost her job.

So when Nina hears that Sparrow Street's Community Garden, one of Gray's favourite places, is to be put up for sale she knows she must do something. Filled with purpose, she gathers the residents of Sparrow Street around her to turn the neglected patch of land into a Garden of Memories.

Working with her neighbours, single mum Kelly and eighty-year-old Ada, Nina soon finds that she's not the only lonely soul on Sparrow Street. And as the community comes together and the garden flourishes, Nina can't help but be drawn to Irish gardener Colm with his sparkling blue eyes and kind heart, finding herself confiding in him about all her recent troubles.

But just as Colm and Nina grow closer and he opens up to her about his own secret loss, Colm's estranged wife returns from Scotland, wanting to try again. Nina knows she should let the man she's falling for go – it's the right thing to do. But what if fate has other plans in store? Will the beautiful garden on

Sparrow Street have brought two people together only for
Nina's cautious heart to push them apart?

If you love an uplifting, moving love story, then *The Garden on Sparrow Street* is the perfect romantic read to curl up with on a winter's afternoon. Fans of Josie Silver and Carole Matthews will love this book!

[Get it here!](#)

HATTIE'S HOME FOR BROKEN HEARTS

Escape to the daisy-strewn windswept Dorset cliffs, to the donkey sanctuary at Sweet Briar Farm, where Hattie Rose is about to find, that in this world, the most unlikely. opposites can sometimes attract...

Hattie was once thrilled to call the beautiful city of Paris her home. But when her heart is broken by her boyfriend and she loses her dream job, she bids farewell to the city of love and hurries home to Gillypuddle, a sleepy village on the Dorset coast. But as she returns home she finds her parents struggling to cope with a terrible family tragedy.

In a desperate search for a new start, Hattie takes a job at the donkey sanctuary nearby on Sweet Briar Farm where Jo, the taciturn owner, certainly loves her animals far more than humans. Hattie can't help but fall in love with the donkeys (and the opportunity to get close to dreamy Canadian vet Seth) but Jo is harder to get to know and when she finds her boss sobbing in her sleep one stormy night, she knows that her new friend is hiding a dark secret.

And when handsome newspaper reporter Owen does some digging into Jo's past he finds something that connects her to Hattie on a whole new level. Can Hattie trust what Owen says, especially when he seems intent on standing in the way of her blossoming romance with Seth? And can Hattie help Jo to start healing and the donkeys of Sweet Briar Farm?

A beautiful story that will melt the hardest of hearts. If you love Jenny Colgan, Lucy Diamond and Josie Silver you

**will be enchanted by this life-affirming read that reminds
you that home is wherever the people you love are.**

[Get it here!](#)

THE MILL ON MAGNOLIA LANE

The sky is cornflower blue, the air is scented with the smell of fresh apple blossom and Lizzie Lovell can't wait to start her new life in the mill on Magnolia Lane. But is she just about to fall in love with someone she shouldn't?

When Lizzie loses her larger-than-life Dad she doesn't know how to move forward. Encouraged by a childhood dream she shared with her beloved father, she is determined to continue his legacy and moves to the old Mill on Magnolia lane, a place he had always longed to own.

Restoring the old windmill is a much bigger job than Lizzie bargained for, especially when she is distracted by her new next door neighbour Jude, who has temptingly twinkly eyes and a body to die for. But when Jude's ex- girlfriend Harriet arrives back on the scene, Lizzie begins to wonder if life wasn't far simpler before she moved to the mill. Especially when it emerges that Harriet knows something about Jude's past, something that could shatter her new start and her heart into smithereens...

If your heart is warmed by Jenny Colgan, Lucy Diamond and Josie Silver's *One Day in December*, you'll fall in love with this beautiful feel-good story about finding love when you least expect it.

[Get it here!](#)

THE CHRISTMAS WISH

Lose yourself in this beautiful romantic comedy set in a land of sleigh rides, sparkling starry skies and gingerbread cottages. Perfect for fans of Karen Swan, Katie Fforde and Jill Mansell.

Christmas is coming but it doesn't feel that way for **Esme Greenwood**. Recently jilted by her cheating fiancée **Warren**, she's had enough of London life and escapes to Thimble Cottage in the Peak District, home of her beloved grandmother **Matilda**.

While Esme mourns for the wedding she'll never have, Matilda puts her granddaughter back together again with comforting words and generous helpings of fruitcake and together, they plan the trip of a lifetime, to Lapland to see the northern lights, somewhere Matilda has always dreamt of going.

But tragedy strikes and when Matilda dies, Esme screws up the courage to go on the trip on her own to honour her beloved grandmother's wishes. At the airport she meets a motley crew of characters including Zach, a handsome, brooding, out-of-work actor and together they set off for an adventure.

Beneath the indigo skies of Lapland, Esme and Zach grow closer. But when Esme is bombarded by messages from Warren promising he's changed and she discovers that Zach is hiding something very significant - will her head be turned? And when a trip to the northern lights reveals the full extent of Zach's own secret past, is there any hope that Esme will get the happy ending that her grandmother wished for her?

Get it here!

THE SUMMER GETAWAY

Ashley Moon is all set for a dream holiday with her daughter in the glittering French Riviera. But nothing can prepare her for the shock of discovering who's staying in the villa next door...

Ashley Moon got much more than a suntan on her first ever foreign holiday; one whirlwind romance and nine months later she had a daughter, **Molly**.

Too heart-broken and proud to ever contact the father, Ashley made a decision to go it alone and raise her daughter herself. Fifteen hard and lonely years later, she finally has the chance to take Molly on her first ever holiday; a gorgeous, all-expenses paid trip to the charming French resort of St Raphael.

It is the perfect setting for a week of quality time together; they plan to cycle through the sun-drenched vineyards, lounge by the glistening pool and practice their French on friendly locals. And just when Ashley thought things couldn't get any better, comes the news of a handsome new occupant to the villa next door.

But fate has other plans for Ashley. One look in to her neighbour's dark hazel eyes is all it takes to give her the shock of her life. Standing in front of her is **Haydon**, Molly's long lost father and the holiday fling she thought she'd never see again.

As the temperature on the Cote D'Azur steadily rises and Ashley and Haydon begin spend more and more time together,

will Ashley find the courage to tell him who she is – and more importantly, who Molly is?

A wonderfully heart-warming story of first love and second chances for fans of Jenny Oliver and Lucy Diamond.

[Get it here!](#)

THE SUMMER OF SECRETS

Can new love grow when you dig up old secrets?

Recently engaged, **Harper Woods** wakes up every morning on Silver Hill Farm feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. She has escaped her troubled past, outside the rolling yellow cornfields go on for miles and just downstairs are the gorgeous tea rooms she's always dreamed of owning.

But Harper is about to discover something that will change her luck forever. For better or worse? She has no idea. Not until an expert can identify whether the jewellery she found hidden in the farm's foundations is priceless, or utterly worthless...

As news of the discovery spreads through the village, there are others who'd like to lay their claim to the fortune. In particular, Will Frampton, handsome recluse and Lord of Silver Hill House, the crumbling stately home on the other side of the hill in desperate need of renovation.

It seems everyone wants a piece of the sparkling prize hidden under the Silver Hill tea rooms. **But as relationships are tested and tea cakes begin to fly, will anyone catch the romance blossoming in the most unexpected of places?**

Love and laughter are the biggest reward of them all in this utterly heart-warming romance, perfect for fans of Jane Linfoot, Debbie Johnson and Jenny Colgan.

[Get it here!](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I say this every time I come to write acknowledgements for a new book, but it's true: the list of people who have offered help and encouragement on my writing journey so far really is endless and it would take a novel in itself to mention them all. I'd try to list everyone here regardless, but I know that I'd fail miserably and miss out someone who is really very important. I just want to say that my heartfelt gratitude goes out to each and every one of you, whose involvement, whether small or large, has been invaluable and appreciated more than I can express.

When the idea to write about a family serving on the lifeboats was first discussed with my editor, I admit that I knew very little about the RNLI. I'd seen the stations of course, during holidays up and down the coast, and being from Dorset I knew there was a training centre there which I've driven past many times. I'd donated on occasion too, stuffing a few pounds into a bucket, like many of us, but that was the extent of my involvement. But then I started to write this series and everything changed.

I began to talk to people who volunteered in the service; I watched videos and read accounts of real-life rescues, and through that research I began to understand what truly unique and incredible people those who serve are. They are selfless, unflinching, dedicated, brave and generous. Most answer 'the shout' whether it's day or night, summer or winter, during Christmas lunches or family weddings, whatever they're doing, in all kinds of weathers and sea conditions. There is no question and no complaint – they simply run for the station. Almost all do it without pay or reward, juggling their commitment to the lifeboats with other jobs and their family lives. Their sacrifices are matched only by the sacrifices their families make to enable their efforts. I can't think of any other organisation quite like it. There is no funding for the service

other than charitable donations, and yet, somehow, they keep going.

I'd like to thank the RNLI for their help in writing this book. In particular, the folks at Lytham St Annes, Poole and Aldeburgh. And a very special thanks goes out to Caron Hill at Aldeburgh lifeboat station, who gave so generously of her time and patiently answered all my questions (so many of them!) about life in the service.

If you would like to donate to keep this vital service going, you can go to www.rnli.org and do so there. Not only can you donate, but you can also find out more about what they do and just how important it is.

I also want to mention the many good friends I have made and since kept at Staffordshire University. It's been ten years since I graduated with a degree in English and creative writing but hardly a day goes by when I don't think fondly of my time there.

Nowadays, I have to thank the remarkable team at Bookouture for their continued support, patience and amazing publishing flair, particularly Lydia Vassar-Smith – my incredible and long-suffering editor – Kim Nash, Noelle Holten, Sarah Hardy, Peta Nightingale, Alexandra Holmes and Jessie Botterill. I know I'll have forgotten someone else at Bookouture who I ought to be thanking, but I hope they'll forgive me. Their belief, able assistance and encouragement mean the world to me. I truly believe I have the best team an author could ask for.

My friend, Kath Hickton, always gets an honourable mention for putting up with me since primary school, and Louise Coquio deserves a medal for getting me through university and suffering me ever since, likewise her lovely family. I also have to thank Mel Sherratt, who is as generous with her time and advice as she is talented, someone who is always there to cheer on her fellow authors. She did so much to help me in the early days of my career that I don't think I'll ever be able to thank her as much as she deserves.

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I have to thank all the incredible and dedicated book bloggers (there are so many of you, but you know who you are!) and readers, and anyone else who has championed my work, reviewed it, shared it or simply told me that they liked it. Every one of those actions is priceless, and you are all very special people. Some of you I am even proud to call friends now – and I'm looking at you in particular, Kerry Ann Parsons and Steph Lawrence!

Last but not least, I'd like to give a special mention to my lovely agent Hannah Todd and the incredible team at the Madeleine Milburn Literary, TV & Film Agency, who always have my back.

I have to admit I have a love-hate relationship with my writing. It can be frustrating at times, isolating and thankless, but at the same time I feel like the luckiest woman alive to be doing what I do, and I can't imagine earning my living any other way. It also goes without saying that my family and friends understand better than anyone how much I need space to write, and they love me enough to enable it, even when it puts them out. I have no words to express fully how grateful and blessed that makes me feel.

And before I go, thank you, dear reader. Without you, I wouldn't be writing this, and you have no idea how happy it makes me that I am.



We – both author and publisher – hope you enjoyed this book. We believe that you can become a reader at any time in your life, but we'd love your help to give the next generation a head start.

Did you know that 9% of children don't have a book of their own in their home, rising to 13% in disadvantaged families*? We'd like to try to change that by asking you to consider the role you could play in helping to build readers of the future.

We'd love you to get involved by sharing, borrowing, reading, buying or talking about a book with a child in your life and spreading the love of reading. We want to make sure the next generation continues to have access to books, wherever they come from.

Click [HERE](#) for a list of brilliant books to share with a child – as voted by Goodreads readers.

Thank you.

*As reported by the National Literacy Trust

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