



Love in the Air
at the
Cornish Bakery



Sarah Hope

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Escape To... The Cornish Bakery

Sarah Hope

Published by Sarah Hope, 2022.

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LOVE IN THE AIR AT THE CORNISH BAKERY

First edition. September 26, 2022.

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Acknowledgements

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

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For my children
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Chapter One



Stepping out of the taxi, Nina rummaged in her pocket and passed the money to the driver. ‘Thanks.’
‘No problem.’

As the taxi rumbled across the cobbles, Nina looked up at the building in front of her—The Cornish Bay Bakery. It was bigger than she’d envisioned. Double-fronted and they made wedding cakes. Flinging her rucksack over her shoulder, she stepped forward, peering into the window and reading the text beneath shiny photographs of happy couples—it was a wedding planning business, too. Definitely not what she’d been expecting. Still, it looked nice.

Taking a deep breath, Nina knocked on the door. She’d known it would be closed at this time. She was just hoping someone would be in. Cupping her hands around her eyes, she peered through the window; she couldn’t see anyone. Stepping back, she looked up. It looked as though there was a flat above the bakery. She’d just have to knock louder, try to get their attention.

She shifted her rucksack higher on her shoulder. The flat looked as closed up as the bakery itself; she couldn’t see any lights on or windows open. Still, it would be worth a try knocking again.

Nope. Nothing. Elsie, the bakery owner, must be out. Shoving her hands in her pockets, Nina looked up and down the cobbled street. It was her own fault. She wasn’t supposed to be coming until tomorrow morning, but when Steph, a friend of her brother’s, had offered her a lift to Trestow, she’d jumped at the chance to save a few pounds on the train ticket. She rolled her eyes. That had been a mistake. What she hadn’t known was that for some reason there had been no buses from Trestow to Penworth Bay this late, so what she’d saved on a train ticket, she’d spent on a taxi fare.

She glanced across at the ocean. Would she get a sea view window in the flat above the bakery? She hoped so. It had been so long since she’d come to the beach. Too long.

What should she do? Sit on the beach and wait until Elsie, or someone, came back? Or find somewhere to sit? She looked up and down the street. The café next door to the bakery was closed, but there was a building at the far end of the bay. She squinted. She couldn’t make out what it was, but it

looked as though there was a car park. It might be a pub or a restaurant or something. If so, there was a good chance it would be open.

Taking another look at the bakery, she began walking across the cobbles towards the building.

As she got closer, she sighed. There were no lights on there, either. Was everywhere in the bay closed today? She could hear something, though. Voices. Walking across to the low wall, she peered down at the beach below. Someone was having a good time; people were lounged across the sand beneath her, relaxing on picnic rugs or chatting in clusters. It even looked as though there was a BBQ set up. She smiled.

Sinking to the top step, Nina pulled her rucksack onto her lap. Where had she put that envelope? After checking the many zipped pockets inside, she pulled the well-read and well-worn envelope out and smoothed it over her knees.

She ran the pad of her forefinger over her gran's name, Nancy Archer. Judging by the condition of the paper, her gran must have read the letter a million times. The softened corners and the way the ink had begun to bleed into the folds were telltale signs her gran had perused the words time and time again.

Looking up, Nina focused on the lighthouse at the end of the beach. He could be in there now. Her gran had only received the letter a couple of weeks ago, so he must still live there. Would he want to see her, Nina, though? It was her gran who he had sent the letter to, not her. Still, she had a message to give him, a promise from her gran to fulfil and after everything her gran had done for her, passing on one message was the least she could do, even one this important.

'Hi, is everything okay? I'm afraid the restaurant is closed tonight.'

Jerking her head towards the voice, she watched as a man and a woman came up the steps towards her. 'Oh, hi. Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude.' The woman glanced across in the direction of the BBQ. How hadn't she noticed them coming? She shook her head; she must have been too engrossed in re-reading the letter. 'I was just biding some time.'

'It's okay, you're not intruding.' The man held out his hand. 'I've not seen you about here before. I'm Simon Groves and this is Jessie Bentley.' He nodded towards the woman next to him.

'Hi, Nina Wheat. I've only just arrived. I've come down to work at the bakery over there...' She nodded behind her. 'But no one's in, so I thought I'd

have a wander around. I'm a day early, so they're not expecting me yet.'

'Oh, you're the new volunteer?' Jessie grinned. 'I've literally just finished volunteering there. Elsie, who owns the bakery, is down here.' Jessie nodded in the direction of the group on the beach. 'Come on down and we can introduce you.'

Nina glanced towards the group. She couldn't go down there. They looked as though they were celebrating something; it wasn't her place to interrupt. 'Oh no, don't worry. I'll be okay. I'll just wait until she heads back.'

'Elsie would never forgive us if we left you up here waiting.' Simon chuckled and held out his hand for her.

'Well, I...' Nina sighed. She supposed she'd have to meet them at some point. Slipping the envelope back into her rucksack, she took Simon's hand and let him help her up.

'I know there're a lot of people here, but they're all part of Elsie's bakery family and so you'd likely be meeting them, anyway.' Jessie grinned as she led the way across the sand. 'We'll go and say hi to Elsie first.'

Gripping the strap of her rucksack, Nina swallowed. She'd never been great at socialising, especially with people she didn't know. 'Okay.'

'Here she is.' Jessie paused beside a woman filling a mug from a slow cooker sitting on a table on the sand. 'Elsie.'

Turning, Elsie smiled. 'Are you all right there, Jessie, love?'

'We've just run into Nina, here. She's the new volunteer.'

'Oh, evening, Nina. How are you?' Placing her mug on the table, Elsie pulled Nina in for a quick hug.

'I'm really sorry to just drop by like this. I was supposed to be coming tomorrow but...' Nina clasped her hands in front of her.

'Don't worry about that.' Elsie waved her apology away. 'It's lovely to have you here. A day early or not. Now, let's get you one of Daisy's hot chocolates before we introduce you to everyone.'

'That'll be nice, thanks.' Nodding, Nina watched as Elsie picked up a mug and lifted the lid on one of the slow cookers, a comforting rich chocolate aroma suddenly filling the air. Taking the mug, she sipped the warm liquid, savouring the taste in her mouth before swallowing. 'Thank you. That's delicious.'

'It's Daisy's recipe.' Grinning, Elsie picked up her own mug before leading the way towards the nearest cluster of people chatting and laughing

together. As they neared, the conversation lulled, and people turned to them. 'I'd like you all to meet Nina. She'll be volunteering in the bakery for the next few weeks.'

'Lovely to meet you, Nina. I'm Daisy and this is my husband, Ollie.' Stepping forward, Daisy touched her forearm.

Nina nodded and raised her mug. 'Good to meet you both and thank you for the hot chocolate. It's delicious.'

'You're welcome. Glad you like it.' Daisy grinned and turned to another couple. 'This is Olivia and Scott.'

'Hi, nice to meet you.' Nina waved.

'Great to meet you, too.'

'I'm Ian. Don't worry, love. We won't expect you to remember all our names. Elsie's bakery family is pretty big.' Ian chuckled and waved a couple towards him. 'Talking of which, here are two more, my beautiful granddaughter Brooke and her partner, Max.'

'Thank you.' Nina frowned. Ian? No, it couldn't be the Ian from her gran's letter. She glanced across at the lighthouse. Could it? And Brooke. The letter had spoken of Brooke, Ian's granddaughter, her gran's granddaughter, her cousin. Was it them? 'Good to meet you.'

'Come on, love. Let's go and meet the others. Most of our volunteers meet everyone in dribs and drabs, but this way you'll have got all the introductions done and dusted in one evening.' Linking arms, Elsie led the way across the beach to a group of people sitting and lounging on picnic rugs.

Looking over her shoulder, Nina watched as Ian began refilling Brooke and Max's mugs. It would be a massive coincidence if it was them. If she'd literally just met them on her first evening in Penworth Bay.

'Are you okay, love?' Elsie patted her arm. 'Have you eaten? We can pop something on the BBQ for you.'

'No, I'm fine, thanks. I had something on the way down here.' Nina swallowed as her stomach grumbled. The packet of crisps she'd shared with Steph felt like a long time ago now, but she was already putting these people out. She couldn't very well demand food, too.

Chapter Two



Opening her eyes, Nina focused on the bedroom door. Had she heard something? Yes, a quiet clicking. The clicking of a door. The muffled sound as someone tried their best to keep quiet, to not disturb anyone. Bile stung the back of her throat, the familiar feeling of helplessness and terror filling her body. She forced herself to sit up, to take the bottle of hairspray she now kept by her as she slept. The bottle of hairspray she wished she'd had that night. The bottle of hairspray she'd always keep by her side from now on.

Flinging the duvet to one side, Nina took a deep breath and stood up. She wouldn't feel like this again. She wouldn't let Elsie get burgled. Not after she'd welcomed her into her home so warmly. No, she couldn't.

With her knuckles white from her tight grip around the can of hairspray, Nina tiptoed out into the hallway. As she made her way to the stairs leading down to the bakery, she tried to push all thoughts and memories away. It was different this time. Back home, she hadn't been prepared. She hadn't even thought to pick up something to defend herself.

At the bottom of the stairs, she placed her hand on the door handle. It was cool beneath her clammy skin. Keeping her eyes fixed in front of her and her index finger hovering over the trigger on the can, she pushed it down and peered out into the bakery. The light from the hallway she was standing in illuminated the dark bakery, shadows dancing across the counters and floor tiles.

Squinting into the dim light, Nina glanced around. Almost as soon as she spotted a sliver of light escaping the bottom of the kitchen door, quiet voices seeped through into the bakery. Two people were chatting and laughing in the kitchen. Voices she recognised. Elsie's voice was definitely one of them. The other belonged to someone else she'd met yesterday evening on the beach. She could picture her face, but the name escaped her—Tina? Teresa? Tracy?

Everything was okay. She should have realised that Elsie would get up this early. The deep shelves beneath the bakery counter weren't going to fill themselves. Of course, a lot of prep work was involved before the bakery could even open.

Closing the door quietly behind her, Nina sank to the bottom step, lowering the can of hairspray onto the carpet next to her. Claspng her hands in her lap, she willed them to stop shaking and leaned her head against the brightly coloured wallpaper, the parrots peeking out from behind large, luscious green leaves as if wondering what she had been thinking. Wondering what had led her to react the way she had.

Staring at the wall, she locked eyes with the parrot closest to her and whispered, 'Please don't judge me.'

What was she doing? Talking to a wallpaper parrot? She laughed, a low, quiet noise escaping her throat. Was this how she was going to be from now on? Sleep-deprived and waking at the slightest sound? Always jumping to the worst possible conclusion?

Ducking her head down, she raked her fingers through her unbrushed hair, forcing them through the knots last night's sea breeze has gifted her. Her gran's advice to be gentle with herself resonated in her ears. How could she, though? Other people continued with their lives, other people didn't let one person control their thoughts and feelings months after the incident. Why couldn't she just move on? Why was it always there, pushing its way from the back of her mind to the front? Why couldn't she just get over the fact that she'd been burgled?

She shook her head. She couldn't. she'd tried. She'd tried every day since to fall asleep, to sleep through the night. But she just couldn't. Her job was on the line and if she lost her job, everything else would go too. She'd come to Penworth Bay to pass on a message, but in truth, it was an attempt to get her life back in order again too.

Nina traced the silhouette of the parrot's wings. Ever since her gran had received Ian's letter, she'd spoken fondly of this bay, the magic it held and of the memories of that summer—the last summer of her youth, as her gran described it. It was strange how much of a hold this place had on her gran; she could see why, even having only just arrived, there was just something about the place, the people. What was strange though was the fact her gran hadn't spoken of it until now. She'd kept the fact that she'd had another daughter—Nina's aunt—secret. She had kept her short relationship with Ian secret, had never spoken of Penworth Bay until the letter had arrived on her doormat.

Nina understood why. Her gran had explained the circumstances, explained that the only way she'd been able to cope had been to push all

thoughts of the child she'd given up to the back of her mind, under lock and key, as she'd described. Nina swallowed. She'd only ever seen her gran cry twice in her life, once when Nina's mum had passed away and once when her gran had video called Nina to ask her to do this for her, to tell Nina the contents of the letter Nina had forwarded to her and her gran had sent back.

This trip to Penworth Bay would hopefully benefit both her and her gran. Her gran would hopefully be able to finally make some sort of peace with the decision she'd been forced to make years ago, and Nina would have a bit of time away from home, the house she'd grown up in, the house her gran had grown up in, the house that was supposed to be full of happy memories, to be her safety net, her refuge. She ran her hand across the carpet. She didn't want to think about that night. She didn't want to replay the events that led to her feeling like this.

Standing up, she picked up the can of hairspray and climbed the stairs. It was early, but she was awake now and getting ready and helping Elsie with the baking certainly appealed to her more than the thought of lying in the bedroom staring at the ceiling for more two hours.

Chapter Three



‘That will be four pounds and eighty pence please.’ Nina passed across the bulging paper bag of rolls to the customer in front of her.

‘Thank you, dear. Have a lovely afternoon.’ The woman counted the change onto the counter and picked up her bag.

‘You too.’ Smiling, Nina picked up the coins and slipped them into the till.

‘How’s it going?’

Looking up, Nina smiled at Brooke. ‘Good, I think. The customers have all been really lovely, even though I keep messing up their orders.’

‘Don’t worry about that. It’ll take a bit of getting used to, that’s all.’

Nina nodded. Were they related? Nina swore Brooke’s eyes reminded her of her gran’s. Or was she just jumping to conclusions? Was her mind playing tricks on her? She cleared her throat. There was only one way to find out.

‘So, you... umm... you’re Ian’s granddaughter? And Ian is Elsie’s fiancé, right?’

‘Yes, that’s right. It’s crazy, though. I only found out Ian was my grandad a couple of months ago.’

‘Really?’ Nina ran her index finger across the edge of the counter. It *was* her. Brooke was her cousin. She must be. Ian had written in his letter to her gran that Brooke hadn’t known her mum had been adopted until recently. That would explain why she’d only found out she was Ian’s granddaughter a couple of months ago.

‘Are you okay? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.’ Brooke touched Nina’s forearm.

Looking down at Brooke’s hand on her arm, Nina blinked. They were cousins. Should she say something now? Should she tell Brooke? Right now? Or wait until she’d spoken to Ian? She hadn’t expected to meet Brooke, not yet anyway. She hadn’t planned for this. ‘Sorry, yes, I’m fine, thanks. It’s just been a long morning, that’s all.’

‘We should get a bit of a lull now before the lunchtime rush starts.’ Diane waved to her customer before picking up a cloth and wiping the counter

down. 'And as if on cue...' Laughing, Diane nodded towards Teresa, making her way towards the counter carrying a trayful of coffee mugs.

'Thought you could do with a little caffeine.' Grinning, Teresa placed the tray at the end of the counter and began passing the mugs around.

'Ooh, thank you.' Brooke grinned and wrapped her hands around her mug.

'Thank you.' Taking the mug Teresa offered her, Nina took a sip, the bitter, woody taste of a good coffee hitting the back of her throat.

'I hope that's okay. I wasn't sure how you took your coffee.' Teresa nodded towards Nina's mug.

'It's just right. Thanks.' Lowering her mug, Nina smiled.

'Good. I know most people aren't fussy, but believe me, it took me a week to get Diane's right.' Looking across at Diane, Teresa laughed.

'Although that's only because she has her coffee really weird.'

'Oi! Whose coffee are you calling weird?'

'Ha-ha, yours. Most people would agree with me that having half a teaspoon of coffee and two of sugar is weird. It's more of a warm sugary water mix than coffee.' Teresa pulled a face.

'Umm, I'm sure it's perfectly normal.' Diane laughed.

'For you, yes.' Grinning, Teresa patted Diane on the hand. 'Sorry, I shouldn't tease you.'

'No, you shouldn't, but I still love you.' Diane blew her a kiss before turning back to the counter as another customer walked through the door.

'Love you, too.' Picking up the empty tray, Teresa weaved her way through the tables back towards the coffee and cake counter, which stood at the back of the area between the bakery counter and the wedding planning counter opposite.

Nina took a final sip of her coffee as she squinted at the photographs above the wedding counter. 'Is that the restaurant on the beachfront?'

'In that photo?' Brooke followed Nina's gaze. 'Yes, it's called Baywater Delights. Daisy and Ollie opened it a few months ago. They hire it out as a wedding venue.'

'Oh, right?' Nina nodded. 'Is it Molly and Wendy who plan the weddings? Sorry, there were so many people at the BBQ yesterday. I'm probably getting everyone's names wrong.'

'No, you're right. Yes, Molly and Wendy are the wedding planners and Wendy also bakes and decorates the wedding cakes.'

‘Oh wow, those on display?’ Before helping Elsie and Teresa in the kitchen earlier, Nina had looked around the bakery, trying to familiarise herself with everything. The wedding cakes and cupcake favours on display behind the glass of the wedding counter were exquisite.

‘Yes.’ Brooke nodded and grinned. ‘They’re great, aren’t they?’

Nina nodded.

‘Right, loves, can I ask a favour of one of you, please?’ Letting the kitchen door swing quietly shut behind her, Elsie carried a large box across to them, balancing it on the top of the counter.

‘Sure.’ Brooke glanced towards her before turning back to her customer.

‘Would one of you mind running these pies up to the pub, please? I somehow missed them off the delivery list this morning.’ Elsie smoothed out a piece of paper and ran her finger down the cursive handwritten list.

‘Have a lovely day.’ Brooke handed across a paper bag to a couple before turning to Elsie. ‘Course we can. Did you want to go, Nina? It might be a chance to see a bit more of the bay?’

‘Umm, yes, okay.’ Nina stepped towards Elsie. ‘Whereabouts is the pub?’

‘It’s just across the cobbles and up the hill. You’ll spot it when you come to it. Could you send my apologies to Gerald the landlord too please, love? I don’t think I’ve missed anything off his order before.’ Elsie rubbed her hands together.

‘You’re distracted, aren’t you?’ Looking across towards Elsie, Diane tapped her fingers against the top of the counter and grinned. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Oh, Diane, love, I can’t get anything past you, can I?’ Elsie chuckled and rubbed Diane’s arm. ‘Daisy has her first scan today.’

‘Oh, yes. Are you going?’ Diane glanced at Nina. ‘Daisy and Ollie announced the pregnancy yesterday evening before you came.’

Nina nodded.

‘They’ve asked us to, yes. Whether me and Ian will be allowed in the scan room, I don’t know, but, oh, I can’t wait to see the little cherub.’ Elsie wiped her eyes.

‘You’re crying already!’ Diane laughed. ‘You’re going to be a mess if you are allowed in.’

‘Oi, you.’ Chuckling, Elsie shook her head. ‘You’re certainly not wrong. Anyway, are you sure you don’t mind taking these pies here to the pub, Nina, love?’

‘Yes, that’s fine. As Brooke said, it’ll be nice to see a bit more of Penworth Bay.’ Nodding, Nina pulled the box towards her.

‘Great, thank you.’ Elsie turned to the kitchen. ‘I’d better get back. I’ve got some rolls in the oven that need getting out, but thanks, love.’

As Elsie retreated to the kitchen and Diane turned to another customer, Nina picked up the box. She was looking forward to getting a bit of fresh air. She needed a bit of time to gather her thoughts, to work out how she was going to spring it on Ian that she had a message from her gran. From her and Brooke’s gran. She shook her head. That felt so strange. It had always been just her and her brother, Finley. They had been her gran’s only grandchildren. The three of them had been the only family each of them had left since their mum had passed away and their dad had left. Just the three of them. And now... and now it appeared their family had suddenly increased.

‘Do you know where you’re going?’

Blinking, Nina looked at Brooke. ‘Yes, yes, I think so.’

‘Okay, great. See you in a bit.’

‘Bye.’ Sidestepping through the small queue of customers who had gathered, Nina walked out into the cool autumn air. What was she thinking? Her family increasing? Brooke might not want anything to do with her, Finley, or even her gran. Her gran had given up Brooke’s mum for adoption, and Nina had no idea what Brooke thought of it all. Would Nina even be able to carry on volunteering once she’d told Ian? Would it make things awkward between her and Brooke?

Coming to the end of the small row of shops along the promenade, Nina paused and looked out across the ocean. Wow, what a place to live. The tall cliffs hugged the bay, the water a beautiful clear blue. It was stunning. And quiet. A small group of people huddled together on the sand, chatting and laughing while two women paddled in the shallow water, their toddlers screeching with excitement as the sea washed over their feet.

It had probably been a completely different story a few weeks ago. She could imagine a place like this being a tourist destination in the summer months. Taking a deep breath, she filled her lungs with the fresh, clean air. There was no point worrying how Brooke would react to the news they were related. Brooke seemed lovely, and she definitely didn’t come across as someone who would hold it against Nina. Even so, the sooner she spoke to Ian, the better.

Chapter Four



Resting the box of pies on one of the wooden tables outside the pub, Nina rolled her shoulders back. It wasn't that the box was particularly heavy; it was just cumbersome. She looked across the road at the path opposite as a small stream of school children walked excitedly down the hill. Each held hands with their walking partner, the adults dotted amongst them making conversation with the children in their care.

She hadn't seen a school on her way up. Maybe it was further towards the top of the hill and they were just starting out on their adventure.

'Hi, Nina.'

Nina looked towards the person who had called her name. She recognised her from yesterday. Was her name Lauren? Yes, she was sure it was. She hadn't realised she was a teacher. Waving back at her, Nina laughed as all the children waved in reply. 'Have a great time on your trip!'

'I'm sure we will, won't we, class?' Lauren grinned. 'We're off to collect some shells for our art class.'

'Oh wow. I'm sure you'll find some lovely ones. Enjoy.' Grinning, Nina watched as the class made their way down towards the beach. She'd not even been in the bay a day and people were talking to her in the street, people she knew.

Lifting the box again, Nina made her way to the wooden door of the pub, leaned her elbow heavily on the door handle, and pushed down, trying to keep the box as level as she could. Feeling the handle give, she gently kicked the door open and slipped inside. The all too familiar aroma of stale beer surrounded her as she made her way towards the bar. It was quiet. A couple of men were sitting playing a game of chess at the table in the far corner and a couple picked at a basket of chips they were sharing at the far end of the bar.

After lowering the box on the bar, Nina shuffled her feet, unsure whether she should wait patiently for someone to appear or if she should call out, make herself known. She always found these sorts of decisions difficult. Easy to most, but to her, she was always unsure of the correct social norms. Slipping onto a bar stool, she pulled her mobile from her pocket. Nothing.

Apart from a brief text yesterday from her brother asking if she'd found the bakery, she'd had no other communication, no calls, no messages. Nothing from any of her friends or colleagues. Not that she'd been expecting anything. Not from her colleagues, anyway. The number of times they'd had to pick up her slack over the past couple of months, she guessed they were happy to see the back of her for a while. They'd never say so, but she couldn't really blame them. Ever since the burglary, she'd been struggling to sleep and, of course, that had had a knock-on effect with her work. She'd let the advertising agency she worked at down.

She placed her mobile face down on the bar. Her friends too. They'd all but given up on asking her out because she'd declined their dinner party offers, their meet-ups to celebrate someone's birthday. Recently, she'd let everyone down. She hadn't meant to; she'd just been so tired. Always so tired.

Running her fingers through her hair, she looked towards the door as a group of people walked through and joined her at the bar.

'Hey, Gerald. You open today, mate? We're wasting away out here.' A man who must have been in his early twenties picked up a pile of menus and passed them around to the other members of his group.

'Sorry, mate. What can I get you all?' A man sporting a beard, presumably Gerald, appeared from somewhere behind the bar and made his way towards the group before pausing and looking across at Nina. 'Sorry, have you been waiting long?'

'Not really.' Nina shrugged, the deep warmth of discomfort flushing across her cheeks. She should have called out instead of just sitting there like that.

'Good, good.' Gerald called over his shoulder, 'Hey, buddy, come out here and serve this young lady, would you?'

'Coming, boss.'

The tone of the voice pulled at Nina's memory. She knew that voice.

'Nina?'

Opening her mouth to speak, she closed it again. Was it him? 'Rowan?'

'Why... what brings you here?' Rowan threw the tea towel he was holding over his right shoulder.

'Pies. I brought pies.' She tapped the box in front of her.

'Pies?'

Had that really been her answer? Pies? ‘I... umm... Elsie forgot about them, so I’ve brought them here.’

‘Oh, right? You’re Elsie’s new volunteer?’ A look of understanding swept across his face.

Nina nodded. It really was Rowan. He was here. In the bay. She shook her head. She’d heard he’d moved away, she’d always assumed he’d gone travelling. She hadn’t cared. Why would she, after what he’d done? After the way he’d behaved?

‘Wow. It’s good to see you after all this time. What? It must be four years now, is that right?’ He grinned, his dimple barely showing through the coarse stubble covering his face.

Four years and three months. Not that she’d been counting. She hadn’t. She just knew it had been just before her birthday that their relationship had broken down. Some birthday that had been. She’d been half expecting, half hoping for a diamond for her birthday, and instead, she’d had her heart broken. Not that he’d remember. ‘It must be.’ Standing up, she pushed the stool back into place and tapped the box. ‘Anyway, I’d better get back. Here are your pies.’

‘Right, yes. Thank you for that.’

Nodding, Nina began making her way to the door, desperate to put as much distance between her and Rowan as quickly as she could.

‘Nina, wait up...’

‘Sorry, I’ve got to get back. We’re super busy today.’ Without looking behind her, Nina pushed the heavy door open and stepped outside. Taking a deep breath, she paused and looked down the hill towards the ocean, towards the bakery. Of all the places in the world, why had Rowan ended up here? He’d always spoken about travelling, telling her over and over that he’d never settle in England, so why had he? He’d always said his dream job would be one where he could travel. Why had he come to Cornwall? To Penworth Bay? The exact place she had come?

She began walking down the hill. It wasn’t as though she could run, take the next bus to the train station, and head home. She shuddered. Not that she particularly wanted to, but even if she did, she couldn’t. She had to speak to Ian first, to Brooke, too.

As she walked down the stairs leading to the beach, she scraped her hair back from her face and bundled it into a messy bun; the breeze was stronger here on the seafront and it tugged at her hair desperately trying to release it

from the grasp of the hairband. She could speak to Ian today. She could march straight up to the lighthouse right now and pass on her gran's message and then she could leave, put as much distance between her and Rowan as she could. There was only one thing holding her back. Well, two. The fact she really didn't want to step foot inside her home, not yet. Every time she had returned home from work, or on the rare occasion she visited her brother or a friend, a dark cloak of foreboding had covered her the moment she'd stepped inside. And that's what it had felt like, literally a cloak of worry, unease. Just as though it had been waiting to drop from the porch ceiling and cover her the moment she returned.

Slipping her trainers off, she wriggled her toes, loosening the grains of sand beneath her. It sounded silly. She'd tried to explain how it felt to her brother, and his answer had been to join a martial arts club. It hadn't been a bad idea, and she'd started to look into those local to her before her gran had rung and asked her to travel to Penworth Bay. Deep down, she'd known it wasn't the answer, though. Yes, she'd have probably felt more confident, more able to protect herself if the house was burgled again, but it wouldn't have helped her sleep, wouldn't have helped her newfound fear of the dark.

At the water's edge, she dipped her toes into the ocean before taking a step in and plunging her feet into the cold water. Focusing on the sound of the ocean, the icy cool water covering her feet and the breeze dragging against her skin, she tried to push all thoughts of that night away. She tried to forget the terror she'd felt the moment she'd woken and realised someone was in the house. The sensation of darkness closing in on her, suffocating her as she'd stumbled through the house she'd grown up in, the house which had always been her safe space, a place of comfort, love. She tried to push the feelings of helplessness, and vulnerability out of her mind as she'd realised that in her attempt to get out of the house before the stranger, the burglar, had realised she was inside, she'd actually gone right towards him. She tried not to focus on the way she'd frozen in fear as a complete stranger had shone a torch in her face, blinding her, paralysing her, before running past her and escaping.

Instinctively, she wrapped her hand around her left upper arm, covering the jagged scar. A permanent reminder of that night. A permanent reminder of how powerless she'd felt. The police officers who had turned up a few minutes later, their blue lights illuminating the quiet street, had told her how lucky she'd been. And she knew she had. She did. Things could have been

worse, much worse. She'd walked away with a scar, the broken vase he'd thrown at her, and a missing laptop. It could have been much worse. Apparently, she'd probably disturbed him before too much damage was done, before too much had been taken.

Looking down, she gently kicked the water and watched the droplets fall back into the ocean, become one with the gushing water again. The problem was, the damage had already been done. In that one night, those few minutes she'd changed from a confident, happy-go-lucky woman to always looking over her shoulder, to checking the doors and windows twenty times before she could even take her coat off, to second-guessing her every move, her every decision, to looking at strangers she passed in the street and wondering if she'd brushed shoulders with the man who had broken into her home and robbed her of her life.

She snorted. She even slept with a light on. She had to. Every single night. At her age. She didn't want to go home. To go back to the place she now felt unsafe. She wanted to enjoy her time here in the bay, to just be physically away from the place she'd once called home.

Taking a deep breath in, she stretched her arms above her head and rolled her shoulders back. She would not let Rowan rob her of this time away. No, enough people had robbed her recently.

Chapter Five



As she walked across the cobbles, Nina could see the queue from the bakery snaking out of the door. Picking up her pace, she weaved her way through the throng of customers and back behind the bakery counter. ‘Sorry I took so long.’

‘No worries. Everything okay?’ Diane glanced across at her before turning back to the customer in front of her.

‘Yes, fine thanks.’ It was. She wasn’t about to let running into Rowan ruin her break down here. Pulling her apron over her head, she stepped forward and picked up the cake tongs. ‘Hi, how can I help you today?’

‘Morning. Could I have two of those lovely iced buns, please? My grandchildren love those. Oh, and I might as well treat myself, too. I’ll have a shortbread if you’ve got any, please?’

Nina smiled. Her gran had always treated her and her brother to an iced bun each when she’d looked after them on a Saturday morning whilst their mum had worked. The tradition of going into town together had continued when they’d gone to live with her after their mum had passed away. They’d enjoyed their Saturday morning trips right up until her brother, and then two years later Nina herself, had left for uni. ‘I think the shortbread is up the other end of the counter. I’ll check.’

‘Oh, thank you, dear. You’re new here, aren’t you? I haven’t seen you before.’

‘Yes, I am.’ Nina placed the bag of iced buns on the counter.

‘Lovely to meet you.’ Holding her hand over the counter, the woman smiled. ‘Edna, and these two munchkins are Justin and Freddie.’

‘Lovely to meet you, too. I’m Nina.’ Taking Edna’s hand, she smiled at the two children standing on their tiptoes with their palms against the glass of the counter. ‘I’ll go and get that shortbread.’

‘Thank you, Nina.’ Edna pulled her purse out of the large shopping bag she was carrying and began counting out change.

‘Is there any shortbread?’ Walking to the end of the counter by the door, Nina passed Brooke.

‘Yes, just down there, right at the end.’

‘Thanks.’ Ducking down, Nina placed a slice of shortbread into a paper bag. As she turned, she caught a glimpse of the queue still winding its way outside and across the cobbles. ‘Does it always get this busy at lunchtimes?’

‘Oh yes. You should have seen it during the school holidays!’ Brooke laughed as she passed a cake box across the counter. ‘We’ll soon get the queue down, anyway.’

‘Hopefully.’ Frowning, Nina turned as someone tapped against the window. It was Rowan. Standing there in a grey coat and woollen navy hat, he waved at her. Great. She held up the bag of shortbread and turned back to Edna. What was Rowan doing here? Had she somehow messed the pies up while walking to the pub? Or was he just here for his lunch? So much for trying to avoid him for the rest of her holiday down here.

‘Ooh, you had some?’ Edna clicked another couple of coins onto the glass countertop.

‘Yes.’ Smiling, Nina placed the bag of shortbread next to the iced buns. ‘And I got you the biggest piece.’

‘Thank you. I’ve not treated myself to shortbread for ages.’

‘You’re welcome. I hope you all have a great rest of your day.’ Nina picked up the coins and waved to Justin and Freddie. ‘Nice to have met you all.’

‘You too, Nina. And thank you again.’

Clicking the till drawer open, Nina dropped the coins into the drawer. Stepping back as Brooke sidled up the till. ‘That customer, Edna, is so lovely.’

‘Edna? Yes, she’s great. She comes in every so often with her two grandchildren.’ Brooke held out the card reader to her customer before lowering her voice. ‘That guy over there, Rowan, I think his name is. He’s asking for you. Didn’t want to be served by me, said he needed to speak to you. Do you know him? He’s new here, has only just been working at the pub for a couple of weeks.’

‘Ah.’ Nina glanced quickly in Rowan’s direction. He was standing at the end of the counter, looking at his phone. She rolled her eyes. This is what she hadn’t wanted. She’d hoped he’d just been there to pick something up for his lunch. Obviously not. ‘He’s an ex of mine.’

‘Oh, really?’

‘Unfortunately, yes.’ Sighing, Nina turned and made her way towards him.

Quickly slipping his phone into his pocket, Rowan looked across at her.
'Nina, I hope you don't mind me popping by.'

'Was there something wrong with the pies?'

'The pies?'

'Yes, the ones I brought to the pub?' She frowned.

'No, the pies are perfect. Or I assume they are. They normally are anyway. It's you I wanted to see. You left quite abruptly.'

Looking down at her trainers, Nina resisted the urge to roll her eyes and tell him what she thought of him. It wasn't the time or the place. Besides, if he didn't know what she thought of him by now, then he never would. 'I wasn't expecting to see you here.'

'I know! How crazy is it that we've both ended up in the bay? Of all places!'

Nodding, Nina watched as his smile illuminated his eyes, almost changing the colour of his irises entirely. It had always intrigued her, the way his eyes told the world how he was feeling. She'd never met anyone whose eyes did that before. True windows to the soul, as people would say.

'So, did you want to grab a drink sometime? Catch up?' He looked her in the eye.

Glancing back at the counter, Nina signalled the queue. 'I should go.'

'Right. Yes, of course.' Looking down at the floor, Rowan nodded.
'Hopefully, I'll see you later then.'

'Bye.' Turning her back on him, she stepped back behind the counter.

Chapter Six



‘So, did I hear you say that Rowan guy from the pub is your ex?’ Diane pulled an empty tray from beneath the counter.

‘Umm, yes.’ Nina rubbed her shin. She wasn’t used to standing all day.

‘Ooh, wow. He’s fit.’ Diane grinned. ‘Is he a recent ex?’

‘No, we split just over four years ago now.’

Nodding, Diane pulled out another empty tray, placing it on top of the first. ‘How long were you together?’

‘What is this? Twenty questions?’ Brooke laughed.

‘Sorry, I’m only curious.’ Diane grimaced. ‘You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.’

‘No, it’s cool. We were together eight years.’

‘Wow. Did you know he was going to be here before you came?’

Laughing, Nina leaned against the counter. ‘No, I had absolutely no idea.’

‘Wow, that’s some coincidence.’ Diane shifted the remaining trays, filling the gaps.

‘It sure is.’

‘I’m guessing you’ll be catching up tonight, then? At the pub quiz.’

‘What pub quiz?’ Nina folded her arms.

‘There’s a pub quiz every week, and we all go along. All of the people you met at the BBQ will be there. We’ve got a team and we’re actually not that bad.’ After serving the remaining customer of the lunchtime rush, Brooke closed the till.

‘We used to be terrible, but the more people volunteer here and decide to stay in the bay, the more our team grows and the better we get. Literally, we used to always lose, and Gerald the landlord would sometimes even give us a round of free drinks because he felt sorry for us. And that’s saying something, he’s usually very tight with money.’

Brooke laughed. ‘Maybe we should try and get all the questions wrong this week to get the free drinks.’

‘I’m not sure Gerald would stretch to free drinks now our team has as many members as it does.’ Grimacing, Diane grinned. ‘It pained him enough giving us free drinks when there were only a few of us!’

‘Ha-ha, I can imagine!’ Brooke straightened the baskets of rolls positioned on top of the counter.

‘Oh, look, here comes Elsie and Ian.’ After pointing out of the window, Diane cupped her hands around her mouth and called across the bakery.

‘Teresa, Molly, Wendy! Elsie and Ian are back from the scan.’

Nina watched as the door to the wedding planning office opened and Wendy and Molly rushed over to the bakery counter, shortly joined by Teresa, who had been tidying tables in the coffee and cake area. She smiled. Everyone seemed so close, like one big, happy family.

Silence filled the bakery as the front door opened and Elsie and Ian stepped inside.

‘Anyone would think you’d seen us coming.’ Elsie walked across to the counter, a huge smile plastered on her face.

‘Ha-ha, we don’t miss a thing. So, how did it go?’ Diane tapped the top of the counter.

‘Oh, it was totally wonderful, wasn’t it, love?’ Elsie turned to Ian.

‘Yes, it was. The sonographer let us into the room, and we got to see the beautiful little mite.’ Ian wiped his eyes with a blue handkerchief.

‘He or she, we don’t know yet, was dancing around, waving their little arms in the air and kicking their legs. Ian thinks Daisy’s having a boy. You said the baby had strong little footballer legs, didn’t you?’ Elsie grasped Ian’s hand, bringing it to her lips and kissing him.

‘Whether they’re a boy or a girl, it’s going to be a strong’un, that’s for sure.’ Ian slipped his handkerchief back into his pocket.

‘Did they get a photo?’ Wendy smiled.

‘Yes, Ollie gave us one, too. Do you want to see?’ Putting her handbag on the counter, Elsie opened it and pulled out a small black and white scan photo.

‘Aw, that’s so cute!’ Picking it up, Brooke looked at the photo before passing it across to Molly.

‘Oh, look, he or she looks as though they’re waving.’ Turning the photo around to show everyone, Molly pointed to a tiny hand held above the baby’s head.

‘That’s what Daisy said, wasn’t it, love?’ Elsie looked at Ian.

Nodding, Ian grinned. ‘I don’t know how we’re going to cope with the wait to meet them.’

‘Do you think they’ll find out if they’re having a boy or a girl? Is that at the next scan when they can tell them that?’ Taking the photo, Diane squinted at it.

‘I believe so, yes, love. I’m not sure if they’ll choose to find out or not, though. I think Daisy wants to know, but Ollie wants to leave it as a surprise.’ After the photo had been passed around, Elsie slipped it carefully back into her bag.

‘I think I’d find out. Just so I could get everything ready in time. You know, get the right clothes and decorate the nursery and that.’ Diane nodded.

‘I don’t know. I think I’d wait and have the surprise on the day.’ Brooke looked at Wendy. ‘Did you find out with Hudson?’

‘Yes, I did. Just so like Diane said, I could get everything ready and decide on a name and that. If I had another though, I’m not sure if I would. I think I’d quite fancy a surprise.’ Wendy grinned.

‘That’s cool. You’d have experienced both ways then.’ Brooke nodded.

‘Are we going to be expecting some more happy news soon, then?’ Ian raised an eyebrow.

Blushing, Wendy tucked her hair behind her ear. ‘Not yet, no. I mean, we’ve spoken about it, but we’re not even married yet.’

‘You want me to have a word with my nephew? Is that what you’re saying?’ Ian chuckled.

‘No! That’s not what I meant.’

‘I know, love. I’m just pulling your leg.’ Chuckling, Ian patted Wendy’s hand.

‘Right, I suppose I’d better get on. I see you’ve had a bit of a rush this lunchtime then?’ Elsie nodded towards the pile of empty trays.

‘Yes, it’s been pretty crazy.’ Brooke passed the trays to Elsie.

‘Good, good, that’s what we like, isn’t it?’ Elsie took the trays. ‘Thanks, love. I’ll go and get started on some more baking.’

‘Yes, sorry, every time I went to escape into the kitchen to do some baking, I had another few customers turn up.’ Teresa grimaced.

‘Don’t worry, love. I didn’t expect you to juggle the coffee and cake area and the baking. Thank you for trying, though.’ Elsie rubbed Teresa on the arm before turning and making her way to the kitchen with Ian.

‘Don’t any of you go telling Harry how cute Daisy and Ollie’s baby scan was, please? I’m begging you.’ Diane grimaced.

‘Ha-ha, is he getting broody again?’ Wendy grinned.

‘Isn’t he always? I tell you, I’d have had an entire football team of kids if that man had his own way.’ Shaking her head, Diane laughed before glancing down. ‘Oh, I missed an empty tray.’

‘I’ll take it, if you like? I could do with grabbing a glass of water.’ Nina held out her hand for the tray.

‘Great, thanks.’ Passing it across, Diane turned to a couple who had just walked in.

Pushing the kitchen door open, Nina stifled a yawn.

‘Elsie’s just popped upstairs; shall I take that for you?’ Looking up from a steaming mug of coffee, Ian held his hand out.

‘Thanks. I was just going to get a quick glass of water too, if that’s okay?’

‘Of course it is, love. Here, I’ll get you one.’ Pushing his stool back, Ian stood up.

‘Don’t worry, I can get it.’ Making her way to the sink, Nina poured herself a glass and looked out of the window into the small courtyard at the back of the bakery. Should she speak to him now? They were alone. This would be the perfect time. Taking a long gulp of cold water, Nina placed the glass down and turned around. ‘Brooke said she found out she was related to you not long ago.’

‘That’s right. Her mum was my daughter. Although I hadn’t even known I had a daughter.’ Ian rubbed the palm of his hand across his face.

This was what worried her. Did he resent her gran for not telling him? He’d have every right to. ‘That must have been a shock.’

‘Oh, it was, it really was. A bolt from the blue, as they say. I feel very blessed to have Brooke in my life now, though.’ He shrugged. ‘The past is the past and I can’t change it, unfortunately. It would have meant the world to me to have met my beautiful Heather, but I’m so blessed to have Brooke in my life now.’

Nina picked up the glass again, gripping it tightly, and swallowed. She could see Ian’s eyes glistening, the telltale shimmer of tears threatening to fall. It must have been so hard for him. It had been for her gran to discover that the child she’d given up all those years ago would never come to look for her, that she would never have the opportunity to share why she put her up for adoption, but for Ian to have found and lost a child he’d never even known he’d had within the space of a few seconds must have been devastating. She cleared her throat and placed the glass back on the draining board. ‘Actually, there was a reason I came to Penworth Bay, I…’

‘Sorry about that, Ian, love. Now, what was I doing?’ With the kitchen door swinging shut behind her, Elsie tied her apron strings behind her back. ‘Hello, Nina, love. Is everything okay?’

‘Yep, I was just getting a glass of water.’ Nina indicated the glass.

‘Right, love. I’ll get baking then. I’ll try to bring out some bits as soon as I can.’

‘Okay.’ Nodding, Nina glanced across at Ian before heading out into the bakery. She’d have to talk to him another time. But soon. He deserved answers soon.

Chapter Seven



‘Come on, it’ll be fun. It always is.’ Linking arms with Nina, Wendy waited for Connor to lock the bakery door before linking his arm, too.

‘Umm, I’m sure it will.’ Nina looked down at the cobbles and listened to the clip-clip her boots made as they walked towards the bottom of the hill.

‘Is this about Rowan? Diane mentioned he was your ex.’

‘No, yes.’ Nina shook her head. ‘It’s just strange seeing him after all this time. The relationship didn’t exactly end well, and he was the last person I expected, or wanted, to run into down here.’

‘Oh, sorry to hear it didn’t end well. That was a long time ago though, he might have changed?’

‘Rowan’s new to the bay, but he seems a good chap. Genuine.’ Connor smiled.

‘Maybe he has then.’ Nina shrugged. ‘I don’t know, it still feels weird.’

‘Do you think chatting to him will help? Getting everything out in the open?’ Wendy pulled her arm away to pull her handbag strap further onto her shoulder before linking arms again.

‘Probably. I’m just not sure I want to.’ She probably sounded awful, but Rowan had broken her heart. She’d only ever truly fallen in love with one man, and that had been him. It had taken a long time and a lot of work to get over the relationship breakup, and she wasn’t sure if she had it in her heart to forgive him. Not fully.

‘Look, why don’t you just see how it goes? Try to put him out of your mind and enjoy the evening and, if you can’t, then you can leave, but give it a go first.’

‘I will.’ Nina nodded as they began walking up the hill. They were late, and it had been Nina’s fault. She hadn’t planned on going at all, not until Wendy and Connor had arrived to drop little Hudson off with Elsie and Ian and talked her into it. She still wasn’t sure if she was doing the right thing by going, but she’d already held them up, and it wouldn’t be fair if she turned around now.

‘Here you go, ladies.’ Connor held the door open, letting Nina and Wendy slip inside the pub.

‘...question.’ Gerald paused, microphone in hand as he looked towards them. ‘It looks as though we have some latecomers. Come on in, don’t be shy. You’ve not missed much.’

‘Evening, Gerald.’ Holding his hand up, Connor grinned.

Focusing on Wendy as she led the way to a table by the window, Nina tried to ignore the fact that everyone was staring at them. She assumed Rowan would be too, so any hope of slipping into the pub unnoticed was well and truly gone now. She should have just been ready for when Wendy and Connor had arrived.

‘Hiya, here sit down and I’ll pour you guys a drink.’ Standing up, Teresa pushed her chair out of the way to let them pass.

‘Thanks.’ Nina waved at the group in front of her. Just as Diane and Brooke had promised, everyone from the BBQ on the beach was there. She slipped into a chair next to Freya as Wendy sat on her other side. ‘Hi.’

‘Hey, how’s everything going at the bakery?’ Freya whispered under her breath as Gerald began talking again, the focus finally being taken from the latecomers back to the landlord and quizmaster.

‘Good, thanks. Great, actually. I’m really enjoying it. Everyone has been really welcoming, the customers as well as everyone working at the bakery, I mean.’ Taking her glass from Teresa, Nina smiled. ‘Thank you.’

‘They really are, aren’t they? When I first came here to volunteer, I remember being really shocked at how nice everyone was. Yes, good people are everywhere, but I felt it was as though everyone was genuinely glad to talk to me and see me even if they were just buying a cake or a loaf of bread from me.’ Freya grinned. ‘I still feel the same.’

‘You’re a vet, is that right?’ Had that been what Elsie had told her, or was she getting muddled up? Nina looked around the table. There had been so many people to meet when she’d first arrived, and she was sure she’d soon get someone’s name wrong or mix up some fact about one person with another.

‘Yes, that’s right. I also help out at Chris’s sanctuary.’ Freya rubbed the shoulder of the man sitting next to her.

‘You okay?’ Turning, Chris smiled.

‘I was just telling Nina how I help out at your sanctuary.’

‘Ah, yes. And she does a fine job, too.’ Taking Freya’s hand, Chris squeezed it.

‘Is that a wildlife sanctuary?’ Nina took a sip of her drink, the sour taste stinging the back of her throat.

‘No, it’s for farm animals, although we do end up with our fair share of wildlife.’ Shrugging, Chris chuckled. ‘We just seem to be a magnet for any animal in need.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever known you to turn any animal away.’ Freya grinned.

‘Well, I can’t really, can I?’

‘Aw, that sounds lovely. It must be a really special place.’ She remembered her gran taking her and her brother to a little wildlife sanctuary when they were younger. Although now she thought of it, they used to breed and sell rabbits and guinea pigs so how much of a genuine sanctuary it had been, she had no idea. Still, it stirred happy memories.

‘Eyes down, ears open, and get ready for your first question.’ The microphone screeched as Gerald picked up a sheet of paper that had fallen from his hands. ‘Question one; which UK confectionary brand produces the sweets Love Hearts, Parma Violets and Drumstick lollies?’

‘Ooh, is that Haribos?’ Diane stage-whispered across the table.

‘No, they make the gummy sweets, don’t they? You know, like the giant strawberry sweets.’ Molly stage-whispered back.

‘Ah, I should have known that. They’re my favourite.’ Diane licked her lips.

‘Are they made by Swizzels?’ Nina frowned.

‘Yes! You’re right. I’m sure you are.’ Harry, Diane’s partner, pointed to the answer sheet.

‘Swizzels it is then.’ Wendy scribbled the answer down.

‘Aw, now the subject of Parma Violets has been brought up, I could really do with some.’ Daisy sipped her orange juice.

‘Ha-ha, they’ll be your new pregnancy craving!’ Diane grinned.

‘We’ll take a detour to the garage in Trestow on the way home if you still want some then.’ Laying his arm around Daisy’s shoulder, Ollie pulled her close and kissed her on top of the head.

‘See, when we have kids, I’ll be getting you everything you crave.’ Harry raised his eyebrows.

‘Stop it. Although to be fair, if you were promising a lifetime’s supply of those giant strawberry gummies, I might actually think about it.’ Diane laughed.

Chapter Eight



‘And the next question is...’
Nina looked across to the bar as Gerald asked the next question. Rowan was standing beside him, serving a man at the bar. She smiled. The way his eyebrows knitted together while he poured a pint reminded her of the face he pulled when they used to play crazy golf together, or attempted to work out the instructions to build a flatpack wardrobe, or follow a particularly difficult recipe. That look had been one of the first things she’d fallen in love with him for.

‘You, okay?’

‘What? Yes, sorry, I was miles away.’ Nina blinked and focused on Wendy next to her.

‘Good. Is it as awkward as you thought it would be with Rowan over there?’

Glancing back across at him, she shook her head. Now the initial shock of seeing him again had worn off, she supposed it shouldn’t matter that he was here. She was at the bakery, and he was working here at the pub. Yes, their paths would naturally cross from time to time, but apart from that, there was no reason that his presence in the bay should affect her break down here. She could be civil with him. ‘It’s fine. Sorry about earlier, I think it was just the shock of seeing him again. It took me a long time to get over him, but that was a long time ago now and I’m not going to let anything get in the way of me enjoying my time here. He seems okay with it, so I should be too.’

‘That’s good.’ Wendy hugged her shoulders quickly.

‘Right, you lovely people, answer sheets to the bar, and then I have a special surprise for you.’ Gerald laughed as a loud gasp filtered around the pub.

‘Don’t keep us in suspense, Gerald.’ A man at the table in front of the bar called out.

‘Yes, come on, tell us, mate.’ Another man with a greying beard stood up from a table in the corner and called across the pub.

‘Get those answer sheets in and then I won’t have to.’ Gerald looked across to Rowan. ‘Don’t be shy, pass them to Rowan who will be deputy

quizmaster and mark them tonight.'

'I'll go. Shall I grab more drinks, too? Everyone want the same cocktail?' Standing up, Diane picked up the answer sheet and the empty jug before looking across at Daisy. 'Do you want another orange juice?'

'Could I have an apple juice this time, please?'

'Ha-ha, apple it is.' Turning, Diane headed to the bar.

'I wonder what this surprise is?' Ollie downed the last of his drink.

'Umm, free drinks for all?' Teresa raised her eyebrows.

'This is Gerald we're talking about. It pains him enough to give free drinks to the winning team. We're lucky we get these card coasters on the tables.' Holding one of the worn, soggy card coasters up, Freya laughed.

'That's very true! He's probably decided to change the prize to a packet of peanuts for the winning team to share.' Teresa rolled her eyes.

'Have you had any luck on the wedding front yet, Connor?' Jessie, who was sitting opposite Nina with her partner Simon, tapped her fingers against the tabletop.

'I'm happy to report there may be a chink in the armour appearing.' Laying his palms against the surface of the table, Connor grinned.

'Really? Wow, how did you manage that?' Jessie's eye widened as everyone else around the table leaned forward, conversation stalled at the news.

'Whose wedding?' Nina frowned.

'Of course, sorry, you probably don't know. Elsie and Ian basically fell in love with each other decades ago, but neither one would admit it to the other because they were really good friends and neither of them wanted to jeopardise that.' Connor grimaced.

'And then at Christmas time last year, Ian was inside the old surf shop, which is now Daisy and Ollie's restaurant, and a storm pulled it down. He got trapped.' Freya looked across the table. 'And if it hadn't been for Scott and Olivia here rescuing him...' She shuddered.

'Anyway, they both finally admitted how they felt about each other, so now we're really hoping they don't waste another umpteen years before they finally tie the knot.' Olivia grinned.

'Oh wow. Judging by the way they act together, I assumed they'd been together years.' Nina took a sip of her drink.

'That's what's so frustrating. We just want to see them happy.' Freya sighed before looking across at Connor. 'Go on then, what have you heard?'

‘Nothing concrete, so I don’t want to get your hopes up, but last week I caught them talking about the future.’ Connor shrugged.

‘What about the future?’ Olivia frowned.

‘I’m not sure. They ended the conversation when they saw me coming. Looking back, I’m wondering if they were talking about your baby...’ He nodded towards Daisy and Ollie. ‘But of course, I didn’t know anything about the pregnancy at the time, but I don’t know, I’m wondering if your announcement may just give them the push they need.’

‘What’s this?’ Placing the jug of orange cocktail on the table, Diane flopped into her seat. ‘You think Elsie and Ian might actually set a date?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. Something’s definitely going on. There have been a few times over the last couple of weeks when they’ve changed the conversation when I’ve walked in.’ Standing up, Connor began refilling glasses.

‘Thanks.’ Nina nodded as he refilled hers.

‘Ooh, I’ve had that, too. Last week, when I walked into the kitchen, they suddenly stopped talking. I thought it was really weird at the time as usually they’re so open with everyone and then after your announcement,’ Diane pointed to Ollie and Daisy, ‘I just assumed they’d been talking about the baby, but maybe they’re making plans. Ooh, do you really think it is? Do you think we’ll all be bridesmaids?’

Freya laughed. ‘There’re quite a lot of us! If we were, Elsie’s entourage would be bigger than the congregation.’

‘True. But she did say we would be. Oh, I hope we will. I hope she wasn’t joking.’ Diane grinned.

‘I guess we’ll just have to wait and see. They’ll let us know in their own time.’ Freya nodded her thanks to Connor as he refilled her glass.

‘That’ll be in ten years, then.’ Diane sighed.

‘It might not. Connor might be right.’ Wendy yawned. ‘Sorry, I’m shattered today.’

‘Attention, please.’ Gerald tapped the microphone as a piercing screech filled the pub. ‘While the deputy quizmaster is busy marking your answers and working out which one of you lot has won the most prestigious pub quiz in the bay...’

‘You mean the only pub quiz in the bay?’ Someone heckled him from the back of the pub.

‘Preciously what I said, the best pub quiz in the bay.’ Gerald gave a thumbs-up to the person who had called out. ‘And whilst he’s doing that, it is my honour to inform you we have a special prize to give away today. I am pleased to announce that we have a hot air balloon ride to give away to one of you lucky things.’

‘Oohs’ and ‘ahhs’ filled the pub, along with a round of applause.

‘That’s right, one of you will join me tomorrow for a ride in the skies above our beautiful bay in a hot air balloon.’ Lowering his voice, he spoke quickly into the microphone. ‘At this point, I am contracted to make you aware that this opportunity has been donated to us by Bales’ Farm Brewery in a bid to raise their profile and advertise their drinks.’

‘Woohoo, how do we win it?’ A woman sitting at the other end of the bar called across to him.

‘Okay, to win the balloon ride, I’ll ask a question and the first person to call out the correct answer will win. Simple as that. If two people happen to call out the correct answer at the exact same time, then I’ll ask those two people another question and we’ll continue until we have a single winner. Any questions?’

‘I’m definitely not going to answer. I can’t think of anything worse than being hundreds of feet above the ground in a wonky basket, only being held up by some ropes holding a balloon.’ Diane shuddered. ‘No chance you’d catch me trusting some balloon with my life, particularly one made by a bunch of people at the brewery.’

‘The people from the brewery won’t have made it, and besides, I don’t think they’d let their employees drink on the job.’ Harry chuckled.

‘Even so. No thank you, I am not winning that.’ Diane shook her head.

‘Are you ready?’ Gerald’s voice boomed around the pub.

‘Yes!’

‘Just get on with it!’

‘We haven’t got all night.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Gerald held his hand up, palm forward. ‘I can sense the excitement in the room, so I will just get on with it.’ Looking down at the slip of paper in his hand, he cleared his throat. ‘In which European language does ‘bom dia’ mean ‘good morning’?’

‘What?’

‘How are we supposed to know that?’

Nina shifted in her seat.

‘You know the answer, don’t you?’ Wendy whispered to her. ‘If you do, call it out.’

Nina grimaced. If there was one thing she hated, it was having all eyes on her and if she called the answer out, whether she was right or wrong, everyone would be looking at her. ‘What if I tell you and you call it out?’

‘No! Go on, don’t you want to win a balloon ride?’

‘Well, yes. I’ve always wanted to go up in a balloon.’ Nina swallowed. She was being silly. This was her chance to actually win something. Apart from winning a bar of chocolate in a drawing competition when she was five, she never won.

‘Come on, someone must know. ‘Bom dia’, in which European language does it mean ‘good morning’?’ Gerald looked around the pub. ‘Anyone?’

Clearing her throat, Nina raised her hand. ‘Portuguese.’ Lowering her hand, she looked into her glass as everyone in the pub hushed and looked across at her.

Grinning, Gerald began clapping his hands, the echo of the microphone banging against his palm, breaking the silence. ‘And we have a winner!’

A round of applause erupted around the pub and shouts of ‘well done’ and ‘congratulations’ filled the air.

‘Well done! You’ve got a good memory. I can’t even remember what good morning is in German and I have a GCSE in it.’ Brooke laughed.

‘My gran loves travelling and used to take us to Portugal at least once a year.’ Nina smiled.

‘Come on down and claim your prize!’ Gerald’s voice boomed across the applause.

And this was why she’d been so reluctant to say the answer. Swallowing, Nina stood up and shifted her chair out of the way. The sooner she went to get the ticket, the sooner she’d be back amongst her newfound friends. Focusing on Gerald behind the bar, she tried to block out the feeling of being watched.

‘Well done!’ After shaking her hand, Gerald passed her an envelope. ‘Ah, I recognise you. You brought us the pies! Tell us what your name is?’

‘Nina.’ Clearing her throat, she spoke louder. ‘Nina.’

‘Lovely to have you here in the bay, Nina.’ Turning back to his audience, he raised his microphone to his lips again. ‘Nina, everyone.’

‘Thanks.’ Looking down, she weaved her way through the tables and back to the table by the window, slipped into her chair, and placed the

envelope on the table. 'Well, that was embarrassing.'

'Aw, no, it wasn't. You did well.' Wendy rubbed her forearm. 'Anyway, don't worry, Gerald should be calling the winning team of the quiz now. The promise of free drinks always stirs a lot of excitement.'

Nina looked around the table and smiled. She felt more comfortable here, amongst these people, some of who she'd only met for the second time that evening, than she had for a long time.

Chapter Nine



‘Are you still here? I thought you had your balloon ride at ten?’ Elsie placed two trays on top of the counter.

‘Yes, I do.’ Nina passed across the customer’s change before checking the large clock on the wall behind her. It was quarter to already.

‘Go on then, love. Off you go before you miss it.’ Holding out her hand for Nina’s apron, Elsie smiled.

‘You’re sure you don’t mind me going? I mean, I am supposed to be working here.’ She slipped her apron over her head.

‘Go on, enjoy it. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience.’ Taking her apron, she wrapped her arms around Nina and pulled her tight. ‘Enjoy yourself. We’ll be fine here.’

‘Okay, thanks.’ Nodding, Nina slipped into her coat and waved to Diane, Brooke, and Teresa as she made her way through the customers and towards the door. Elsie was right. This would likely be the only time she’d have the chance to go up in a hot air balloon, and it had always been on her list of things she wanted to do. Her gran had taken her brother, Finley, on a balloon ride when he’d been fifteen, and he’d spoken about it for months. She’d supposed to have been going too, but she’d come down with food poisoning from her best friend’s birthday party and had missed out.

Turning up the hill, she checked her watch. She had five minutes to get to the school playing field where it was taking off. She frowned. Was that the right phrase? Did a hot air balloon take off? Maybe drift off. Shaking her head, she grinned. Whatever it was, she only had five minutes to get there. Zipping up her coat, she began jogging up the hill. Nothing was going to make her miss it this time around.

There was the school. The instructions in the envelope had said to go through the gates leading straight into the field so she didn’t have to wander through the school. She assumed she’d be able to see where to go from there. Slowing down to a walk, she passed the school reception and continued up the hill until she came to a green gate.

Yes, there it was. The balloon was huge. It had some sort of writing on it in big, bold letters. She couldn’t read it as the balloon hadn’t been inflated

yet, but she presumed it would be the advertising for the brewery Gerald had spoken of.

Clicking the gate open, she made sure to close it properly and made her way across to the group of people standing next to the deflated balloon. Holding her hand above her eyes to shield the low autumn sun, she searched the group of people for Gerald. Was he even there?

She sighed. She couldn't spot Gerald, but Rowan was definitely there, and he was making his way towards her now. She glanced behind her, part of her longing to walk straight back out of the gates and back down the hill towards the bakery, but she'd miss the balloon ride if she did that. Gerald must be running late.

'Was it you who won the balloon ride?' Rowan held his arms out, a slow grin spreading across his face.

'Yes. Where's Gerald? I thought he was coming up there with me?'

'He's had to go and visit a supplier. Some last-minute emergency or something, so you've got me instead.'

'You're coming on the balloon ride?' Oh great, this was supposed to be exciting, something nice for her to do.

'Yes. How brilliant is this going to be?' He indicated the balloon. 'I've spoken with the pilot, who reckons we have the perfect weather conditions for the ride.'

Stubbing her trainer against a clump of grass, she closed her eyes. She wasn't going to run. She'd promised herself she wasn't going to let the fact that Rowan was in the bay ruin her holiday, and if that meant she had to ride in a tiny basket with him, then so be it. She would.

'Good morning, Nina, is it?' A man wearing navy overalls and a flat cap walked towards her, holding his hand out.

'Hi, yes.' Nina took his hand; his grip was firm.

'I'm Nigel. I'll be your pilot today. Have you been on a balloon ride before?'

'No, this will be my first time.' Nina smiled.

'In that case, I'd like to assure you that I've got twenty-eight years' experience under my belt and you're in safe hands. As I've been telling your friend here, we couldn't have asked for better weather conditions, not at this time of the year, and so you'll have nothing to worry about up in the air. You'll be able to relax and enjoy each other's company.'

Nina glanced across at Rowan. Friend? If only he knew.

‘Have either of you got any questions?’ Nigel looked from Nina to Rowan and back again.

‘Where will we land?’ Rowan glanced across at the balloon.

‘The only thing I can promise you is we will land on the ground.’ Nigel chuckled. ‘It’s always a little more difficult to pinpoint an exact spot as it very much depends on the speed and direction of the wind when we get up there. We can make predictions, but we’re very much in the good hands of Mother Nature as to the exact location. We have numerous landing sites around here, meaning the landowners have given us their permission to use their land.’

‘Ah okay. So, it’ll be a surprise then?’

‘Yes, it will. Our good crew members here will come and fetch us, though.’ Nigel indicated a small group of people huddled around the balloon, presumably carrying out safety checks or something.

‘Any more questions?’

‘No, I don’t think so. Thank you.’ Nina nodded.

‘Great, in that case, I’ll go and get the balloon ready for you and call you over when we’re ready.’ Rubbing his hands together, Nigel walked towards his crew members.

‘This is exciting.’ Rowan shifted from foot to foot.

‘Yep.’ As she watched the balloon slowly inflate and stand tall, the basket tipped into position.

‘Come on over and hop in.’ Climbing into the basket, Nigel called across to them.

‘Great, after you.’

Slipping in front of Rowan, Nina stepped onto the wooden steps leading up to the basket and swung her leg over the rim, taking Nigel’s hand to save herself from toppling over. ‘Thank you.’

Chapter Ten



‘Are you both ready? You might want to hold on to the rim of the basket on our ascent.’ Nigel looked over at them and grinned. Tightening her grip on the edge of the basket, Nina watched as Nigel fired the burner and the balloon rose into the air.

‘You okay?’ Rowan lurched forward as the balloon rose further, knocking into her shoulder. ‘Sorry.’

‘No worries. I’m fine. You?’

‘Good.’ Nodding, he looked over the edge. ‘Wow, look at the view. We’re pretty high up already.’

Turning around, Nina watched as they floated upwards. The school children had lined the edge of the playground, which looked out across the field and were waving and shouting. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but she waved back, trying to see if she could spot Lauren and Daniel, who worked there. Soon they were higher than the trees, higher than the school building. Taking a deep breath in, Nina grinned. She hadn’t tasted air like this before. Not this fresh and clean.

‘There’s a bottle of bubbly here. Help yourselves.’ Nigel nodded towards a picnic basket sitting by their feet.

‘Brilliant.’ Rubbing his hands together, Rowan knelt down and pulled out two champagne flutes and the bottle. Standing back up, he passed the glasses to Nina. ‘Are you okay holding them?’

‘Yes, just don’t aim the cork up at the balloon.’ Taking the glasses, she grimaced.

‘Huh, good point.’ Looking down over the edge of the basket, Rowan raised his eyebrows. ‘We don’t want to take any chances, do we?’

As he poured the bubbly, Nina watched the same look of concentration flash across his face.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ Shrugging, she gave him his glass and turned back around, taking in the view.

‘Is everything okay between us?’ Replacing the bottle, he stood next to her, holding his glass over the rim of the basket.

Frowning, Nina shrugged. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'You've just been really quiet with me. When I saw you yesterday in the pub,' he shrugged. 'I don't know. I thought we'd maybe catch up. Chat.'

Taking a long gulp of her drink, Nina bit down on her bottom lip. They didn't need to have this conversation. Not here. Not miles up above the ground where neither of them could walk off or escape.

'You're annoyed with me, aren't you? What have I done?' Looking down, he ran his hand across the back of his neck. 'I don't understand. We spoke about pies and then I came to the bakery to speak to you, and you were busy. Fair enough. But what did I say that annoyed you?'

She gripped the rim of the basket with her free hand and glanced across at Nigel, who was seemingly oblivious to the conversation unfolding. 'Can we just drop it?'

'Why? I don't understand how I could have offended you.'

'You haven't offended me.' She rolled her eyes. Surely he must understand this isn't about now? 'Not these past couple of days.'

'Then what?'

Were they just going to tap-dance around the real issue for the entirety of their time up in the air? Why hadn't she just walked away when she'd realised it was him coming? There would have been another point in her life when she'd have had the chance to ride in a hot air balloon. It hadn't had to have been today. 'You really expect me to forget everything that happened?'

Turning, Rowan leaned his back against the side of the basket and faced her. 'Are we talking four years ago?'

Narrowing her eyes, Nina could feel the sting of tears behind her eyes. 'Yes, we're talking four years ago now. Just because it was a long time ago, it doesn't mean I can just forget everything. You might be able to, but I can't.'

'I haven't forgotten. I just figured it was best to move on, to live in the present.'

'Seriously?' Turning, she looked at him. 'You might be able to forgive and forget and pretend that our relationship hadn't meant anything. Hey, maybe it didn't, not to you. But it had meant something to me. At one point I was convinced that...' Tailing off she turned back around, following the ribbon of a river beneath them as it meandered through trees until the canopy was so thick and they were so high it seemed to disappear entirely.

‘You were convinced that what? That we’d be together forever, that we were made for each other? If that’s the case, you weren’t the only one.’

‘What do you mean?’ She kept her voice low and steady. If he was saying things to see a reaction, she wasn’t about to give him one. She wasn’t about to open up to him just to give him the satisfaction of knowing that he’d hurt her.

‘Just that. I was going to propose to you. I’d planned it all out. I was going to take you to that waterfall you’d always wanted to visit. Pistyll Rhaeadr in Wales. Do you remember the one? I even had the ring.’

She scoffed. ‘Yeah right.’

‘Too right. You can ask my sister if don’t believe me. She came with me to choose the ring.’ Closing his eyes, Rowan shook his head. ‘I planned it all and then out of the blue, you left.’

Was he telling the truth? Had he really been going to propose? Had he really bought her a ring? ‘I don’t know if I believe you.’

‘That was always the problem, wasn’t it? You could never believe me.’

Shaking her head, Nina sighed. He was right; she’d never fully trusted him. Anyone. She hadn’t been able to. She still struggled. After years of watching her dad lie to her mum, she struggled to believe anyone. After all, lies can sound just as convincing as the truth. ‘Not just you. Anyone.’

‘What happened with your parents shouldn’t have affected our relationship. I’d told you time and time again that you could trust me. I proved it to you.’

‘I...’

‘I know you watched your dad lie to your mum, cheat behind her back, but that was years ago, that was when you were young. It had happened years before we even met.’

‘Time doesn’t wipe memories away.’ Turning away, she wiped her eyes with the pad of her thumb. It had been her dad’s lying and cheating that had led to her mum passing away, she was sure of it. If she hadn’t been trying to track him down after he’d left, she would never have been involved in that car accident.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you.’ Reaching out, Rowan touched her arm.

Pulling away from him, she shook her head. ‘I’m not upset.’

‘Can you just answer me one question, please? And then I promise I won’t bring up anything about our past again.’

‘What?’ She could hear the croak in her voice as she tried not to cry. He’d been going to propose. She’d thrown it all away. Their whole relationship.

‘Why did you leave that day? What made you choose then to walk out?’

Closing her eyes, she tried to steady her breathing. None of it made any sense, not after what he’d just told her. Not after he’d said he was planning on proposing. ‘I thought you were going to leave me.’

‘Leave you? I was going to propose to you. Why would you have thought I was going to leave you?’

‘Your ex, Samantha, she was temping at my work. Do you remember?’

‘I remember. But what has it got to do with her?’

‘She told me she’d been seeing you behind my back. She told me you’d taken her out for dinner the night before I ended things.’

Rowan was silent.

It was true then. If it hadn’t been, he would have said so. He would have jumped straight in with an excuse. His silence said it all. His silence told her she hadn’t been imagining things. It told her that she should have taken Samantha’s constant claims that Rowan had been texting her non-stop seriously. She’d confronted him about the texts the first time Samantha had told Nina. It had been the first day Samantha had started working in the office. Of course, Nina hadn’t known who she’d been then. She hadn’t known she was Rowan’s ex-girlfriend. Samantha had seemed to know exactly who Nina was, though. She’d approached her that morning, before their coffee break, and told her that she was sorry she was causing upset between her and Rowan. She’d then introduced herself properly and told Nina that she and Rowan had been texting for months. Rowan had denied it. Of course. ‘She was telling the truth then.’ It was a statement. She didn’t need an answer, she already had one.

‘No, it wasn’t true. Just like the text messages weren’t true either, but you’re not going to believe me, anyway.’

Downing the rest of her bubbly, she crossed her arms. ‘So, no explanation. You just expect me to believe you.’

‘What explanation can I give you? I can’t fight against what you believe to be true. I can’t take away the mistrust you’ve been left with from your father’s actions. Samantha lied about the text messages. I proved that time and time again when I showed you my phone. When she claimed to have received messages from me when we’d been together. Even that time I’d left

my mobile at home and yet she'd told you the next day that I'd been messaging her. I can't. I just can't prove my innocence to you anymore. I shouldn't have to. We're not even together.'

Turning back around, she looked down. They were travelling over a small village now. She could just about make out a windy road leading to a beautiful little cove. There were so many lovely places down here. So many places just waiting to be explored, treasured. She focused on her breathing, focused on the roads, the fields, the buildings. He had to be lying. If he hadn't taken her to dinner, if it had all been lies, then she'd been trusting the wrong person, she'd been putting her trust in Samantha and not Rowan. Why? Why had Samantha's claims held more weight than Rowan's, than the man she'd been in love with, the man who had been about to propose? She couldn't be wrong. She couldn't.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rant.' Running his fingers through his hair, he looked at her.

'It's fine. I don't even know what to think anymore. In that moment that she'd told me, everything had become so clear. So easy. I just walked. That's all I had to do. I just had to walk out of the relationship and then I wouldn't have to feel like I did anymore.'

'You weren't happy?'

Nina sighed. 'I was. I was so happy. Things were great, weren't they? But playing in the back of my mind was the fact that my mum had been happy too. She'd been happy until she'd discovered what my dad had been up to behind her back. She'd been so happy and finding out destroyed her.'

'You didn't want to jump?'

'Jump?'

'Jump in. You were afraid to jump fully into the relationship in case I hurt you the same way your dad hurt your mum?'

Frowning, she looked across at him. A clump of his hair was sticking up, disturbed by him running his fingers through it. She reached up and patted it down. 'Yes, I was scared. Maybe I believed Samantha because it was the easiest thing to do.' Did she believe what she was saying? Did she believe him? She hadn't given him the chance to deny it, not before she'd walked out, but now... She shook her head. She didn't know what to believe anymore.

'I never stopped loving you, you know that, don't you? I would never have done anything to hurt you.'

She looked up into his eyes. He looked sincere. The deep brown of his iris leading straight into his being. Maybe she did believe him. ‘Did I throw it all away because I believed Samantha?’

‘Well, you could have asked me before running off.’ His lips tugged at the edges of his mouth.

‘Argh, I don’t even know what to think anymore. If I say I believe you, then I literally just threw everything away for nothing, but...’ Leaning her elbows on the rim of the basket, she pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes, waiting for the speckles of light and the plunging darkness. This darkness she liked, the darkness of comfort, of self-reflection.

‘It broke my heart.’

‘Great, yep, just carry on sticking the knife in.’ She held her breath, listening to the air rushing past them.

‘I didn’t mean it like that. Who knows how things would have turned out between us.’

She felt as he leaned his back against the basket, his side brushing her arms. ‘We’d probably have 2.4 children, a dog and a little cottage in the country somewhere.’

‘That or we’d have just got back from backpacking across Thailand or Australia.’

‘Yep. Not Australia, though. Maybe New Zealand.’

‘Oh, yes, the spiders. How could I have forgotten the number of times I had to rush round to yours and put out a tiny money spider for you in the middle of the night?’

Taking her hands away from her eyes, she looked across at him and smiled. ‘They were never money spiders, not in my gran’s house. You must remember the size of the beasts that lived there.’

‘Ha-ha, that’s true. I’m sure you fed them steroids or something.’ He grinned. ‘Are you still there? At your gran’s?’

‘Yep, and she’s still living in Australia, and no, I haven’t flown out to visit her yet.’ Her lack of visiting and her fear of spiders remained a running joke in her family, but the truth was she didn’t want to visit her. She didn’t want to visit her because then she’d have to say goodbye all over again. Her gran visited twice a year, once at Christmas and once in the summer. Nina didn’t think she could cope with any more goodbyes than that. ‘How about you? How are your parents?’

Rowan smiled. ‘They’re just the same. Nothing’s really changed.’

‘That will be our landing point today.’ Nigel called across to them. ‘Do you see that field over there? That’s where we’re heading, so hold on.’

Chapter Eleven



‘Thanks again, Nigel. It’s been great.’ Nina nodded towards him as she stepped out of the car.

‘Yes, thank you.’ Rowan shook Nigel’s hand before joining her on the path. ‘Did you fancy grabbing a drink before you get back?’

Nina checked the time. The bakery would soon be closing, and Elsie had told her to take the rest of the day off. She shrugged. ‘Why not?’

‘Great.’

They walked in a comfortable silence and crossed the road towards the pub. ‘What brought you to Penworth Bay? I mean, it’s beautiful and the people seem lovely, but of all the places in the world, what brought you specifically to the bay?’

‘I never quite got around to travelling the world, instead just over a year ago, I decided to travel around the coasts of the UK.’ He shrugged. ‘When I got here, I just fell in love with the place. I’d run out of money too, so I decided to get a job for a bit, and after chatting over a pint to Gerald one night, he offered me a job. I’m not sure how long I’ll stay, but I’m pretty happy here for the moment.’ He pulled the heavy wooden door open, holding it open for her. ‘How about you? Why did you choose to volunteer at Elsie’s bakery? There must have been loads of places to choose from?’

‘Ah, now that’s complicated. I needed a break, my gran needed a message delivered and, well, Penworth Bay was the most convenient.’

‘That sounds intriguing. Can I ask what the message was and why she couldn’t just write a letter or make a phone call?’ Shrugging out of his coat, he hung it on a coat stand by the door before holding his hand out for Nina’s.

‘Thanks. I haven’t passed the message on yet, so I probably shouldn’t say.’ She frowned. It would be so good to have someone familiar to talk to about it all—she was still trying to understand everything she’d been told recently—but at the same time it really wouldn’t be fair to either Ian or Brooke if Rowan found out before they did.

‘Fair enough. How come you haven’t passed the message on yet? Just not had the time to? The opportunity?’

She slipped onto a bar stool and watched as Rowan turned the coffee machine on behind the bar. Apart from a table of people talking with Gerald quietly in the corner, the pub was empty. 'I've had the time and the opportunity. It just hasn't felt right, not yet.'

'Hot chocolate?'

'That sounds nice.' She rubbed her arms, and despite the heating being turned up full blast in the car on the way back to the bay, she still hadn't warmed up from the balloon ride.

'I'm sure you'll know when the time is right.'

'That's what I'm counting on.'

'Here you go, extra sweet with one sugar and whipped cream. Just the way you like it.' He frowned. 'Or I'm assuming you still do?'

'Perfect. Thank you. You remembered?'

'Of course I remembered. Are you cold?'

'Freezing.'

'I'll pop some more logs on the fire. We'll soon warm you up.'

Smiling, Nina watched as Rowan stoked the fire. They were sitting at the end of the bar, closest to it, and as soon as the logs caught, Nina could feel the heat being emitted.

'There we are. It shouldn't take long to warm up now.' Slipping onto the bar stool next to her, Rowan wrapped his hands around his mug and looked at her. 'How did you find the balloon ride, then?'

'Strangely therapeutic.' She grinned.

'Ha, me too. It was good to talk. To talk properly about our past.'

'Yes, it was. I've spent so long hating you for what I thought you'd done and...'

'Thanks!'

'No, you know what I mean. I thought you'd cheated on me, and it's taken me to run into you again after all these years to begin facing the possibility that just maybe it was a bit of self-sabotage too.'

'You were trying to protect yourself? I understand that. It must have been difficult with Samantha there telling you stuff, but I honestly did not send her any messages or go for dinner with her.'

Nina nodded. She believed him. Looking away, she focused on the orange flames of the fire and followed the dance of the flames. She'd wasted all of this time. She'd thrown a good relationship away. By trying to protect herself from lies, she'd shaped her future by listening to them.

‘Are you okay?’

Turning back to him, she grinned. ‘Just warm.’

‘I knew it wouldn’t take long to warm the place up.’ Rowan chuckled.

Pulling her jumper over her head, Nina smoothed down her hair and folded her jumper, laying it on the bar.

‘Ouch. What happened there?’ Rowan pointed to her arm.

Looking down, Nina sighed. How long would it take her to remember she had that scar? She closed her eyes before opening them again and focusing on a bottle of gin on a shelf on the wall behind the bar. ‘I had a run-in with a burglar.’

‘What?’

‘Just that. I woke up and realised I was being burgled. Got up to get out of the house and he ran into me, knocking me against that vase my gran kept in the hallway.’

Rowan rubbed the palm of his hand over his face. ‘I’m so sorry that happened to you. How long ago was it?’

‘A couple of months, which is another reason I’m here, to hopefully get a good night’s sleep.’ She laughed, the hollow tone sounding anything but joyful.

‘Oh, Nina. That’s awful. I wish I’d been there for you.’

‘What’s done is done.’ Or it would be if she could just stop reliving the incident every time she tried to fall asleep. She glanced across at him. He was still looking at her. ‘What?’

‘I was just thinking about how different our lives would be if we hadn’t broken up.’ He trailed his finger around the edge of her scar.

She grimaced. ‘We’ve spoken about that; the kids or the travelling.’

‘No, I mean really. I’ve missed you.’

‘Yeah right.’ She shifted on the bar stool.

‘Didn’t you miss me?’

She blinked. He knew the answer. From the way he was looking into her eyes, he knew the answer. ‘I...’

Moving his hand up to her face, he ran the pad of his index finger across her cheek, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

Covering his hand with hers, she lowered them to the bar, their fingers entwining. She’d missed his touch, the warmth of his skin against hers. He’d always been there for her, he’d always been her cheerleader. They’d been each other’s. The perfect relationship. Or it would have been if Nina hadn’t

let her insecurities get the better of her. What had she done? She'd thrown away something so good. Tossed it aside on the say-so of another person. She covered his thumbnail with her finger, the jagged edge telling her he still chewed his nails. It wasn't her fault. She knew that. Deep down, she knew that she couldn't have helped the way she was feeling. Not back then. Since, she'd learned that not every relationship was the same as her parents. Since, she'd begun to trust her own instincts more, but back then, four years and three months ago...

'What are you thinking?'

'Just... I'm sorry I threw everything away. I really believed Samantha. I thought... I guess...'

'You were protecting yourself. Anyone would have done the same given your past.'

Why did he have to be so understanding? Leaning forward, it was her turn to bring her hands to his face. She cupped his cheeks with her palms and leaned forward, pausing an inch away from him. Searching his eyes. Is this really wanted he wanted? Before she could question herself any further, he leaned in, closing the small gap between them. Closing her eyes, she focused on his lips against hers. It felt right. She felt at home again.

Chapter Twelve



‘Here we go. Get these down yourselves. It’ll warm you up a bit before we open.’ Elsie placed a tray of warm croissants and a jar of jam down on the table closest to the cake and coffee counter and rubbed her hands together.

‘It’s freezing today.’ Diane pulled her coat tighter around herself. ‘I think it’s going to take me the whole morning to warm up after my walk down here.’

‘Get one of these down you and a hot drink and you’ll soon warm up, love. Our bodies just need a bit of time to get used to the drop in temperature.’ Elsie rubbed Diane’s shoulder.

‘You can say that again.’

‘Besides, when we’re rushed off our feet, we won’t have time to feel the cold.’ Brooke laughed as she picked up a croissant and smeared jam inside.

‘That’s very true.’ Sinking back into her seat, Diane wrapped her hands around her mug of coffee.

‘These are delicious.’ Nina closed her eyes, savouring the taste of the warmth from the croissant mixing with the cool of the jam.

‘Ooh, we’ve got breakfast today!’ Wendy held the front door open as Molly slipped in behind her.

‘Don’t look so surprised. You know you can always help yourself to something for breakfast.’ Elsie chuckled.

‘I know. It just signals the colder days when you bring us croissants. It’s like an autumn tradition.’ Wendy grinned and flung her coat on another table before sitting down next to Nina and taking a croissant.

Shutting the door behind her, Molly slipped her coat off, keeping her scarf wrapped around her neck for warmth. ‘It smells lovely.’

‘Thanks, love. Now eat up, drink up, and get warm. You look freezing.’

‘I am. And Wendy gave me a lift today, too.’ Molly laughed and began slathering jam on her croissant.

‘With the heating up full blast, I might add.’ Wendy grinned. ‘Which might sound lovely and warm but I’m sure it’s not working properly because

it only just managed to defrost the ice on the inside of the windscreen. It didn't actually seem to do much to warm us up.' Wendy shrugged.

'You'll have to take it along to Scott. Let him work his magic.' Elsie picked up the now-empty tray.

'Is that Olivia's partner, Scott?' Nina took a sip of coffee.

'Yes, he's a mechanic. He works at the garage up by the pub.' Diane took another bite.

'Oh, I keep meaning to. But it'll have to wait until the end of the month now. Hudson stood on the bottom drawer of his chest of drawers and has now broken it so that needs replacing too.' Wendy sighed.

'Go and speak to Scott, I'll see him right. You can't go driving about with ice covering your windscreen and the heating not working.' Elsie laid her hand on Wendy's shoulders. 'And ask Connor to look at the drawers. I'm sure he'll be able to fix them.'

'I will. And thank you, but no, I'll wait until the end of the month.'

'You'll do no such thing, Wendy, love.' Elsie shook her head. 'I wish you'd begin to accept a bit of help. I'd do it for any of you. Stop being so proud.'

Wendy scrunched her nose up. 'Okay, thank you.'

'Good. The sooner you lot learn that we look after each other and it's okay to lean on others sometimes, the better.' Elsie kissed the top of Wendy's head. 'Right, I'm off to get those rolls out of the oven and see how Teresa's getting on.'

'So, Nina, how was the balloon ride?' Diane looked across at her.

Nodding, Nina grinned. 'It was good. Really good.'

'And that smile, that's nothing to do with the fact that Rowan, our resident bartender, walked you home yesterday evening?' Diane raised her eyebrows, a grin dancing on her lips.

Rolling her eyes, Nina laughed. It was no good. She couldn't keep a straight face in front of them all. 'Maybe.'

'Ooh, what's this?' Molly leaned forward in her chair. 'Is there something going on between you and Rowan? I thought you were exes?'

'We were. We are.' Nina pulled off the end of her croissant and popped it into her mouth. 'We may have shared a little kiss.'

'Nina! So, you're back together now, then?' Diane's eyes widened.

'Yes, no. I don't know.'

‘What do you mean you don’t know? You either are or you aren’t.’ Diane leaned her elbows on the table.

Nina shrugged. ‘We didn’t discuss it. We spoke about what had happened in the past. Why we’d broken up and that, but we didn’t talk about where things went from now.’

‘I’m guessing you want to get back together with him?’ With her croissant finished, Diane took a log sip from her mug.

Shifting on her chair, Nina shrugged. She knew the answer. Of course she did, but without knowing how he felt, she felt awkward answering. After drinking hot chocolate and sharing a kiss, he’d walked her home just as everyone had been leaving the bakery. From then on, she’d lost track of time; they’d sat at the table by the window and spoken for hours. They had slipped back into the ease and comfort of their past; the conversation had flowed, and they’d laughed, cried, and chatted until the glow from the streetlamps outside had been the only light source, the moon hidden behind dark clouds.

‘That’s a yes then.’ Diane grinned at her.

‘I’m not sure what’s going on with us. We ended up talking for hours and it felt like it used to.’ Nina shrugged.

‘Aw, it does sound as though there’s definitely something still there then.’ Wendy smiled. ‘Why don’t you talk to him? Find out where you stand?’

‘I will. I guess I’m just not sure I want to know the answer.’ Looking down at her coffee mug, Nina stirred in a spoonful of sugar, hoping the combination of a sugar rush and caffeine would wake her up a bit.

‘It doesn’t sound as though you’ve got anything to worry about. Besides, he’s probably wondering the exact same thing.’ Brooke patted her on the forearm.

‘Maybe.’

Taking her coat off, Diane stretched her arms above her head. ‘I suppose we’d better tidy this up and open the door. I can see a couple of customers out there waiting already.’

Chapter Thirteen



Nina smiled as she checked her mobile.
‘What are you grinning about?’ Diane slid a full tray of freshly baked cookies beneath the counter.

‘Rowan’s just messaged, asking if I want to meet him for a walk at lunchtime.’

‘In this weather?’ Diane shuddered as she looked out of the window.

Following her gaze, Nina shrugged. It looked dreary and cold, but it wasn’t raining. ‘It’s not raining.’

‘That’s true. You can take your break now if you like? Go for your walk before it starts hammering it down.’

‘Are you sure?’ Nina looked from Diane to Brooke and back again.

‘Fine by me. I’m planning to hole up in the kitchen next to the oven on my lunch break.’ Diane laughed.

‘And I’m going to the lighthouse to have lunch with Ian, but that’s not until two.’ Brooke smiled as she turned back to serve a customer before calling over her shoulder, ‘Oh, by the way, me and Max are going bowling tonight if you want to come? You could ask Rowan, too. It might be a chance for you two to spend some more time together?’

‘Okay, thanks. I’ll ask him.’ Grinning, Nina swapped her apron for her coat and stepped outside. Diane had been right; it was still cold. It actually felt colder than it had this morning. Not that she’d been outside until now. Shivering, she zipped her coat up and began walking quickly across the cobbles. Rowan had messaged to say he’d meet her on the beach.



AS SHE STEPPED ONTO the sand, she pulled her scarf tighter around her neck. Closer to the ocean, the wind seemed stronger, carrying with it delicate sprays of ocean water, covering her coat and face with a glistening sheen.

‘Nina!’

Turning, she smiled as she watched Rowan jog towards her. ‘I thought you’d be coming from that way.’ She nodded towards the steps leading down

from the promenade at the foot of the hill.

‘I did, but I thought I’d run up and buy us some doughnuts. I remember seaside doughnuts were always your favourite.’ Grinning, he opened a paper bag, the steam rising quickly dispersed as it hit the cool air.

‘Ooh, yes, they’re definitely my favourite. Thank you.’ Taking a doughnut, she bit into it, savouring the warm and sugary goodness. ‘That’s so good.’

Taking one from the bag, he popped it in his mouth. ‘Umm, they are.’

‘Did you just eat it whole? Like in one go?’ Nina laughed.

Shrugging, he grinned before popping another in his mouth. ‘You know me.’

‘What an absolute waste of a good doughnut. A better than good doughnut.’ Shaking her head, she grinned. She’d forgotten his gift of making food disappear in one go. She watched as he swallowed, the doughnut gone, a shimmering coating of sugar clinging to his lips, the only sign he’d had two at all. She brushed the pad of her index finger against his lips. ‘You’ve got a bit of sugar...’

‘I can think of a better way of dealing with that.’ Grinning, he leaned forward, his lips touching hers.

As they kissed, she wrapped her hands around his neck. Pulling away, she licked her lips and laughed. ‘Umm, tasty.’

‘Ha-ha. Maybe we could kiss after I’ve eaten lunch too. Tuna and cheese melt, yum.’

‘Ergh, no thanks. You know how much I can’t stand tuna.’ She shuddered. ‘Yuck.’

Laughing, he scrunched up the empty paper bag and slipped it into his pocket before laying his arm around her shoulders.

‘Do you mind me asking you something?’

‘Ask away. You don’t need permission to ask me a question.’ He frowned.

‘Umm, I know. I just... this is an awkward one.’ Glancing across at him, she paused.

‘This sounds ominous.’ Letting his arm fall from her shoulders, he shoved his hands into his coat pockets.

‘It’s not. Well, I suppose it is, or it could be.’ Looking down, she stubbed at the sand with the toe of her trainers. ‘I just wanted to ask what was going on between us? I know it’s not... I know we’ve only just met again and

there's a lot to work through, but after our kiss yesterday and today I just wondered if... How are you feeling?'

'I...ummm...'

Nina nodded. That was all the answer she needed. She shrugged, her eyes focused on the little mounds of sand she was digging up with her trainer. 'It's okay. I just thought I'd ask. Hey, it's better to know, isn't it?' Was it? At this moment in time, she wasn't sure. At this moment in time, she wished she'd never asked. She wished she'd have just been okay with carrying on like they were—reminiscing, enjoying each other's company—now she'd broken the spell.

'Hey, Nina, you didn't let me finish.' Turning, Rowan held out his hands towards her, waiting until she'd taken them. 'I wanted to ask you something, too. Heck, I wanted to ask you yesterday, but I didn't because I was worried it would scare you off and send you running in the opposite direction.'

'What did you want to ask me?' She frowned.

'I wanted to ask you if you'd consider giving our relationship another chance?' He looked down at their hands as he clasped them tighter. 'I know it's probably a daft idea and that, as you said, we still have a lot to talk about, to work through, but we've still got something between us. Do you feel it, too?'

Smiling, she nodded slowly. 'I feel the exact same way.'

'Good.' Grinning, he looked away before locking eyes with her. 'And that's why we've both found ourselves in the bay at the same time. Serendipity.'

Laughing, Nina shook her head. 'You were always the sappy romantic one.'

Chuckling, Rowan drew her in for a hug. 'There's nothing wrong with being romantic. It's better than being jaded.'

'Oi, I'm not jaded. Not that much anyway.' Tightening her arms around him, she leaned her head on his shoulder and smiled. They still fitted together. 'Is that your stomach rumbling?'

'Probably. I woke up late and skipped breakfast.' His breath tickled her hair.

Pulling away, she pecked him on the lips. 'You should come and work at the bakery. We had freshly baked croissants for breakfast.'

'Warm?'

'Oh yes, and with jam.'

‘Ah, I may have to sneak in tomorrow morning, then. Shall we go and get some chips?’

‘That sounds like a good plan.’ Turning around, Nina slipped her hand into his as they made their way back towards the promenade.

‘Nina, Rowan. Hello, you two.’ Ian smiled as he stepped onto the sand from the ramp leading up to the promenade.

‘Hi.’ Nina bit down on her bottom lip.

‘Hello, mate.’ Shaking hands with him, Rowan nodded at the shopping bag Ian was carrying. ‘Been shopping?’

‘Yes, I’ve got Brooke coming for lunch today, so I thought I’d cook us a nice omelette with salad.’ Ian indicated the bag.

‘That sounds nice.’ Nina smiled.

‘I just hope she likes omelette.’ Ian frowned. ‘It’s such a blessing to have her in my life. It’s strange though, she’s my granddaughter and yet I have so much to find out about her, what she likes, dislikes...’ Ian shrugged.

‘Oh, yes. You’ve only recently discovered you had a daughter and granddaughter.’ Rowan nodded. ‘That must be tough.’

Ian rubbed his hand across his eyes. ‘It’s difficult to think of everything I’ve missed out on, to think I wasn’t there through the difficult times.’ He shook his head and nodded. ‘I’m determined to focus on the good. I can’t change the past, but I can shape the future.’

‘That’s very true.’ Rowan nodded.

‘Anyway, enough about me. How are you settling in at the bakery?’ Ian looked across at Nina.

She cleared her throat. ‘Great. Thank you. Everyone’s been really lovely. Even the customers are welcoming.’

‘That’s the bay for you.’ He glanced from Nina to Rowan and back again. ‘Gerald mentioned you two already knew each other?’

‘Yes, we used to date.’ Glancing at Nina, Rowan grinned. ‘Well, more than date. We almost got engaged.’

‘Oh, wow.’ Ian nodded. ‘And you didn’t arrange to meet back here in the bay?’

‘Nope. Just a happy coincidence. A sure sign that we should give things another go if ever there was one.’ Lifting her hand, Rowan kissed her.

‘Well, I’d say so.’ Grinning, Ian looked back at Nina, his gaze resting on her for a few moments before shaking his head. ‘You know, love, you remind

me of someone. I thought it the first time I met you. I can't quite put my finger on who, though.'

'Really?' She shifted her feet against the sand.

'Yes, it'll come to me.' Tapping the side of his head, he turned around. 'See you later.'

'Bye.' Rowan frowned. 'I wonder who you remind him of? You've not visited here before, have you?'

'Nope.' She shook her head and pulled him up the ramp. 'Come on, I can smell the chips already.'

Chapter Fourteen



Cupping her hands to her mouth, Nina breathed into them, her breath warming her skin. She looked up and down the cobbles. He was late. She stamped her feet against the ground, trying to warm her toes. How can the weather have changed so drastically in just a few short days?

A loud rev echoed across the cobbles as a motorbike appeared and slowed to a stop next to her. She watched as the motorcyclist took off his helmet before she realised it was Rowan. ‘You’ve got a motorbike?’

‘Yep.’ Grinning, he ran his fingers through his hair, swung his leg over, and reached into the small box at the back of the bike. ‘Here’s one for you.’

Nina looked from the red helmet he held towards her to him and back again. ‘You want me to come on there with you?’

He shrugged. ‘It’s perfectly safe. I’ve been riding about three years now and never had an accident.’

Scrunching up her nose, she took the helmet and slowly lowered it onto her head. Whatever her reservations about riding on a motorbike, it hadn’t escaped her how much the motorbike gear suited him. With her fingers so cold, she struggled with the strap.

‘Here, let me.’ Taking the clasp, Rowan tightened the straps. ‘Your fingers are like ice.’

‘They feel like ice, too.’ She rubbed them together.

Bringing her hands to his lips, he kissed her fingers before returning to the box at the back of the bike and pulling out a pair of gloves. ‘Here pop these on, they’ll warm you up.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Ready?’

‘I think so.’ She watched him sit down before she swung her leg over the bike and wrapped her arms around Rowan’s middle.

‘How do you feel?’

‘As though I’m going to fall off.’ She grimaced.

‘Shuffle forward and grip tighter then.’ Rowan covered her hands as she did so. ‘That’s it. Ready?’

‘Yes.’ Or at least, as she’d ever be. Give her another balloon ride any day of the week over a ride on a motorbike. She closed her eyes as she heard the rev of the engine starting and the bike begin to shake with the power beneath them.

Rowan glanced behind him and called over the sound of the engine. ‘Would you rather we get a taxi?’

‘Nope.’ She shook her head as they slowly began riding across the cobbles. This wasn’t so bad. She relaxed as the motorbike picked up speed, leaving the cobbles and the bay behind them. Soon they were weaving along the winding country roads towards Trestow, and she could feel the wind tugging on her coat and her hair whipping against the back of her neck.

Slowing down, Rowan pulled the bike into a layby and popped his visor up, indicating for Nina to do the same. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes. Great. It’s actually quite fun, isn’t it?’

Laughing, Rowan shook his head. ‘I think so. Ready to go again?’

Nina nodded.



‘HEY, YOU TWO. GLAD you could come.’ Brooke hugged Nina and then Rowan.

‘Good to see you again.’ Stepping forward, Max hugged Nina before turning to Rowan, shaking his hand and patting him on the back.

‘Thanks for inviting us.’ Nina looked around the large foyer. It looked as though there was a cinema upstairs, too. Restaurants lined the foyer, with the bowling alley situated at the back of the foyer behind a large planter filled with greenery. ‘I haven’t been bowling for ages, though, so I’ll warn you that I’m a bit rusty.’

‘Nina, being a bit rusty is a good thing for us.’ Rowan chuckled. ‘She always wiped the floor with anyone she played with.’

‘Ha-ha, is that a challenge, then?’ Brooke laughed. ‘Who am I kidding? I’m absolutely rubbish!’

‘You’re not that bad.’ Max wrapped his arm around her middle.

‘Maybe not quite as bad as you, but I’m still pretty poor.’

‘Charming.’ Max grinned at her before turning to Nina and Rowan. ‘It’s true though, we’re lucky if we get two pins down between us.’

Nina shook her head and laughed. ‘I’m sure you’ll both be great. When I say I’m rusty, I haven’t played in over four years, so I really will be terrible.’

‘Shall we go and find our lane?’ Brooke indicated the entrance to the bowling alley.

‘Good idea.’ Falling into step next to Nina, Rowan leaned across towards her. ‘Have you not been since we went together last?’

‘Nope.’ She shook her head. Bowling had always been their thing. The local bowling alley, the place they’d turned to unwind, to de-stress after a long week at work. It would have felt strange to go without him. Not that she’d had anyone she could have particularly gone with anyway, not unless you counted her brother and his family when they visited. ‘How about you?’

‘The same.’ He ran his fingers through his hair. ‘The idea of going bowling without you just felt weird.’

Looking across at him, she grinned. ‘So tonight really will be interesting then.’

‘You mean you think I actually stand a chance of winning against you?’

‘I didn’t say that.’ Nina laughed.

Chapter Fifteen



‘W oohoo! Another strike!’ Turning, Nina high-fived Rowan as he rushed towards her pulling her in for a hug.
‘You’ve not lost it.’

‘It would seem not.’ Laughing, Nina kissed him.

‘Hey, I don’t mean to interrupt, but this hardly seems fair.’ Max held up his fingers and began ticking them off. ‘First off, we play three games of individuals against individuals and you, Nina, win twice and you, Rowan, once. Then we play a game of us two against you two and again you win. I vote for mixing up the teams. Me and Rowan, against you two.’ Max looked at Nina and Brooke.

‘Ooh, I like that idea. Me and Nina will smash you two!’ Standing up from the bench, Brooke placed her arm around Nina’s shoulders and grinned.

‘Right, this is getting serious.’ Rowan rubbed his hands together. ‘Let’s make this interesting and say the losing team buys dinner?’

‘Sounds good. I just hope you’ve brought your wallet out.’ Fixing Rowan’s gaze, Nina grinned.

‘I hope you’ve got your purse.’

‘I do, but I won’t need it.’ This was just like old times. They used to play this game every Friday when they went bowling. ‘Come on, Brooke. We’ll go first.’

‘Okay. Can I just apologise in advance that I’ll probably make us lose?’ Brooke picked up a bowling ball, swung it back before letting go and watching it as it trailed slowly down the middle of the lane before veering off into the gutter. ‘I did warn you.’ She grimaced.

‘Don’t worry. I think there might just be a couple of things I can help you with there.’ Nina smiled. She and Rowan had loved taking her nephew bowling, and she was sure she could use some strategies they’d taught him all those years ago to help improve Brooke’s aim.

‘Watch and weep.’ Standing up, Rowan threw his bowling ball down the lane, pumping the air as it knocked all the pins down. ‘Yes!’

‘Don’t get too smug. This game is far from over.’ Grinning, Nina tested the bowling balls for comfort before rolling one down the lane. She watched

as it barrelled into the centre pin, sending it flying and knocking the others down, too. 'Strike!'

'Go on, Max. Don't let me down.' Rowan called across as Max flung the bowling ball down the lane, knocking over three pins on its way through. 'Not bad. Not bad.'

Nina watched as Rowan high-fived Max. How was it that after all these years apart, they'd slipped so easily into being together again?

'Nina, everything okay?' Rowan touched her elbow.

'Yes, sorry. I was miles away.' Taking a step closer to Rowan, she lowered her voice. 'I was just thinking how comfortable it all feels, us two being together again after four years apart. It almost feels as though we've never been apart at all.'

Grinning, Rowan wrapped his arms around her and looked into her eyes. 'I feel the same way. I never stopped loving you, Nina Wheat.'

'Really?' She frowned.

'I promise. This just feels so right.' Glancing away, he ran his hand across the back of his neck.

'Are you tearing up?' She ran the pads of her thumb across his furrowed forehead.

Shrugging, he grinned. 'I love you.'

'I love you too.' Leaning her head against his shoulder, she sighed. Why had she ever let him go? A loud blast of music signalled the beginning of the game in the lane next to them and a group of teenagers began cheering as one of them stepped forward to play. 'However much I love you, I still won't let you win.' Kissing him on the lips, she stepped back.

'I wouldn't expect anything less.' Grinning, Rowan went to sit next to Max.

'Okay, Brooke, your turn.' Nina joined Brooke as she picked up a bowling ball. 'Hold on, see if this one feels a better fit for you.'

Replacing her bowling ball, Brooke took the one Nina had offered her and weighed it with her hand. 'Yes, that feels better. Thanks.'

'Good. Another tip I wanted to show you is, see how you normally stand like this...' Nina stood at the top of the lane with her feet together before moving them further apart. 'Try standing like this and swinging the bowling ball back like this. Do you see my weight transfers to my back foot and then the front again?'

'Like this.' Watching her, Brooke copied.

‘Almost. Just bring your arm back like this...’ Standing behind her, Nina gently manoeuvred her arms into position. ‘That’s it.’

‘Wow, has anyone told you that you both look uncannily alike?’ Max leaned forward on the bench and placed his elbows on his knees.

‘What?’ Frowning, Brooke looked across at Max.

‘Ignore him, he’s just trying to distract you.’ Stepping away, Nina pulled her hair up into a ponytail. They didn’t look alike.

Imitating Nina, Brooke swung the bowling ball back and let go, holding her breath as she watched it glide down the middle of the lane—the middle of the lane! As the pins toppled, Brooke jumped up in the air. ‘Strike! I got a strike! A real strike! I’ve never had a strike before in my life!’

‘Yay! Good one.’ Nina grinned.

‘Thank you!’ Brooke wrapped her arms around Nina.

‘You’re welcome.’ Laughing, Nina stepped back, glancing across at Max who stepped in to hug Brooke. She looked across at Rowan. ‘Getting worried now?’

‘Me? Worried?’ He raised his eyebrows before chuckling. ‘Most definitely.’

‘I can’t believe I actually got a strike.’ Brooke walked across to the bench with Nina.

‘You did really well.’ Sinking onto the plastic bench, Nina bit down on her bottom lip. Had Max really noticed a resemblance between the two of them? Or had he just been trying to distract them? She’d go and speak to Ian tomorrow. She couldn’t let Brooke work things out for herself. Or Ian. It wouldn’t be fair on either of them.

‘Yes!’ High-fiving Max, Rowan grinned.

‘Great strike, Rowan, mate.’ Max checked the gameboard. ‘No pressure, Nina, but the game’s resting on your turn.’

Walking towards her, Rowan held out his hand, pulling her to standing. ‘Your turn.’

‘Right, of course.’ Taking his hand, Nina stood up and picked up a bowling ball. This was it. Pushing all thoughts of Max’s words and why she’d come to the bay out of her mind, she focused on the weight of the bowling ball in her hand and the pins standing proudly at the bottom of the lane. Swinging her arm back, she pictured the line in which she wanted her bowling ball to follow.

‘It’s true! You do.’ Max’s voice rose. ‘Don’t you think, Rowan? Tell me you can see a likeness between Brooke and Nina?’

‘Well, I guess so.’

Shaking her head, she tried to regain focus, but it was too late. The bowling ball had left her fingers, and she watched as it was pulled dismally into the gutter.

‘Yes! Dinner’s on you two.’ Max laughed as he held out his hand for Brooke.

Swallowing, she turned around. ‘Well done, guys. That was a good game.’ Walking to the bench, she picked up her bag and flung it over her shoulder. ‘I don’t know about you three, but I’m starving. Where’s a good place to eat around here?’

‘Me too.’ Brooke took Max’s hand, and they led the way out of the bowling alley.

‘Nina?’

Pausing, Nina looked back at Rowan. ‘Aren’t you coming?’

‘What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know what you mean? We’re going to get food.’ Nina shrugged.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t. come on, I’m starving. I could literally eat a horse right now.’

‘You’re vegetarian.’

‘That’s how hungry I am.’ She laughed.

‘Just wait up a moment.’ Standing still, he indicated to her to wait.

‘What?’ Pulling her handbag strap higher up onto her shoulder, Nina shifted on her feet before sighing and walking back to him.

‘Just sit down for a moment.’ Sinking onto a metal bench next to the large planter in the middle of the foyer, Rowan held his hand out for her.

Ignoring his hand, she sat down next to him.

‘You do know that you can talk to me if something is bothering you, don’t you?’ Rowan held her hand.

‘There’s nothing bothering me.’ Pulling her hand away, she tapped her foot against the tiled floor. ‘Brooke and Max will be wondering where we’ve disappeared to.’

‘A few minutes won’t hurt.’

Looking across at him, she shrugged. ‘I don’t know what you want me to tell you. I’m fine. Everything is fine.’

‘Nina, you got distracted. Your bowling ball ended up in the gutter.’
Rowan took her hand in his again.

‘So, am I not allowed to have a bad game? Did you see how many times Max and Brooke’s bowling balls ended up in the gutter? You’re not interrogating them.’ She leaned forward, ready to stand up.

‘Nina, the only time you’ve ever sent a bowling ball down the gutter was the night after your gran had told you she was emigrating to Australia. I know something’s wrong.’

Sighing, Nina slumped her back against the cold metal of the bench. He was right. That had been the only time she’d ever been off her game.

‘Look, you don’t have to tell me what’s bothering you, but has it got something to do with this message you need to deliver from your gran?’

Nina nodded.

‘And it has something to do with Brooke, too?’

She nodded again.

‘But you can’t tell me until you’ve spoken to all involved?’

Shaking her head, Nina closed her eyes. ‘Sorry.’

‘Hey, don’t apologise.’ Leaning forward, he looked at the floor before turning back to her. ‘You know that I’m here for you, though? Whatever happens.’

She opened her eyes and looked at him. ‘I do. And thank you.’

‘Right.’ Nodding, he stood up. ‘Let’s go and get something to eat then.’

Chapter Sixteen



Nina patted her coat pockets. Envelope, check. Letter, check. ‘See you later, Elsie.’
‘See you, love. Have a lovely, if not chilly, walk.’ Elsie called from the kitchen.

Nina felt bad not offering to help Elsie with placing the orders with the suppliers for the week, but she needed to catch Ian on his own. Pulling the door open, she stepped outside, immediately pulling her hood up against the rain. Nothing was going to stop her from telling Ian who she was and passing her gran’s message on. It had been a close call yesterday with Max and now he’d noticed a resemblance between her and Brooke, he was bound to bring it up again.

She stepped around a group of people filing into the café next door. Elsie had mentioned it would be open late today.

She’d spent over half an hour staring at herself in the mirror last night when she’d got back after bowling and dinner, and she still couldn’t work out why Max had said she and Brooke looked similar. Yes, she guessed Brooke had her gran’s eyes. She’d spotted that when she’d first met her, but Nina didn’t. Her eyes were deep brown, the colour of her dad’s. Maybe it was their noses or the shape of their eyes or something. Either way, she knew she couldn’t put the inevitable off much longer.

Reaching the top of the ramp, she shrugged. She might as well walk across the sand, even if the weather was terrible. If things didn’t go well with Ian, then she’d likely be leaving tomorrow. She should make the most of the walks along the beach while she could.

The sound of the waves crashing up the sand helped relax her, and she rolled her shoulders back, trying to loosen her tense muscles. She didn’t even know why it was worrying her so much. Well, she did. Ian had been nothing but kind to her from the moment they’d met, and a small part of her had wished he wouldn’t be. A part of her had hoped he would turn out to be not very nice, or something, something which would stop her feeling so guilty. Not that she should, but she couldn’t help it. Her gran hadn’t even told him she’d been pregnant, and to see Ian well up when he’d spoken to her and

Rowan about the daughter he had never got to meet and about Brooke, it made her feel guilty that her gran hadn't told him.

She walked closer to the ocean, the water just out of reach of her trainers. Her gran had explained, had told her everything, the circumstances surrounding the baby's birth. Her aunt's birth. And Nina knew why she'd done it, but she still couldn't shake the sadness that Ian hadn't even known her aunt had been born.

Well, today, hopefully, she'd be able to pass on some answers to him. Hopefully, he'd be able to understand the circumstances that had led to her gran doing what she had.

'Nina!'

Looking up at the promenade, Nina shielded her eyes from the rain.

'Rowan?'

'Have you seen a dog? Brown and white with a red collar?'

Turning around on the spot, she looked up and down the beach. 'No. Have you lost one?'

'Not me, a couple have, though. They came running into the pub asking if we'd seen it so I offered to help look.'

Nodding, she watched as he began running up the promenade, searching for the dog. She looked from Rowan to the lighthouse and back again. 'Hold up, I'll help.'

'Cheers.' Pausing, Rowan waited at the top of the steps, still looking this way and that.

Joining him on the promenade, she paused. His red jumper was stained a deep shade of burgundy from the rain and water dripped from his hair. He must have been searching for some time. 'Where are we looking?'

'The owners are searching at the top of the hill and a couple of regulars are heading towards that end of the beach, so I guess we've got the cliffs.' He shrugged and began jogging back towards the shops, heading past them towards a small path cut into the cliffs.

Following him, she squinted ahead, trying to search the long grass for the lost dog. 'What's his name?'

'Bruno.'

Nina nodded as she ran up the steep slope behind Rowan. 'Bruno!'

'Bruno!'

'What's that over there?' Nina pointed across to some ferns to her right. She looked across at Rowan, who was already a few metres ahead, and

shrugged. She'd go and check. If it was Bruno, then she'd call ahead again and get his attention. Slowing her pace as she neared the ferns, she tried to be as quiet as she possibly could. The last thing they needed was for her to startle the dog and have him run off again.

Almost there. She frowned. He wasn't moving. At all. The glimpse of white showing through the leaves hadn't moved an inch since she'd first spotted it. Maybe he was hurt? Had injured himself or had realised he was lost and was just terrified?

'Bruno?' She spoke quietly, calling his name, telling him everything would be okay. She was almost there now, could almost touch the ferns.

'Nina! Stop!'

Frowning, she straightened her back and looked around. Rowan was running towards her. 'I think I've found him. There's something behind the ferns.'

'Wait, don't go any further. Look at the signs.' Reaching her, he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back. 'The signs.'

Steadying herself, she looked around. Where were the signs? Oh there. Signs warning of a steep drop and slippery ground. 'Did you just save my life?'

'Maybe.' Rowan shrugged. 'I may have overreacted a little, but the cliffs can be dangerous, especially when it's raining and getting dark.'

'Well, whether you overreacted or not, thank you.' She looked across at him and smiled. 'You don't think that bit of white behind the ferns could be Bruno, then?'

'No, look, ironically it's one of the signs which has fallen.' Kneeling down, he pointed.

'Oh, yes. Well, now I feel daft.' Her hood fell as she shook her head.

'You are not daft.' Standing next to her, he gently tucked her hair behind her ears and pulled her hood back up.

'Thank you.' Leaning forward, she kissed him before pulling back and heading further up the path. 'Bruno!'

'Bruno!' Cupping his hands around his mouth, Rowan slowly spun around, calling his name.

'There! There he is!' Patting Rowan's arm, Nina pointed back down the path. 'I see him.'

'Oh yes. Bruno, come on, buddy. Over here. Come to us.' Kneeling down, Rowan held out his hand.

Nina kneeled down next to him and watched as the dog began walking towards them, hesitant at first, but the closer he got the more confident he became and soon he was standing in front of them, wagging his tail.

‘Got you.’ Taking Bruno’s collar, Rowan petted his head, tickling his ears. ‘That’s it, Bruno. Good boy.’

Shrugging her handbag from her shoulder, Nina unclipped the strap and clipped it to Bruno’s collar. ‘There we go. A makeshift lead.’

Standing back up, Rowan grinned at her.

‘What? Doesn’t everyone carry a handbag with a makeshift lead attached?’ She laughed before linking arms with him. ‘Come on, let’s reunite him with his owners and get you dry before you catch a cold.’

‘Do you think that’s true?’

‘What? That you can catch a cold from actually being cold and wet? I’ve no idea.’ Shaking her head, she laughed.

‘Hold on one moment, I’ll just get the torch up on my phone so we can see where we’re going.’ Pausing, he pulled his phone from his back pocket and shone the torch in front of them.

Chapter Seventeen



Leaning her elbows on the bar, Nina watched as Rowan finished serving one of the regulars. Judging by the way he interacted with them, if she hadn't known better, she would have assumed he'd worked at the pub for years.

With the customers heading to their table, Rowan turned around and called through the doorway behind the bar, 'Gerald, I'm heading out on my break now.'

Nina slipped off her barstool and pulled on her coat.

'Sorry about that. Where shall we go?' Grabbing his coat, he shrugged into it.

'How about Daisy and Ollie's restaurant? Elsie said they serve cream teas now.' Nina yawned.

'A cream tea sounds yummy.' Lifting the bar hatch, he walked across to her and drew her in for a hug, kissing her on the forehead. 'You look tired.'

'I'm okay. We've just had a busy day at the bakery.' She shrugged. She was always tired. She was used to being tired.

'You're not sleeping properly, are you? You've got that tired look you always got when things got stressful at work, and you couldn't sleep. I've noticed you've been like it since seeing you again here.' Laying his arm across her shoulder, he pushed open the pub door, and they braced themselves for the drop in the temperature.

'I just have a bit of trouble sleeping nowadays. I cope.' Zipping her coat up, she wrapped her arm around Rowan's waist as they began walking down the hill.

'Did it start after you were burgled?'

Frowning, she looked across at him. 'Yes, how did you guess?'

He shrugged and pulled her towards him slightly. 'Just a lucky guess. Look, why don't you sleep round here tonight? We can watch films and relax on the sofa. You can fall asleep in front of the TV. You might be able to get a good night's sleep that way. I can stay awake.'

'Aw, you'd do that for me?'

'Stay awake all night? Of course I would.'

‘Thanks, but I’ll survive. I can’t ask you to do that.’ She smiled, her grip around his waist tightening.

‘You’re not asking. I’m offering.’ He shrugged. ‘Think about it. The offer’s there.’

‘Thank you.’ Pausing, she turned to him and gently laid her hands against his cheeks, pulling him towards her. ‘I really do love you, Rowan.’

‘I love you too.’

The second she felt the warmth of his lips against hers, the shrill ringtone of her mobile rang through the quiet street. Sighing, she pulled it from her coat pocket. ‘Sorry, I need to answer this.’

‘I’ll walk on and get us a table.’ Rowan nodded in the direction of the restaurant.

‘Okay, thanks.’ Nina smiled before answering her mobile. ‘Hi, Gran.’

‘Hello, Nina, darling. How is your stay in Penworth Bay going? Are you still volunteering in that little bakery?’

Nina smiled. It was good to hear her voice. ‘It’s not as little as I thought it would be. They do all sorts there, there’re tables and chairs where customers can order coffees and cakes. There’s even a wedding planning department. It’s brilliant.’

‘Oh good. You’re enjoying yourself, then?’

‘Yes. The rest of the staff are just super lovely, and the customers are really nice, too. Everyone’s made me feel so welcome.’ Should she tell her that she’s working alongside Brooke?

‘You sound happy.’

‘I am, and you’ll never guess who is living in the bay.’ Nina watched as Rowan paused at the bottom of the hill, turning around and waving to her before disappearing along the seafront.

‘Go on...’

‘Rowan. He’s working at the pub here.’ Nina grinned.

‘Your Rowan? What a small world it is. Have you spoken to him?’

Nina looked down at the ground and kicked at a small stone. ‘We’re kind of dating again.’

‘Dating? Oh, Nina, he broke your heart last time. Please be careful.’

Nina closed her eyes. She could hear the concern in her gran’s voice. ‘It’s okay. It wasn’t him. He hadn’t done anything wrong. It’s a long story and I’ll explain it all to you, but things are going really well.’

‘In that case, I’m pleased for you. For both of you. I always said you two were a good fit, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, you did.’

‘Did you manage to speak to Ian? How did he take the news? Did he understand?’ Her gran’s voice faltered.

‘I haven’t had the chance to speak to him yet. I will, though. I promise.’

‘That’s okay, darling. I don’t want to make things difficult for you. Your trip is as much a chance for you to have a holiday as it is about... everything else. Have you met him?’

‘Yes, I’ve met him and he seems really kind.’ Nina plunged her free hand into her pocket.

‘He always was.’

‘I’ll talk to him today.’

‘Only if you can.’

‘I will, Gran. Love you.’

‘Love you too, darling. Take care.’

Nina held the phone against her ear long after her gran had gone. She missed her. And she needed to speak to Ian. Today. Now. Elsie had told her that he was taking her out straight after closing so it would have to be now. Looking at her phone, she scrolled through to Rowan’s name and pressed *Call*.

‘Hey, Nina. I’ve got us a table overlooking the beach. It’s inside and nice and warm too.’

‘Rowan, I’m really sorry, but there’s something I need to do right now. Do you mind if we catch up later instead?’ She closed her eyes, sensing his disappointment.

‘Right, yes, that’s fine. Is everything okay?’

‘I hope it will be. I’ll explain later.’ Slipping her phone back into her pocket, Nina focused on the task ahead and hurried back to the bakery. If she was going to speak to Ian now, then she needed to collect something first.

Chapter Eighteen



Nina knocked on the door again and looked over towards the edge of the rocky outcrop the lighthouse was built on. The waves were crashing right up towards the top of the rocks, the ocean's spray covering the surrounding rocks. She looked down at her jeans. The denim covering her ankles and lower legs had stained from the waves which had sprayed water across the causeway.

'Nina, hello, love. What a lovely surprise.' Ian stepped aside and ushered her through the door.

'Hi, I was just wondering if you had a couple of minutes spare?' Chewing her bottom lip, Nina stepped inside.

'Of course. What can I do for you, love?' Closing the door behind him, he indicated the sofa. 'Please, take a seat. Can I get you a drink? Tea? Coffee? Water?'

'Umm, a tea sounds nice, thank you.' She waited until Ian had disappeared through a doorway, presumably into the kitchen, before perching on the edge of the sofa. Placing her handbag on her lap, she pulled out the letter her gran had received from Ian and the envelope her gran had asked her to give to him. If she had them to hand, she wouldn't be able to back out of talking to him.

'Here we go. One tea. I wasn't sure if you took sugar or milk, so I went all posh and brought out a milk jug and a sugar pot. Help yourself.' Lowering the tray to the coffee table, he began unloading the cups.

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. I'll just pop the milk jug and sugar pot here...' Milk sprayed across the coffee table, dripping down to the carpet as he knocked the jug.

'Are you okay?' Pulling a handful of tissues from the tissue box at the end of the coffee table, Nina began mopping up the milk.

Staggering back, Ian sat down heavily on the small sofa opposite. 'My letter...'

Nina looked down at the letter lying on her lap and back at the sodden tissue in her hand. Carefully lowering the tissue to the tray, she wiped the

milk from her hands across the legs of her jeans and picked the letter up.
'Yes.'

'You... you...' Slumping back against the sofa cushions, Ian rubbed his palms across his face. 'You know her. You know Nancy?'

'I'm...'

'No, don't tell me.' He waved his hand in front of his face. 'That's why I thought I recognised you. You're her granddaughter. Am I wrong?'

'No, you're not wrong.' Nina looked down at her trainers. She should have offered to take them off at the door. She would have walked water and sand all through the living room now.

'And your nan, gran, grandmother, she read my letter?'

'Gran. She's my gran. Yes, she read the letter.' Picking it up, Nina held it between her fingers.

'I wondered if she may have moved. I only had the address she gave me all those years ago. And that was a struggle to find.'

'She's moved, but I'm living in her old house now. She lives in Australia now or she would have made the trip down here herself.' Nina ran the pad of her index finger around the edge of the letter.

Ian nodded. 'Australia, you say. She got there then?'

Nina frowned.

'She'd told me her dream was to live in Australia.'

'Oh.' Nina hadn't realised moving to Australia had been a dream of her gran's. From what she'd told her soon after her aunt was born, her gran met her grandad and got married. She must have put her dreams on hold whilst raising her mum and then later Nina and her brother. She frowned. Why had her gran never mentioned it? Shaking her head, Nina placed Ian's letter on the coffee table and picked up the envelope. 'She asked me to give you something.'

'She didn't want to send it to me? Or speak to me over the phone?'

'She...my gran...these were at the house. She didn't want them to be sent in the post. She didn't want to risk losing them.' Nodding, she lifted the flap of the envelope and carefully passed the black and white photographs across the coffee table.

Leaning forward, Ian wiped his hands down his shirt before taking the photographs. 'My Heather? My little girl?'

'Yes.' Nina swallowed as Ian looked through the small stack of photographs. She knew what he would be seeing; a photograph of her gran

holding Heather, a photograph of Heather in the hospital crib, a photograph of Heather with her new parents. 'That last photo, the photo with the couple who adopted Heather. My gran said that's her favourite one. She says she used to look at it for hours and be comforted knowing Heather would grow up happy.'

Ian nodded, tears streaming down his cheeks as he studied the picture.

'Here.' Holding out the box of tissues, Nina batted away her own tears.

'Thank you.' Taking a wedge of tissues, Ian wiped his face.

Clearing her throat, Nina took a deep breath in. 'She asked me to tell you that she's sorry. She never meant to keep Heather's birth a secret from you but when her parents, my great grandparents, found out she was expecting, they sent her away and then after the birth, when she went back home, her parents wouldn't let her out of their sight.' Nina took another tissue and wiped up a splash of milk she'd missed. 'She married shortly after that and as time went by, she began to believe her parents that it was best Heather's birth was left in the past.'

'She'd wanted to tell me?' Ian glanced up at her before looking back at the photographs.

'Yes. She wanted to tell you. She asked me to let you know that she'd got as far as Trestow on the bus once before being pulled aside by a police officer and taken home. Her dad had reported her missing.' Nina shrugged.

'That means a lot. It means a lot to know that she wanted to tell me. When Brooke turned up in the bay...' Ian paused and frowned. 'Do you know Brooke is Heather's daughter? Your cousin?'

Nina nodded. 'I worked it out.'

'Does she know?'

'I thought it best to leave it to you to tell her.'

'Right. Of course.' Lying the photographs carefully on the sofa next to him, he wiped his palms down his trousers. 'When Brooke turned up in the bay, when she told me about Heather, I worried that you gran hadn't told me because she didn't want me to know.'

'She did. She always wanted you to know, she just never found the right time to.' Nina shifted position on the sofa. 'She wanted me to ask you if she'd be able to speak with you, to explain everything. And Brooke too.'

Looking down, Ian pinched the bridge of his nose. 'Sorry, this is... It's a lot to take in, that's all.'

Nodding, Nina bit down on her bottom lip. 'I understand.' She pointed to the front door. 'I'll get going now. Give you some time.' Standing up, she picked up her coat and opened the front door.

'Thank you, love. This must have all been very difficult for you, too. I appreciate you coming here today.'

Nina nodded before stepping out into the cold. Letting the door swing shut behind her, she stood and stared across the causeway towards the beach, the restaurant, the shops. She let the chill from the wind creep in through the woollen fibres of her jumper, felt the wind whip her hair against her cheeks, listened as the waves crashed against the rocks. She'd done it. She'd told him. Now only time would tell what would happen next.

Shivering against the cold, she shrugged into her coat and began walking back across the causeway, trying her best to keep to the centre of the narrow pathway, as far away from the water as she could.

Chapter Nineteen



‘Nina?’
Blinking, Nina tore her mind away from her thoughts and focused on the customer in front of her. ‘Sorry, what was it you’d asked for?’

‘Five rolls and one of those cupcakes with the pink swirls on. Please.’

‘Coming right up.’ Turning, Nina began placing five cupcakes in a cake box.

‘Psst...’ Diane nudged her elbow. ‘He asked for *five* rolls and *one* cupcake.’

‘Did he?’

‘What’s up? Since you’ve been back from lunch, you’ve been in your own world.’ Taking the cake box from her, Diane began putting the cupcakes back on their tray.

‘I just...’

‘Here you go, five rolls and one cupcake. On the house. I hope you have a great afternoon.’ Brooke smiled at the customer before turning to Nina and placing her hand on her forearm. ‘We’re worried about you, that’s all. Did you want to go and have a lie-down or get something to eat?’

Tightening her apron strings, Nina looked at them both. ‘No, I’ll be fine. Sorry, I’ll concentrate now.’

‘Okay. If you’re sure.’ Diane raised her eyebrows.

Taking a deep breath, Nina turned to the next customer. She just needed to get through the rest of this shift. When the bakery closed, she could have a bit of time to go over things, to think about what had happened, how Ian had reacted. ‘Hi, what can I get you today?’

‘Hello, Nina. How are you today?’

Realising who was standing in front of the counter, Nina smiled. ‘Hi, Edna. I’m okay, thank you. How are you and your two grandsons?’

‘Oh, we’re just fine. Thank you. Justin is at an after-school art club, so me and Freddie thought we’d wander down here and get us both and Justin a treat for after his club.’

‘An art club? That sounds fun. What treat would you like, Freddie?’

‘Can I have a cookie, please?’ The small boy stood on his tiptoes and pointed to a cookie at the back of the tray. ‘Can I have that one, with the extra bit of chocolate on, please?’

Picking up the tongs, Nina tapped the cookie. ‘This one?’

‘Yes, please.’

Placing it in a paper bag, she passed it across to Freddie. ‘There you go. Is Justin having a cookie, too?’

Sinking his teeth into the cookie, Freddie nodded.

‘I’ll have one as well, please, Nina. Judging by the rate Freddie here is getting through this one, they must taste good.’ Edna chuckled.

‘They must do.’ Nina passed the bag across to Edna.

‘Thank you.’ Pulling a note from her purse, Edna pressed it into Nina’s hand. ‘Get yourself one too, dear.’

Looking at the note, Nina watched as Edna and Freddie made their way out of the bakery. She missed her gran. She’d know what to do, how to act, what to say.

‘Aw, that was really sweet of her.’ Brooke pulled out an empty tray from behind the glass of the counter.

‘Yes, it was.’ Nina slipped the note into the till.

‘Make sure you get yourself something. That’s what she wanted.’

‘I will. Just in a while.’

‘Here, I’ll take the tray through. I need to grab a glass of water. I’m gasping. Does anyone else want one?’ Taking the tray off Brooke, Diane headed towards the kitchen door.

‘Yes, please, I’ll have one.’ Brooke called after her before leaning against the back counter. ‘Thank goodness for a lull.’

‘Yes.’ Nina looked outside and watched the rain hammering against the window. ‘That’ll be why.’

‘Is it wrong of me to be secretly pleased it’s raining so I get to have a rest?’ Brooke laughed as slipped out of her shoes.

‘No, I don’t think so.’ Nina shrugged. ‘I was thinking the same thing.’

‘Good, I’m glad I’m not the only one.’

The kitchen door swung open and shut again as Diane re-joined them behind the counter.

‘You didn’t get my water?’ Pulling her shoes back on, Brooke looked at Diane. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll go and grab one.’

‘No, don’t. Just wait a while.’ Rubbing her forehead, Diane frowned.

‘Why? What’s happened?’ Frowning, Brooke slipped her shoes back off.

‘I’m not sure. Ian’s in there and he looks as though he’s been crying.’

‘Ian?’ Brooke glanced towards the kitchen door. ‘Should I see if he’s okay?’

‘I don’t know. I’d wait a few minutes. I’m not sure what’s going on.’ Leaning against the counter, Diane crossed her arms. ‘All I know is, I’ve never walked into that kitchen before and been in a hurry to come back out again.’

Looking at the floor, Nina tried to slow her breathing. Ian must be telling Elsie about her. That was it. She’d have to leave. What about Rowan? She shook her head. She shouldn’t be thinking like this. Ian had just had a massive shock, and she was worrying about herself. It wasn’t right.

She jerked her head up as the kitchen door swung open again, and Elsie walked out.

‘Brooke, love. Do you mind if you pop back to the kitchen for a few minutes, please?’ Elsie glanced at Diane. ‘You two will be okay for a while, won’t you?’

‘We will.’ Diane frowned.

‘Good, good.’ Turning back to the kitchen door, Elsie paused and walked back to the counter. Placing her hand on Nina’s forearm, she spoke softly. ‘Everything will turn out all right.’

Nodding slowly, Nina watched as Elsie retreated back into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind her. She knew precisely what Brooke was about to find out. How would she feel? Would she be angry with Nina? Of course she would. Why wouldn’t she? Nina had befriended her, worked alongside her, they’d even been bowling together and at no point had Nina hinted to her who she was. Not once had Nina mentioned the fact that they were related.

And Elsie, what must she think of her? She stared at the closed door. She couldn’t imagine what was being said in there. She didn’t know Elsie, Ian, or Brooke well enough to second-guess how they were all reacting to the news.

‘Nina, do you know what’s going on?’ Diane looked at her. ‘I haven’t seen Ian, or Elsie for that matter, look so upset and flustered. What did Elsie say to you? Did she tell you what was going on?’

Diane too. And Teresa, Molly and Wendy. Everyone she’d met at the BBQ on her first night in the bay, and then again at the pub quiz. Rowan. She’d kept it all from him and he’d asked, he’d asked what was going on,

what had brought her here to Penworth Bay. Looking around the bakery, she suddenly felt trapped, watched. She couldn't do this. She couldn't wait out here, wondering what was unfolding on the other side of that door. She had to get away. She had to get some air. She pointed to the bakery door. 'I have to go.'

'Go where?' Diane walked towards her.

'Out. I need to get some air. I'm sorry.' Before Diane could say anything else, Nina yanked her apron over her head and headed to the front door, flinging her apron onto the counter as she went.

Stepping outside, she closed the door on Diane's questions. She was only concerned about her. Nina knew that, but she wouldn't be for long. Not when she found out what Nina had been hiding from them all.

She hardly noticed the rain as it pelted down, sinking quickly through her jumper. She didn't care. She just had to get away. Away from everyone. Away from the reasons she came to the bay. Running down the ramp onto the deserted beach, she sank onto the sand, pushing her back against the seawall, the rough concrete protecting her a little from the worst of the downpour.

Curling her fingers into fists, she tried to stop them from shaking. She shouldn't be feeling like this. Ian, Brooke, Elsie even, they had the right to feel like this. Not her. She'd only delivered a message. A message that would have consequences for all involved. Her included.

Her ringtone shrieked through the roar of the ocean and the splash of rain against the promenade above, and Nina pulled it out of the back pocket of her jeans. Looking at the caller ID, Nina closed her eyes, waiting until it rang out, until silence surrounded her again, before she put it away. It had been her gran who had rung. She should have answered. She would be wondering how Ian took the news. But she couldn't. She couldn't bring herself to talk to her. To tell her everything would be okay when she wasn't sure it would be.

Elsie had said the same thing. She'd said it would all be okay. Elsie didn't know either. She was just guessing, hoping.

Bringing her knees to her chest, Nina balled her hands into fists again, lowering her head and pressing her fists against her eyes. She wanted to block it all out. She wanted to travel back in time, to not have told Ian. She wanted to stop them from telling anyone else. She wanted things to be how they had been this morning.

Crossing her arms, she leaned her head onto her arms and looked into the dark void she'd created. There was nothing she could do. She couldn't undo

the things she'd said, the messages she'd passed on. And she shouldn't want to. Ian deserved to know; Brooke deserved to know. Everyone at the bakery and in the extended bakery family deserved to know. That was the only way Ian would get the support he needed to come to terms with what had happened.

She was being selfish. She knew she was. She was thinking of herself. She wanted to unsay the things she'd said because it would make her life easier, and that wasn't fair. She shouldn't be thinking of herself. Not now. Not with everything going on.

Closing her eyes, she kept herself still, small. She didn't know how long she'd wait here. She didn't know what the time was or how long she'd already been sitting there. When she opened her eyes again, the sun was setting, a deep orangey red glow disappearing beneath the horizon.

Should she go back now? Go back to the bakery and find out what was being said? Find out if they wanted her to leave? She leaned her head back against the concrete wall and focused on the rain cascading across her forehead, her cheeks, her nose. She'd go back in a bit. She'd just leave it a little while longer. She closed her eyes again.



‘NINA? HECK, NINA, LOOK at you.’

Opening her eyes, Nina watched as Rowan ran up to her, sinking to his knees in front of her and shrugging out of his coat. She let herself be pulled gently away from the wall; she sat still while he wrapped his coat around her before lowering her back into position.

‘Have you been sitting here all this time? Everyone’s been looking for you.’

She felt the pads of his fingers against her cheeks as he carefully wiped her dripping hair away from her eyes.

‘Come on, let’s get you clean and dry. Can you stand up? I’ll take you back to the bakery and you can change out of these wet clothes.’

‘No. not the bakery.’ Her voice was croaky, her throat sore. She didn’t want to go back there. Not yet.

‘Okay, okay. Back to the pub then.’

Nodding, Nina let Rowan take her by the elbows and support her as he pulled her to standing.

Chapter Twenty



As she turned the shower off and reached for the towel, she heard a quiet tapping on the bathroom door.

‘I’ve put some clothes on the rail for you. They’ll be a bit baggy, but they’ll be better than putting your wet stuff back on.’ Rowan’s voice was quiet, calm.

‘Thanks.’ Stepping out of the bath, she pulled a blue t-shirt of Rowan’s over her head. She recognised this one. Had she bought it for him one birthday? Would he have kept it that long? She shrugged. It didn’t matter. Pulling a pair of jogging bottoms on, she used her hairband to tighten them before she towelled her hair a bit more.

‘Are the clothes okay?’

Pulling the door open, Nina nodded as Rowan pushed himself away from the wall opposite where he’d been leaning.

‘Looking good.’ He grinned and held out his arms.

Sinking into his embrace, Nina hugged him back, squeezing him tight.

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Rubbish.’ She whispered against his chest.

‘I’ve made you some hot chocolate. Come on through to the living room and let’s sit down for a bit.’

Nodding, she followed him along the hallway and into the living room before sinking into the sofa cushions. Once Rowan had laid a throw across her knees, he passed her a mug. ‘Thanks.’ Wrapping her hands around the hot ceramic, she filled her lungs with the warm, sweet steam.

‘I rang and told Elsie you’re here.’

Frowning, Nina looked up at him. ‘Why?’

‘Because she’s been looking for you. Elsie, Ian, Brooke, Diane, Teresa, Molly and Wendy. They’ve all been looking for you.’ Perching on the coffee table in front of her, Rowan leaned down and gently stroked her hair from her forehead. ‘They’ve been worried about you. We’ve all been worried about you.’

‘You know?’

‘Not everything. No. Just that your gran is Brooke’s mum’s mum.’ Rowan shook his head. ‘Is that right? You’re related to Brooke? Is that why you got upset when Max said you two looked alike?’

Nina nodded. Everyone would know now. Everyone would know how she’d come down here and kept this whole thing a secret for so long. ‘I wanted to tell you.’

‘But you had to tell Ian first? That’s understandable.’

‘I don’t know what’s going to happen now. I think I’m going to have to go back home.’ Looking down into her mug, she watched as two bubbles danced together on the surface of her hot chocolate before hitting the ceramic wall of the mug and finally bursting.

‘No, you don’t. Elsie and Ian, they’re worried about you. Not angry at you. You didn’t do any of this. And by the sounds of it, it was all out of your gran’s control, too. Most of it anyway.’ Leaning down, he wrapped his hands around hers, taking some of the weight of the mug. ‘No one thinks any different of you.’

‘Of course they do. They will. They all will. How can’t they? I should have told Ian straight away. I should have told Brooke as soon as I’d worked out who she was.’

‘They’ll understand why you didn’t.’

Nina closed her eyes; she wasn’t sure they would.

‘I’ll give Elsie a call, tell her she and Ian can pop by. You’ll see, it’ll all be okay.’

‘No! Please don’t.’ Putting the mug on the coffee table, Nina wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. ‘I’m tired. I just want to sleep. Can I stay here tonight? Please?’

‘Of course you can.’ Standing up, Rowan kissed her on the forehead before sitting at the far end of the sofa and lying a cushion over his lap.

‘Thank you.’ Lying down, her head on the cushion, Nina closed her eyes.

Chapter Twenty One



‘Morning, sleepyhead.’
Pushing herself to sitting, Nina stretched her arms above her head and looked up at Rowan. ‘Did I sleep right through?’

‘You sure did.’

Taking a deep breath, she smiled. She’d forgotten what it felt like to have a good night’s sleep.

‘I’ve got your clothes here. I ran them through a quick wash and let them dry on the radiator overnight.’ Rowan patted the pile of clothes he was carrying.

‘Thanks.’ Folding the throw, she laid it over the back of the sofa and stood up.

‘Gerald is cooking us breakfast, and then we can wander over to the bakery. What do you think?’ Rowan ran his fingers through his hair.

‘Umm.’ She remembered now why she had stayed at the pub. She could feel the knot of nervousness returning to her stomach but, equally, she knew she had to face up to things. She knew she needed to go and clear the air with Ian, Brooke, and Elsie. ‘I can go on my own.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I need to face them at some point.’ She nodded.

‘Okay.’ Stepping towards her, he wrapped his arms around her.

Burying her face in the dip of his shoulder, she breathed in the familiar scent of his aftershave. ‘Thank you for everything.’

‘Hey, there’s no need to thank me.’ He kissed her on top of her head. ‘It really will be okay. Else and Ian are just worried about you.’

Taking a deep breath, she pulled away and nodded. She’d find out soon enough, anyway.



SLOWING DOWN, SHE FOCUSED on her breathing as she walked across the cobbles. She could see the bakery now. She could see the queue of customers trailing outside. Another way she’d let them all down. Chewing

her bottom lip, she winced as she felt her teeth pierce the skin, her mouth filling with blood. It was now or never.

‘Excuse me, please.’ Sidestepping around the customers, Nina walked into the bakery, pausing in the doorway.

‘Nina.’ Diane waved at her from behind the counter before nudging Brooke on the arm.

Standing still, Nina watched as Teresa quietly slipped out from behind the coffee and cake counter and over to the bakery counter, taking the bag of pastries from Brooke’s hands and turning to the customer. Nina looked down at the floor. She shouldn’t have come here. She should have accepted Rowan’s support, or better still, asked Ian to meet her at the pub.

‘Hi.’

Keeping her eyes focused on the floor tiles, Nina waited for Brooke to tell her what she thought of her. She waited for her to tell her how disappointed she was that Nina had kept everything from her. She waited...

‘Do you want to come on through to the kitchen? Elsie and Ian are waiting for you.’ Brooke spoke quietly, kindly.

Nodding, Nina followed her through the bakery and watched as she pushed open the door to the kitchen, waiting for her to go through. Pausing, she looked around the bakery. Everything appeared normal, as it had done since she’d arrived. Customers chattered and laughed. A small child in a buggy wriggled, trying to escape. Wendy and Molly were standing talking to a couple at the wedding counter, pointing out the various wedding cakes on display. The only thing which was different was the fact that Teresa had left her position behind the coffee and cake counter to relieve Brooke.

‘Nina, love. I’m so glad you’re back.’ Rushing towards her, Elsie pulled her in for a hug as the door swung gently shut behind her, the noise from the bustling bakery muffled.

Stepping away, Nina kept her eyes focused on the floor. ‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I should have told you all why I was here in the beginning, as soon as I’d arrived in the bay. I won’t make things awkward. I’ll get my things and get going.’

‘You’ll do no such thing, love.’ Ian’s voice was soft, strong.

Looking up, Nina met his gaze. ‘But I...’

‘You had a daunting task. You came to a strange place to tell me, a total stranger to you, that your gran had given our child up for adoption. On top of that, you had to tell Brooke, another total stranger, that you are related to her.

No one can blame you for not telling us straight away.’ Stepping towards her, Ian took her hands in his. ‘And no one is blaming you for the message you brought us either.’

‘You’re not angry with me? Or disappointed?’

‘Absolutely not. How could I be? How could any of us be? There’s nothing to be angry about and certainly no reason to be disappointed. I’m sorry if the way I reacted to your news made you feel that way. It had never ever been my intention. I was simply trying to wrap my head around everything.’ Ian’s voice cracked.

‘No, I... you didn’t make me feel like that. I just assumed that was how you, all of you, would feel about me.’ She ran her tongue over her cut lip.

‘Good, I’m glad it wasn’t my reaction which made you feel that way. I’m glad you came. I’m glad you told me what you did. Thank you for bringing me the missing piece of the puzzle. I’ll never forget what you did for me.’ Ian held out his arms.

Nodding her head, she hugged Ian back. She’d never meant to hurt him.

‘My turn now. She is my cousin, after all.’ Grinning, Brooke wrapped her arms around Nina and Ian.

‘Well, I’m never one to want to feel left out.’ Chuckling, Elsie joined the hug.

As arms were lowered and Elsie, Ian and Brooke stepped away, Nina smiled and looked across at Brooke. ‘I’ve never had a cousin before.’

‘Me neither, but I’m glad I do now and I’m glad it’s you.’ Grinning, Brooke hugged her again, laughing. ‘I can’t believe Max guessed we were related when we were bowling.’

‘I know. What did he say when you told him?’ Nina tucked her hair behind her ears.

‘After the shock had worn off, he said, ‘I told you so’.’ Brooke laughed. Shaking her head, Nina laughed. ‘What happens now?’

‘Now?’ Elsie rubbed Nina’s arm. ‘Now, we have a coffee before we get back to work.’

‘You’re sure you don’t want me to leave?’

‘Of course, we don’t. We’ve got a lot of catching up to do. You’re family now. You’re part of the bakery family and you’re Brooke and Ian’s family, too.’

‘Thank you.’ Nina looked from Brooke to Ian. Was she really part of their family?

‘And before you ask, you’re my beautiful Heather’s niece, which automatically makes you part of my family.’ Ian wiped his eyes. ‘And Elsie is right, we do have a lot of catching up to do.’

Chapter Twenty Two



‘Do you really think this is a good idea?’ Nina grimaced as she looked around the hall. Roller skaters rushed past, the more experienced of them travelling at dizzying speeds as they weaved in and out of the slower skaters.

‘Believe me, it wasn’t my idea.’ Rowan chuckled as he tied the laces on his roller skates.

‘Hey, are you two ready?’ Brooke skated up, pivoting on her skates before coming to a stop.

‘Almost.’ Smiling, Nina quickly shoved her feet into her skates and tightened the laces. Spending the night trying to balance and avoid a trip to A & E might not be her idea of fun, but it was Brooke’s, and she was glad Brooke was letting her into her life.

‘Great. Have you rollerskated before? Sorry, I should have asked you before we got here.’ Brooke frowned.

‘No, that’s okay. Yes, I have.’ She automatically touched her wrist.

‘Great. How about you, Rowan?’

‘Once or twice.’ Nodding, Rowan stood up, taking a moment to balance on his skates before holding out his hand to Nina.

‘Phew. We’ll see you out there, shall we?’

‘Yep.’ Holding up her hand, Nina watched as Brooke and Max skated smoothly onto the floor. ‘Don’t you dare tell her that I broke my wrist roller-skating.’

‘My lips are sealed.’ Rowan ran his finger over his lips. ‘But only if you promise me one thing in return.’

‘What?’

‘That we don’t end up spending the night in A & E again.’

Laughing, Nina gripped Rowan’s hand and pulled herself to standing. ‘Unfortunately, that’s one thing I don’t think I can promise.’

‘I was worried you were going to say that.’ Grimacing, Rowan gripped the partition between the benches and the skating floor and steadied himself as Nina wrapped her arms around his shoulders as her legs split beneath her.

‘Sorry. Sorry.’ Shuffling her feet back together, she stood and patted his chest. ‘There you go.’

‘There I go? You were the one almost on the floor.’ Laughing, he held out his hand, and they half-walked, half-skated to the skating floor.

Grinning, Nina kept her eyes focused on the floor ahead of her. ‘Now, remember, think serene thoughts. We’re swans gliding across the surface of the lake.’

Guffawing, Rowan stopped, turned, and gripped Nina’s shoulders as he doubled over with laughter.

‘Oi. I was being serious. If we think about gliding, then maybe we will.’ She laughed. ‘Okay, fair enough. Let’s just try not to fall over too often.’

‘That’s more like it.’ Straightening his back, he stepped in closer as another skater who must have been barely ten sped past them before twirling and skating backwards. ‘Now, that’s just showing off.’

‘Too right it is, but we’ll show him.’ Taking Rowan’s hand, she jutted her right foot out and pulled her left one towards it.

‘Great job.’

‘Why, thank you.’ Grinning, she repeated the action, only this time her left leg decided to shoot out from beneath her and she grabbed hold of Rowan’s jumper to steady herself. As she clung to him, she felt him sink beneath her, and they both landed in a mess on the floor.

‘You okay? No broken bones.’

‘Not yet.’ Nina watched as the little kid zoomed past them once more, jumping and twisting mid-air before landing smoothly and continuing his lap around the hall floor. ‘I think we showed him.’

‘Most definitely.’ Chuckling, Rowan stood up, regaining his balance for a second before landing with a thump next to her again. ‘I think we’re stuck. Destined to forever be lying in a heap on this hall floor.’

‘Huh, I wanted to watch that film tonight.’

‘The one with Sandra Bullock?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Maybe I can get it on my phone.’

Shaking her head, Nina laughed. ‘Come on, let’s try again.’

‘Hey, do you two need a hand?’ Brooke spun to a stop in front of them, shortly followed by Max.

‘Yes, please. Quite literally.’ Holding her hand up, Nina gripped Brooke’s hand and staggered to standing whilst Max helped Rowan to his

feet. 'Thank you. It's been a while since I last skated.'

Brooke grinned. 'No worries. Do you need a quick refresher?'

'A quick refresher would be great, please.' Still gripping Brooke's hand, she let herself be led towards the outside of the floor.

'Okay, watch what I'm doing and see if you can copy. Start off with your strongest foot and glide. Bring the other foot in front of you. That's it.'

'Glide one foot forward. Glide the other...' Nina stubbed the rubber brake on the toe of the left roller skate on the floor, causing her to trip forward.

'Don't worry, just try again. Remember to glide your foot. You don't need to take a big step like you do when you're walking.' Brooke skated slightly in front of her, turned and held her hands, pulling Nina gently forwards as she glided with her roller skates. 'That's it, you're doing well.'

Nina looked down at her feet. She was doing it. She was actually roller-skating.

'Look up at me. Don't look down. That's it. Great work!' Brooke grinned as she fell back in time with Nina's skating again. 'Okay, now try to let go of my hand. Use your arms to steady yourself and to propel yourself forward.'

'No...' Reaching ahead to grab Brooke's hand as she let go, Nina had to readjust her footing but kept going. 'I'm roller-skating.'

'You are.' Laughing, Brooke kept in pace with her. 'Do you know how many times in my life I've wished for a sibling or a cousin?'

'No.' Nina looked across at her.

'Millions of times. And, you know, I'd accepted that I'd never have one, so you turning up in the bay and turning out to be my cousin, well, it's unreal.' Brooke grinned.

'Thank you.' Nina smiled. 'You can't imagine how terrified I was telling Ian. I thought I'd lose you, who I'd felt I was really getting to know, Ian, Elsie, and everyone else. I thought they'd be so disappointed in the fact that I hadn't told you sooner...' She shook her head.

'Sorry you felt that way. It must have been really difficult working up to the point to speak to Ian.'

'It was.'

'Look!'

Following Brooke's gaze, Nina grinned. 'Wow, Rowan's got the hang of it. I don't know why I'm so surprised because he was always the one better at roller-skating than me.' Nina laughed.

'Nina?'

‘Yes?’

‘Why don’t you stay in the bay? Just for a bit, see if you like it? You’ve told me you only have your brother and his family and that they don’t live near you. You could stay and we could get to know each other. Rowan lives in the bay too, so that would be perfect too.’

Nina slowed down. ‘I can’t. I have my job, my gran’s house.’

‘Do you enjoy your job?’

‘Not really, but it pays the bills.’ She shrugged. It was a crazy idea. People don’t just up sticks and move their lives hundreds of miles away, did they?

‘And your gran’s house? Would you be able to rent it out? Until you knew for sure you wanted to stay down?’

‘But it’s my gran’s house and before that, it was my great-grandparents’, I can’t just get rid of it.’ She hadn’t slept through a whole night there since it had been burgled, but she hadn’t in the bay either, apart from last night and she’d had Rowan there on the sofa. ‘It’s a nice idea, but...’ She sighed. She couldn’t imagine her life without Rowan in it again, and she really did want to get to know Brooke. ‘What about my job, though? I’d need to find a job?’

‘You’re thinking about it?’ Brooke’s eyes widened as she looked across at her.

‘I don’t know. If I’m honest, I haven’t felt this way in a long time. Down here I feel accepted. I’ve made more friends in such a short space of time than I have in years living back home. And of course, there’s Rowan.’ She looked over at him as he and Max skated on the other side of the hall and waved.

‘Well, if you do, I might just be able to recommend somewhere you could look for a job.’ Brooke frowned. ‘I don’t want you thinking I’ve been asking around or interfering or anything, but I was in the café earlier and Penny, the owner, was worrying about how she’d cope when Eva leaves next week. I may have put in a good word or two about you.’ Slowing down, Brooke paused. ‘But I made it clear to her I wasn’t sure if you were going to stay or not. It’s not as though I told her you definitely wanted the job or that you were definitely staying or anything.’

‘Wow.’ Pushing the toe of her roller skate down, Nina stopped just in front of Brooke and carefully clomped back to her.

‘I’ve gone too far, haven’t I? I’m sorry.’

‘You haven’t gone too far.’ Nina shook her head. ‘I’ve just never had anyone do something like that for me before. Thank you.’

‘Really? So, you’ll stay?’

Closing her eyes, Nina tried to think of one reason besides her gran’s house that was stopping her from moving and she couldn’t think of anything. Not a single reason. She’d all but drifted away from any real friends, all she did on her lunch breaks at work was sit at her desk and plan things she wanted to do on her days off. Not that she ever got around to doing them mainly because she had no one to do them with. What was stopping her? Nothing. Brooke’s idea of renting her gran’s house out for a while was a good one, and if she did decide to make the bay her permanent home, then she was certain her gran wouldn’t mind her selling it. Her gran had always told her to do what she wanted with it. Opening her eyes, she grinned. ‘Yes.’

‘Eek! This is going to be so awesome!’ Brooke wrapped her arms around Nina’s neck. ‘You can stay with me if you like? We’ll be squished into Annie’s campervan but the house I’m buying with the money from my grandparents’ house should be completing in a couple of weeks, so you can move in with me. If you want to?’

Pulling away, Nina looked at her. ‘You’d really let me move in with you?’

‘Of course. We’re cousins, aren’t we?’

Laughing, Nina shook her head. ‘That would be awesome, thank you. I’d pay you rent and sort somewhere else as soon as possible.’

‘They’d be no hurry. It’ll be amazing!’

‘What are you two looking so happy about?’ Skating up to them, Max came to a stop, shortly followed by Rowan.

‘Nina’s going to move down to the bay!’

‘For a test-run to begin with.’ Nina looked across at Rowan.

‘That’s great news.’ Rowan nodded.

‘Thanks.’ She frowned. ‘You don’t seem as happy as I thought you’d be.’

‘I am, I am.’ Looking down, Rowan rubbed the back of his neck. ‘I’m just trying to take it all in, that’s all.’

‘Okay.’

Skating towards her, Rowan cupped her chin and drew her in for a kiss. ‘I *am* happy.’

Chapter Twenty Three



‘You’re actually staying?’ Teresa grinned as she passed around the coffee mugs.

‘Yes. I am. For the time being anyway. I’m going to stay for a bit and see how things turn out.’ Nina took a sip of her coffee, glad of the caffeine after a busy lunchtime serving.

‘I’ve already told you that’s what everyone says.’ Diane shrugged. ‘We’ve encouraged yet another volunteer to stay on in the bay with our kindness, humour and mesmerising beauty.’ Swishing her hair over her shoulder, Diane laughed before holding her hand up to high-five Teresa.

‘We’re quite a team.’ High-fiving Diane, Teresa shook her head. ‘On a serious note, I’m really glad to hear you’re staying. It’s been great having you around.’

‘Thank you.’ Looking down into her mug, Nina blushed. ‘I spoke to Penny earlier too, just before we opened, and she’s happy to give me a job.’

‘Congratulations! That’s fantastic news.’ Brooke grinned.

‘That’s definitely a reason to celebrate! Why don’t we go to the pub this evening and have a proper celebration?’ Diane grinned.

‘I’d be up for that.’ Brooke nodded.

‘Me too. Gavin went out last night, so he owes me a night off. He can look after the kids tonight.’ Standing up, Teresa began piling the empty mugs onto the tray.

‘Okay. That sounds nice.’ Nina smiled. She hadn’t expected everyone to be as excited as she was about her move to the bay, but everyone she’d told had seemed really pleased. She’d told Elsie when she’d got back after rollerskating yesterday and she’d made her call Ian straight away to tell him. Both of them seemed happy for her and happy to have her sticking around. Standing up, she made her way back behind the counter.



‘SOME OF THE BAKERY lot are coming here to the pub to celebrate with me later. Will you be about?’ Nina squeezed the tea bag against the side of

Rowan's mug before doing the same to hers.

Rowan popped his head around the door into the small kitchen in the flat above the pub. 'I'm working tonight, so I'll be about, but I can't promise I'll be able to come and have a drink with you.'

'That's okay. I just thought I'd mention it.' Nina frowned. Where was the sugar kept in this place? She opened the cupboard above the kettle. Nothing. Pulling the next one open, a bag of pasta tumbled out, sending pasta shells spilling across the work surface.

'Sugar is in the cupboard under the kettle.' Rowan's voice filtered through from the living room where he was sorting his laundry.

'Thanks.' She rolled her eyes. Who kept the sugar under the kettle? After stirring a spoonful of sugar in her mug, she replaced the sugar and began picking up pasta shells from the work surface. Reaching to the corner, the sleeve of her jumper got caught on a mound of letters. Shaking her arm, the letters scattered across the work surface. Great. It was obviously going to be one of those days when a simple task, such as making tea, took twice as long as it should have done.

'Sorry, I'm almost done.' Rowan's voice drifted through to the kitchen.

'Uh-huh. No worries.' What was this? Catching a glimpse of the main body of one of the letter, she frowned. Discarding the handful of pasta shells by the kettle, she picked up the letter. Rubbing her eyes, she looked at it again. Why hadn't Rowan said anything?

'There we are. All done.' Walking back into the kitchen, Rowan froze. 'What are you doing?'

'I... uh... the packet of pasta fell out of the cupboard when I was looking for sugar.' She indicated the pasta shells still scattered across the work surface. 'When were you going to tell me you've been offered a journaling job with a worldwide travel agency?'

Rowan shrugged. 'I wasn't.'

'Why not? I've just told everyone I'm moving down here, and you don't think I deserve to know you're not actually going to be here?' She bit down on her bottom lip. 'That's why you were so quiet last night when I spoke about my move.'

With his back against the doorframe, Rowan rubbed his hand across his face. 'I wasn't going to tell you, because I'm not accepting the job offer.'

Nina read through the letter again.

'I need to head down to the bar. Help yourself to anything.'

Leaning against the work surface, Nina held the letter. This was his dream job. He'd always wanted to travel. Always. Was she the reason he wasn't taking it? Was it because of her announcement yesterday?

Running down the stairs, she walked through the office area and behind the bar. Rowan was pouring two glasses of wine for two women standing at the bar. Sidling up to him, she held out the letter. 'This is your dream job. You've always wanted to travel.'

Glancing across at her, Rowan shrugged. 'Not anymore.'

'You were just talking about travelling the other day. You told me you'd never had the opportunity to travel abroad, so you'd travelled around the coast instead. You literally said that.'

'So, maybe I've got rid of the travelling bug?' Turning back to the bar, he gave the women their glasses and took payment.

Tapping her foot against the floor, Nina waited until the women had retreated to their table. 'Please tell me I'm not the reason you're not taking the job?'

Rowan emptied the drips trays beneath the pumps and spoke quietly, his back to her. 'I don't need to travel to be happy.'

'So, it is me, then?'

'I didn't say that.' Replacing the drip trays, he turned and looked at her. 'What do you want me to say? That if you hadn't come along, I'd have taken the job? Then, maybe, but you're here and we're together and that's something I didn't think was ever going to happen again. I'm not about to jeopardise our newfound relationship for a trip abroad.'

'It's a bit more than a trip abroad. You'd be travelling all over the world.'

'But it's not what I want. Not anymore.'

'Rowan, please?' Stepping towards him, she took his hands in hers. 'I don't want you to miss out on the opportunity of a lifetime. Not because of me.' She swallowed. What was she doing? Why was she pushing him away again? Because she loved him. 'I love you and I don't want you to regret missing out on this opportunity.'

'And you don't think that if I went, I wouldn't be missing out on this?' He indicated the space between them. He looked away and began wiping the bar down.

What was she supposed to do? Sit back and watch him give up the chance of a lifetime? The job which he'd been dreaming of for as long as she'd known him? She couldn't. She cared about him too much. She loved him too

much. She couldn't let him give up on his dreams. She'd mess up the relationship anyway sooner or later, and then he'd have missed out regardless.

She tapped the edge of the letter against the bar and took a deep breath. 'I think you should take the job.'

'What?' He paused, his back still facing her, the cloth still in his hand.

'Just that. I think you should take the job.'

'And, what? I don't get a say in my own life suddenly?'

'You'll only end up resenting me.'

Turning around, he flung the cloth into the sink. 'Nina, just stop, please.'

'Stop what? I'm only trying to do what's best for you.' That's all she wanted. She just wanted him to be happy.

'You're not; you're second-guessing me. You're not listening to what I'm trying to tell you.' He rubbed his palm across his face. 'Yes, the chance to travel would be amazing. Yes, I've been wanting to travel my whole life. And the job offer is a brilliant one. I'd get to travel, there's a chance of promotion, the money is good. But it's not what I choose. *I* choose. Not you. This is my life, and I do get a say in it.'

'Fine. I'm sorry for caring and not wanting you to waste this opportunity.' Grabbing her coat, she placed the letter on the bar next to Rowan and headed to the door. Stepping outside, she stood by the door as she shrugged into her coat before braving the rain. As she headed down the hill towards the bakery, she tried to avoid the huge puddles forming across the path. The sky was dark, threatening, the clouds low.

She swiped at her eyes. Not that it made any difference, her hood wouldn't stay up in the wind and no one would be able to tell she was crying as her face was streaming with rainwater, anyway. She hadn't meant to upset him. She just knew he would have jumped at a job like that if she hadn't walked back into his life. She didn't want to hold him back. She wouldn't. That was the last thing she wanted.

Chapter Twenty Four



Pushing the bakery door open, she stepped inside before closing it firmly behind her.

‘Nina, here, catch.’ Teresa threw her a tea towel.

‘Thanks.’ Stamping her trainers against the cork matting by the door, Nina rubbed her hair and face dry with the tea towel before looking around. The bakery was empty, as was the coffee and cake area. Brooke and Diane were leaning against the counter, chatting.

‘I’ve got hold of them.’ Elsie came rushing through from the kitchen with her mobile in her hand. ‘Oh, Nina, look at you, love. Get yourself by a radiator and get yourself warm.’

‘Are they okay?’ Teresa came around from behind the coffee and cake counter.

‘Yes, they are, love. Wendy and Molly have finished at their venue, so I’ve told Wendy to drop Molly off at home after picking Hudson up from the childminders. Teresa, you need to get going too in case the after-school clubs are closed.’

‘What’s happened?’ Nina wiped the tea towel over her face and neck.

‘There’s a storm heading inland, love.’ Elsie sat down at one of the tables. ‘I’m the first one to admit I get a bit paranoid about storms coming since my Ian got caught up in one, but it’s always best to be safe than sorry.’

‘It might clear up in a bit. I’ve not had a call from the school so I can hang around for a bit.’ Teresa checked her mobile.

‘No, you get off, love. If it clears up, the four of us can manage. I don’t want you driving along those country roads in the storm to collect Pippa, Toby, and Rueben from their clubs. Brooke and Diane have only got to run up the hill to get home.’ Standing up, Elsie pulled Teresa’s coat from the coat stand and held it open for her.

‘Okay, if you’re sure?’ Shrugging into her coat, Teresa grabbed her bag from behind the counter.

‘I am. Now off you get and let me know when you get home.’

‘Will do.’

‘Good, good.’ Elsie turned to the rest of them. ‘Right, well, I suppose we might as well have a coffee while we wait and see if the storm passes us by.’

‘I’ll get them.’ Diane made her way towards the coffee machine.

Slipping out of her coat, Nina hung it over the back of a chair to dry and joined Elsie and Brooke at the table. Despite towel-drying her hair, rainwater still dripped down the back of her neck.

‘Here we go. Four coffees.’ Just as Diane placed the last mug on the table, a flash of lightning illuminated the bakery, shortly followed by the loud rumble of thunder.

‘I think that’s our cue to close. We won’t be having any more...’ The overhead lights flickered before dying altogether, casting a strange, eery grey hue across the bakery. Placing her palms against the tabletop, Elsie stood up. ‘Brooke, Diane, get your bits and bobs and I’ll run you home.’

‘We’re only up the hill. We can walk.’ Brooke stood up.

‘Not on my watch, you won’t. Go on, it’ll only take me a few minutes.’ Elsie placed her hand on Nina’s shoulder. ‘You get some coffee down you before it gets cold, and I’ll be back in a few moments.’

‘Okay.’ Nina pulled a mug towards her.

‘I am most definitely bunking up in Annie’s cottage tonight. There’s no way I’m staying in the camper in this.’ Brooke grimaced as another crack of thunder rolled across the sky.

‘I don’t blame you. See you tomorrow.’ Nina smiled.

‘Bye.’

As the back door clicked shut behind the three of them, the bakery was plunged into silence, punctuated only by the crash of thunder. Nina looked around, everywhere looked tidy and clean. They must have tidied when she was on her lunch break and the rain had begun to pour. Wrapping her hands around the hot mug, she brought it to her lips and took a long, slow sip. She couldn’t stop thinking about the argument she’d had with Rowan over the letter. Should she have just left it? Not said anything? Been grateful that he’s chosen their relationship over his dream job?

Leaning back in the chair, she rolled her shoulders back. No. That wouldn’t have been fair on Rowan. She knew he wanted to take the job. She knew he’d be in his element, living the dream, and she couldn’t just sit by and let him give up all of that, not for her. She shifted in her chair and checked her mobile. There was still a signal. The storm couldn’t have reached the masts yet.

Scrolling through to his name, she pressed the call button. As she waited for him to answer, she took a deep breath. She wasn't even sure what she was going to say, but she wanted him to understand that she only wanted him to take the job because she loved him and wanted to see him happy. She pinched the bridge of her nose. The last thing she wanted was to be here without him, but she had to put him first. She had to, especially after she'd messed up the last four years of their lives.

She put her mobile on the table and watched as it rang out. Maybe he was still serving. People may have taken refuge in the pub, waiting for the storm to pass.

Thunder rumbled above the bakery. It was louder this time, the storm closer. As she waited for it to pass, she saw her phone light up; the ringtone lost in the rumbling thunder outside. 'Hello?' Cupping the mobile around her ear, she waited until the thunder had passed. 'Hello?'

'Hello, love. It's Elsie. I'm going to hole up at Diane's until the storm passes. I know it's not far, but it doesn't feel very safe to drive back at the moment. Is that okay with you, love?'

'Yes, that's fine.' Swallowing, Nina looked around the bakery. The daylight had all but been smothered by the clouds above, and she could hardly see across to the other side of the bakery anymore.

'Okay, love. Keep safe.'

'You too.' Placing her mobile back down on the table, Nina tapped her foot against the floor. The bakery would soon be plunged into darkness, and she would be here. Alone. Pushing her chair back, she ran to the back door and checked the handle. It was locked, but then again, her front door back home had been locked too when the house was broken into. And what better cover than to break in during a storm?

Looking around the kitchen, she dragged the stools across from the table and pushed them against the door, creating a barrier. If anyone got through, they'd set off a domino effect on the stools and she'd hear them.

Rushing back through to the bakery, she checked the front door. It, too, was locked. Again, she dragged a chair across to the door, this time jamming its wooden back beneath the handle. With both the back door and the front door secure, she stood in the middle of the bakery and spun slowly around. Shadows danced across the walls and the floor tiles. She looked towards the door to the flat. Without the large windows of the bakery, it would be even

darker up there. Besides, she wouldn't be able to hear the stools fall if someone did break in.

No, she'd stay down here. That would be the safest thing. Picking up her coffee mug, the liquid inside now mid-to-lukewarm, she lowered herself onto a chair by the window, the lightest place in the bakery.

She sat perfectly still, her eyes focused on the promenade outside. She could feel the darkness and the shadows creeping in on her. Trying to steady her breathing, she watched as each lightning strike illuminated the promenade outside the window, the waves of the ocean crashing up against the seawall, spraying water across the cobbles. With each strike, she counted until the fiercely pounding thunder arrived.

The rain was relentless, one continuous stream of water slapping against the window, but the thunder slowly rolled past them, leaving a ferocious wind in its place. Elsie wasn't going to be coming home, was she? Not tonight. Not if this continued.

Bringing her mug to her lips, she took a sip of coffee, the temperature of the freezing liquid surprising her. She must have been sitting here for longer than she'd thought.

A loud crash filled the bakery and Nina froze, coffee cup in hand, her eyes darting to the kitchen door where the sound had come from. Had someone broken in? Had the stools toppled? Was that what the loud bang had been?

Holding her breath, she listened. The only noise she could hear was the pounding of her heart in her chest. She needed to do something. She couldn't just sit there, waiting. Standing up, she paused again. She couldn't hear anything else coming from the kitchen. Forcing herself, she inched her way across the floor in the direction of the kitchen.

Pausing by the kitchen door, she pulled her phone from her pocket and switched on the torch app. Without giving herself time to think, she pushed the kitchen door open and scanned the room. The stools were still in place, guarding the back door.

She frowned. She couldn't see anything which had caused the bang. She screamed as something crashed against the kitchen window. Gripping the edge of the work surface, she swung her light towards the sound. It was a garden chair. One of those plastic garden chairs. It must have flown over the wall from the café next door.

Leaving the kitchen, she retreated to her seat by the window and checked the battery on her phone. It was on five per cent. There was no telling when the power would be back up, but she assumed it would be a while as the storm was giving no sign of abating.

She turned it off, a sheet of darkness immediately covering the bakery. She couldn't do this. She couldn't sit here all night, on guard, waiting for something to happen. She wanted Rowan. She wanted to talk to him. To work things out.

Chapter Twenty Five



Standing up, she shrugged back into her coat, the chill from the earlier rain seeping into her bones already. She couldn't sit in the dark any longer. Pulling the chair away from the door, she opened the door and paused. This was a really daft idea. She knew that. But it had to be better than sitting alone in the dark. She couldn't do that. She just couldn't.

Bracing herself, she turned her torch app on again and stepped outside, clicking the door locked behind her. Her hood was blown off immediately, and she closed her eyes against the grains of sand being blown into her face by the wind. This was it. She'd made her choice and, being as she hadn't brought her key with her, there was no going back.

Staying as close to the buildings and as far away from the water being propelled above and over the seawall as she could, she began walking towards the bottom of the hill, gripping the streetlamps and benches to help her battle against the wind.

As she turned up the hill, she was grateful that the fierce wind was now behind her and working with her rather than against her. As she neared the pub, she jumped into the road, narrowly missing a large branch as it was torn from a tree.

A few more steps and she'd be there. Just a few more. Without warning, her phone battery died, the light disappearing.

Gripping hold of the door handle to the pub, she twisted it in her hand. Nope, it wasn't budging. They'd locked up for the night. Of course they had. She knocked on the large wooden door. Nothing. Hammering with her fists, Nina hoped she would be heard. She hoped Rowan had stayed downstairs. She didn't stand much of a chance at all if he was in the flat above.

It was no use. Why had she left the bakery? Yes, it had been dark, but it had been dark and enclosed. Out here, it was still dark, but she was out in the storm, too. Taking a deep breath, she beat against the door as hard as she could before sinking to the concrete doorstep. It was no good. She'd be out here all night.

A loud creak sounded behind her, and she fell inside as the door was pulled open.

‘Nina! What on earth?’ Gripping her beneath the armpits, Rowan pulled her to standing and forced the door shut again before turning to her. ‘Did you walk from the bakery in this? Why?’

Bringing her hands to her mouth, she blew on her fingers. ‘Elsie got stranded at Diane’s and...’ She shrugged.

‘The power’s out.’ Rowan nodded.

She looked around the pub. A handful of candlelit lanterns stood on the bar illuminating the immediate area with a warm welcoming glow. The fire roared in the hearth too, casting a warmth through the pub. ‘It looks as though you’re prepared.’

Rowan shrugged. ‘Gerald keeps all sorts in the back room. Let me take your coat. You must be freezing.’

‘A little.’ She laughed, her teeth chattering. She watched as he hung her coat by the fire before bringing her into a hug and rubbing his hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her up.

‘Thanks.’

‘Grab a chair in front of the fire and I’ll get you my coat.’

Nodding, she did as she was instructed and sank into an old armchair by the fire, holding her hands out towards the warmth.

‘There you go.’ Rowan wrapped his coat around her shoulders before perching on the arm of the chair and kissing the top of her head.

‘You’re not mad at me?’ She looked up at him.

‘Yes, but I still love you.’

Sighing, she leaned her head against his side. ‘I really only want the best for you. I’m pushing you into taking that job offer because I want you to be happy.’

‘I am happy.’

‘You know what I mean. You’ve wanted to travel since forever. You always spoke about it when we were together before, and you were travelling when you ended up here. Travelling is in your bones. And that job is literally perfect for you.’

‘Maybe it was. Once, but not now.’ He shifted position. ‘I applied when I first arrived here, but since then I’ve fallen in love with the bay, the people, you again. And the need to travel just isn’t there anymore. I don’t want to give all this up. I’ve loved every second I’ve spent here, and I want to settle down here. I want *us* to settle down here. Travelling might be fun, but the way I see it is why take a chance on the unknown when I’m so happy here.’

I've made friends, good friends. I'm thinking about starting my own business and I just want to see what my future holds here.'

'So, you're not just turning it down because I've turned up. Because that's a huge amount of pressure on me, if it is.' She chewed her bottom lip.

'No, I'm not. I was thinking about turning the job down before you'd even turned up in the bay. You're the icing on the cake, so to speak.' He stood up and knelt down in front of her. 'I'm not saying I wouldn't have turned down the job for you, I would have done. That, or asked you to come with me, but things just feel so right here now that you've walked back into my life.'

'And you're not just saying that, so I don't feel like I'm holding you back?'

'No, I'm not.'

'Then why did you still have the letter there in the kitchen?' She frowned. She wanted to believe him.

Looking away, he blushed. 'Now, that is a bit embarrassing. I kept it to prove to myself that I could get a job like that.'

'Oh, okay. That's not embarrassing.'

'It is a little. I've started writing a blog about the places I visited here in the UK. I'm hoping to be able to earn money from it eventually and, if it goes well, to travel to other places to feature in the blog. I want to focus on the UK, though. I want to have a base, and I want Penworth Bay to be my base. *Our* base.'

'I love the sound of that.'

'I love you.' Cupping her cheeks, he leaned forward.

Holding the back of his neck, Nina pulled him closer, their lips touching, his warmth transferring to hers.

'You're freezing. Budge up.' Chuckling, he squeezed in next to her and wrapped his arms around her.

'Thanks!' Laughing, she leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes. Life was pretty perfect.

Chapter Twenty Six



‘Can you take these in please, love?’ Elsie passed Nina two jars of mint sauce and a salt and pepper shaker. ‘Can you manage them all?’

‘Yep, I’ve got them.’ Pushing the kitchen door open with her hip, Nina paused and took in the sight in front of her. So, this was one of Elsie’s famous bakery family dinners she’d heard so much about. Tables from the coffee and cake area had been pushed together and covered with tablecloths to make one long table reaching from the bakery counter all the way across the bakery to the display of wedding cakes.

Everyone she now called her friends and family were there. Brooke and Max stood talking to Chris, Freya, Olivia, and Scott by the front door. Jessie, Simon, Molly, Jude, Gemma, and Matt had taken up one end of the table. Carrie, Daniel, Lauren, Charlie, Heidi, and Liam were laughing over something as they gathered around Charlie’s mobile phone. Diane, Daisy, Ollie, Ian, Teresa, Gavin and Rowan were looking over paint sample swatches Daisy and Ollie were thinking about decorating their nursery with. Harry, Wendy and Connor were sitting in a circle on the floor with Wendy’s son, Hudson, and Teresa’s sons, Rueben and Toby, while Teresa’s daughter, Pippa, ran around the circle pretending to be some sort of jumping, magical creature.

Placing the jars and shakers on the table, Nina walked across to Rowan and put her arm around his waist.

‘Hi again.’ Kissing the top of her head, he placed his hand in the small of her back and pointed to the colour swatches covering the table. ‘Do you see a colour you like for our future nursery?’

Laughing, Nina looked across at him. ‘Oh, you’re being serious.’

Tilting his head from side to side, Rowan grinned. ‘Why not?’

‘Why not, indeed? Let me think.’ Leaning forward, she swept her eyes across the different colours before picking up a peaceful green one. ‘How about this one? It’s very close to the colour on the wallpaper in the bedroom I’ve been staying in upstairs.’

Taking the swatch, Rowan nodded. ‘I like that.’

‘It’s decided then. Wedding, house and kids.’ Nina nodded.

‘Absolutely. I hear summer is a good time for a beach wedding.’

Laughing, she kissed him on the lips. ‘I can’t tell if you’re being serious or not.’

‘I almost proposed once before, remember?’

‘That’s true.’ She nodded. ‘I think a summer beach wedding sounds perfect.’

‘Right, you lovely lot. Grubs up, come and help yourselves.’ Elsie called from the doorway into the kitchen before walking across to the table and peering at the colour swatches. ‘Ooh, are these the colours you’re choosing between for Bump’s nursery?’

‘Yes.’ Daisy rubbed her bump. ‘We’re having a tough time choosing, though.’

‘I don’t blame you, love. You’ve got some beautiful colours there.’ Elsie picked up swatch after swatch. ‘Umm.’

‘Here’s another one.’ Rowan placed the swatch he and Nina had been looking at back down on the table.

‘That’s a very serene and peaceful colour. It’s the same colour as the birds on the wallpaper in your room, isn’t it, Nina?’ Elsie tapped her finger against the swatch.

‘Yes, that’s what Nina said.’ Rowan grinned.

‘Did you? You’ve got a keen eye too, then.’ Elsie rubbed Nina’s forearm and smiled. ‘Come on then, let’s get our food before it gets cold.’

‘It smells delicious.’ Rowan grinned.

‘It is delicious.’ Connor grinned as he helped Hudson carry his plate back to the table.

‘Well done, Huddy. You’ve got lots of yummy carrots on your plate today. They’ll help you see in the dark.’ Elsie lifted Hudson up onto a chair.

‘I told him to get lots of carrots. I’m doing an experiment.’ Pippa hurried past Connor and slid her plate onto the table next to Hudson’s.

‘Is that right? I see you have a lot of carrots, too.’ Elsie pulled Pippa’s chair out for her.

‘Yep, I do. I have a wobbly tooth. Look.’ Opening her mouth, Pippa tugged at one of her front teeth. ‘When it falls out, I’ll put it under my pillow for the tooth fairy.’

‘Ooh.’

Holding her hand around her mouth, Pippa looked around her before lowering her voice to a stage-whisper. 'I'm eating lots of carrots, so I will be able to see the tooth fairy in the dark and ask her for five pounds instead of one.'

'Five pounds?' Elsie held up five fingers.

'Yes.' Pippa nodded seriously. 'I'll draw you a picture to show you what she looks like when I see her.'

'I'd like that. Thank you.' Elsie smiled.

'Now, remember, Huddy, you need to eat all your carrots so you'll be able to see the tooth fairy when your teeth fall out. Okay?' Pippa looked at Hudson.

Covering his mouth, Hudson nodded.

Chuckling, Ian whispered to the group, 'I'm not sure if poor Hudson is excited or traumatised at the thought of his teeth falling out.'

Nina smiled at Pippa and Hudson and looked back at Rowan. 'We've got all this to look forward to.'

'We sure do.' Squeezing her hand, he led the way into the kitchen.



'I COULD EAT ANOTHER whole plateful; it was that delicious.' Rowan wiped his mouth with his napkin.

'Me too. I think that was the best roast I've ever had.' Nina grinned.

Scraping her chair back, Elsie stood up before ushering Ian to standing too. 'Could we have a moment of your time before we move on to pudding?'

Climbing up, Pippa stood on her chair and held her index finger to her lips. 'Shhhhh.'

'Thank you, Pippa, love. We can always count on you to keep order.' Elsie chuckled as she steadied Pippa's chair and helped her clamber back down. 'Ian and I have a bit of news we'd like to share.'

A hush fell over the table as everyone turned towards Elsie and Ian.

'We're getting married on the 19th of November.'

Ian cleared his throat. 'This year.'

A round of applause erupted around the table as everyone stood up, cheering and whooping at the news.

Laughing, Elsie held her hands up, palms forward, waiting for quiet. 'And as promised, I would like to ask all my girls to be bridesmaids with Pippa as flower girl,' Elsie placed her hand gently on Pippa's head. 'And Rueben,

Toby and Hudson as page boys. We know it will be a little unusual to have so many bridesmaids, but we're a bit of an unusual family, so we figured why not bring that quirkiness into our wedding?'

'I'm going to be a flower girl?' Pippa clapped her hands against her cheeks.

'Yes, if you don't mind, that is?'

'Can my dolly be a flower girl, too? She has a pretty dress Mummy and Gavin got me for my birthday.'

'Of course she can. The more the merrier.' Elsie chuckled before turning to Ian. 'We've not really decided on any of the details of the wedding yet so we know that it's going to be a bit of a rush to get it all planned and ready in time but I'm sure we can pull it off.'

'And let's face it, we think you've all been waiting long enough to see us get married. I know we have.' Ian kissed Elsie's hand.

Epilogue



‘Is that the last of your things?’ Brooke picked up a carrier bag. Nina looked around the bedroom she’d called home for the last few weeks and nodded. ‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Phew. I don’t think much more would fit into Annie’s camper.’ Brooke grinned. ‘Still, it’s only going to be for a week or so and then my house sale will complete, and we’ll have more room.’

‘Do you two need any help up there?’ Rowan’s voice wafted upstairs.

‘Nope, we’re done. Thank you, though.’ Nina ran the pad of her index finger across the parrots emblazoned on the wallpaper as she walked down the stairs. ‘I’ll miss these cheerful little faces.’

‘Aw, I’m sure Elsie will let you visit her parrots.’ Rowan chuckled. ‘Besides, you’ll still have my cheerful little face to look at.’

‘Ha-ha, very funny.’ Nina laughed as Rowan took her rucksack from her. As they walked through the empty bakery, Nina turned and looked around the place. ‘It feels like the end of an era. I can’t believe how much my life has changed since I first stepped foot in this place.’

‘You’ll only be working next door. I’m sure you’ll be popping in all the time to see everyone, anyway.’ Rowan hugged her. ‘I know what you mean, though. It’s crazy to think how much can change in a few short weeks.’

‘It is.’

‘Right, come on then. Let’s dump this stuff and go for a drink at the pub.’ Brooke and Max shut the door to the flat.

‘Good idea.’ Pulling the front door open, Nina paused. ‘Oh, hi. Can I help you?’

‘Hi, I’m Evie Phillips. I’ve come to volunteer here.’ A woman shifted a holdall to her other shoulder.

‘Hi, Evie, lovely to meet you. I’m Nina, and this is Rowan.’ She looked behind her. ‘And over there are Brooke and Max.’



THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR reading. I hope you enjoyed reading *Love in the Air at the Cornish Bakery* as much as I have enjoyed writing it. If so, I'd be so grateful if you could leave a review, please.



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Running from a painful past, Olivia craves some time for herself and hopes to find some solace at The Cornish Bay Bakery.

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When an emergency services open day sparks her into rethinking her career choices, will a new job be the only thing on her mind or will local firefighter, Owen, catch her eye too?

After a stark reminder of the life she'd hoped to leave behind, can Paige start to believe in herself again? Can she take the steps to build the future she deserves?

Can Owen convince her that she's worthy of his love? And can residents of Penworth Bay help her see this could be the start of a new life?

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When Lauren Burton turns up to The Cornish Bay Bakery there's more on her mind than surprising her sister. She hopes taking a break by the

scenic Cornish coast will give her the time and space to help her focus on her dreams for her future.

When she is quickly welcomed into the warm heart of the bakery family, she wonders what took her so long to visit. With the winter sun shining and the sand between her toes, she realises she's perfectly happy to be single and free of the drama of her past relationship.

Running into cute firefighter, Charlie, Lauren battles with her newfound determination to stay single and begins to allow herself to wonder if she could find happiness in a relationship after all.

Can their fledging romance cope when Lauren's ex gets back in touch? Will a secret Charlie holds jeopardise Lauren's hope of a happily ever after?

With a bucketful of small town kindness, the promise of romance and enough sea air to blow away the most stubborn of cobwebs, join Lauren as she arrives in the beautiful Penworth Bay...

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As soon as Molly Evans arrives in Penworth Bay, she is reminded that there's more to life than work. Volunteering at The Cornish Bay Bakery, she is soon welcomed into Elsie's close-knit bakery family, and with celebrations on the horizon, she is quickly drawn into the excitement of upcoming events.

When Jude, the man she once loved, walks into the bakery, his presence threatens to ruin her Cornish getaway entirely. As they work through painful memories and her true feelings towards him resurface, can she be honest to herself and to him?

With the sun shining through the clouds and the sand warm under her feet, she begins to question her goals in life and realises that this short break

away from the stresses of everyday living could be just the catalyst she needs to make changes for the better.

Can Molly and Jude put the past behind them and rekindle an old flame or will a stark reminder of why their previous relationship together came to an abrupt end squash their renewed romance before it really begins?

Return to idyllic Penworth Bay and revisit the charm and quirks of this friendly seaside community. Follow Molly as she arrives at The Cornish Bay Bakery and is surrounded by friendship, love and second chances...

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Returning to Penworth Bay was always going to be difficult for Carrie Turner, but as soon as she steps inside *The Cornish Bay Bakery* and is greeted by Elsie, she is soon reminded of the warm and fuzzy feeling of her childhood.

After teaching abroad for years, it was time to face the inevitable. She could no longer avoid clearing out and selling her late mother's home; the cottage she grew up in.

The close-knit community of her past rallies around to support her, and soon she forgets she's ever been away and why she'd been so reluctant to return. With the sand between her toes and old friends around her, she falls back in love with the idyllic bay she grew up in.

Carrie is delighted to discover her childhood best friend, Danny, has made the bay his home and when he offers to help her, will memories of growing up together be all they share or will unexpected feelings emerge between them?

Step into the beautiful seaside community of Penworth Bay and, once again, be surrounded by friends and welcomed into Elsie's Bakery

family. Follow Carrie as she revisits her childhood home...

<https://books2read.com/Returning-to-Cornish-Bakery>



♥ **Wedding Fever at the Cornish Bakery**

Come & join us in beautiful Penworth Bay, Cornwall

Volunteer at The Cornish Bay Bakery in exchange for a cosy room with views across the bay, new friends and the chance to explore the magical Cornish coast.

In need of a change to your pace of life?

Want to escape the pressures of work?

Then contact Elsie today!

Running from the altar to Cornwall, the last thing Gemma Moreton wants to think about is weddings.

With The Cornish Bay Bakery in the midst of planning for Daisy and Ollie's big day, Penworth Bay is practically bursting with wedding fever and Gemma is left wondering if this will be the escape she needs.

When Gemma is introduced to Matt, a relationship is the last thing on her mind.

Will Penworth Bay work its magic and help Gemma's heart to heal from past hurts? Will she fall for mountain rescue hero, Matt, and finally learn she is worthy of true love?

Just as she is beginning to believe that she may have found her own happy-ever-after, Matt discovers that she left her ex at the altar and their fledgling romance is in jeopardy. Can he learn to trust her with his heart when he's still recovering from his own heartache?

Return to The Cornish Bay Bakery and, once again, immerse yourself in the warmth of Elsie's welcome. Feel the sun on your shoulders and the sand at your feet. Listen to the gentle waves from the ocean and celebrate Daisy's and Ollie's wedding with them...

<https://books2read.com/Wedding-Fever-at-Cornish-Bakery>



♥ **Finding Love at the Cornish Bakery**

Come & join us in beautiful Penworth Bay, Cornwall

Volunteer at The Cornish Bay Bakery in exchange for a cosy room

*with views across the bay, new friends and the chance to explore the magical
Cornish coast.*

In need of a change to your pace of life?

Want to escape the pressures of work?

Then contact Elsie today!

Heidi Bateman is out of options. Her dream job in the Galapagos has ended and she finds herself with no job and nowhere to live.

When Gemma suggests Heidi volunteers at The Cornish Bay Bakery, she jumps at the opportunity to give herself some time to think and space to plan her future.

After a clumsy mishap in the cafe leaves her reeling, she reluctantly lets Liam, Penny's son, try to make things right.

As the days roll on, Heidi soon begins to feel valued and wanted, both by Elsie's extended bakery family and by Liam.

After spending her life pushing people away, can Heidi overcome her fear of the unknown?

Can she learn to trust or will her past experiences ruin her chances of being loved and loving others?

Crammed full of friendship, love and a sense of belonging, revisit Penworth Bay and enjoy the sun warming your face and the sand between your toes as Heidi volunteers at Elsie's bakery...

<https://books2read.com/Finding-Love-at-Cornish-Bakery>

♥Picnic Days at the Cornish Bakery

Come & join us in beautiful Penworth Bay, Cornwall

*Volunteer at The Cornish Bay Bakery in exchange for a cosy room with views across the bay, new friends and the chance to explore the magical
Cornish coast.*

In need of a change to your pace of life?

Want to escape the pressures of work?

Then contact Elsie today!

Running from the her cancelled wedding and the betrayal of her sister, the last thing Jessie wants to think about is relationships, especially happy ones. So when she is faced with the prospect of having to plan other people's weddings, she decides to try to focus on the present, instead of the past.

Upon her arrival in idyllic Penworth Bay, she is immediately enveloped into Elsie's cosy bakery family and welcomed into the close-knit community

of the bay. Jessie becomes part of the team and quickly learns she can call the rest of the bakery family her true friends.

Kind, handsome Simon Groves comes to her rescue after a terrifying roadside incident and soon Jessie finds she no longer needs to pretend to be happy, because she is. Officer Groves shows her there is hope after her failed relationship and she soon begins falling in love.

Will the surprise arrival of her sister and her mum jeopardise Jessie's newfound happiness? Will she be able to continue to look to the future or will the past dramas pull her home again, away from her new life in the bay and away from her fledging romance with Officer Groves?

Can Jessie and Simon's relationship survive past trauma and challenges, or will they end up going their separate ways?

Step back into sunny Penworth Bay and enjoy the hustle and bustle of the height of the tourist season. Experience the thrill of the fair and the chill of the water around your ankles when you paddle in the sea.

If you've enjoyed escaping to Cornwall, I've written a whole other series focusing on women taking the leap to have a fresh start in life. Books in the Escape To... series:

- ♥ Escape To... The Little Beach Cafe
- ♥ Escape To... Christmas at Corner Cottage
- ♥ Escape To... Berry Grove Bed & Breakfast
- ♥ Escape To... The Seaside Ice Cream Parlour
- ♥ Escape To... Bramble Patch Craft Shop
- ♥ Escape To... The Flower Shop on Serendipity Lane

Each book is a standalone story and can be read in any order. They are all available to read free in Kindle Unlimited, to buy as an ebook or to buy as a paperback.



♥Escape To... The Little Beach Cafe

Love, friendship and new beginnings... it's all waiting for Pippa Jenkins at *The Little Beach Cafe*...

When Pippa's aunt leaves her a cafe by the beach, it doesn't take her long to jump at the chance of a new start.

Waving goodbye to mounting debt, threatening bailiffs and never-ending shifts at a job she hates, Pippa and her young son, Joshua, arrive at their new cafe.

With a group of new friends by her side, can Pippa return her aunt's cafe to its former glory, as well as helping Josh settle into his new school and life?

As Pippa strives to make her new business a success, the arrival of her ex makes her question everything.

Will she succumb to his charms, or will Joe, the local plumber, be able to repair Pippa's heart? Can she see a future at The Little Beach Cafe, or will she return to her old life?

<https://books2read.com/The-Little-Beach-Cafe>



♥Escape To... Christmas at Corner Cottage

Cosy up with this heartwarming Christmas romance filled with hope, love and new opportunities...

When Chrissy Marsden moves her children and menagerie of pets into Corner Cottage in the small village of Moorfield, she hopes to put her divorce behind her and have the fresh start she's been longing for.

After a chance encounter at the school gates she finds herself being hired to alter a wedding dress and the opportunity to reignite her passion for sewing,

Will friendship and a chance to start her own dressmaking business be all she finds or will the bride's brother, Luke, offer something else entirely?

Just as Chrissy feels she is finally getting her life back on track, a surprise pregnancy and a lack of trust threatens her new relationship.

Can a Christmas Eve wedding bring Chrissy and Luke back together? Can she succeed in her new business venture? And will she be able to make the village her family home?

<https://books2read.com/Christmas-at-Corner-Cottage>



♥Escape To... Berry Grove Bed & Breakfast

Escape To... Berry Grove Bed & Breakfast promises love, second chances and new beginnings...

When Kim Reynolds learns how unhappy her daughter, Mia, is, she realises the perfect remedy is a completely fresh start.

Giving up the corporate job she's worked towards for her entire life, Kim is determined to make Berry Grove Bed & Breakfast a success but more

importantly, she's determined to support her daughter as she settles into her new life.

When Danny, Kim's childhood sweetheart, turns up, buried feelings and a complicated secret threatens to surface and jeopardise their newly discovered peaceful lifestyle.

Can the two people Kim loves most in the world understand and forgive her for keeping them apart?

<https://books2read.com/Berry-Grove-Bed-and-Breakfast>



♥Escape To... The Seaside Ice Cream Parlour

An opportunity of a lifetime, friendship and love... Escape To... The Seaside Ice Cream Parlour offers them all...

When Jenny has the chance to leave her days of sofa surfing behind and move to the beach to run her best friend, Helen's ice cream parlour, she jumps at the opportunity.

With no relevant experience, learning new skills to manage the ice cream parlour at the same time as juggling motherhood and trying to settle into their new home, certainly keeps her busy.

Welcomed into the local community, Jenny soon finds friendship and happiness. When Nick, Helen's ex, makes it impossible for Jenny to ignore him, ill feelings quickly turn to friendship, leaving them both wanting more.

Will Jenny succeed in making a new life for herself and her daughter, Grace, in the idyllic coastal town? Can Jenny put her feelings aside or will truths be told which will change her mind about her and Nick's future?

<https://books2read.com/The-Seaside-Ice-Cream-Parlour>



♥Escape To... Bramble Patch Craft Shop

Snuggle up with Escape To... Bramble Patch Craft Shop and escape into a world of love, new friends and the opportunity for Molly to follow her dreams....

When Molly Wilson and her two children, Lauren and Ellis, are forced to leave their old lives behind, will a small rundown shop in the middle of Payton-On-The-Water, a quiet village in the English countryside, offer the

fresh start they need and an opportunity for Molly to live her dream of opening and running Bramble Patch Craft Shop?

Between comforting and trying to settle her two homesick children into a new way of life, and dealings with the local law enforcement, Officer Duffey, can Molly make a success of her new business venture?

When a late night incident with a flat tyre highlights the fear that she has taken on too much and the reality that she is truly alone, will the arrival of Officer Duffey on the scene help or hinder her rescue?

Desperate to immerse herself and her family into village life, will the friends she makes by hosting regular Knit and Natter meetups be all she finds or will she discover there is more to Officer Duffey than his spiky exterior?

<https://books2read.com/Bramble-Patch-Craft-Shop>



♥ **Escape To... The Flower Shop on Serendipity Lane**

Take a stroll down Serendipity Lane, breath in the beautiful fragrances of the flowers from the florist, take in the beauty of the castle and see if you can spot the love in the air...

After years of juggling long hours at work, studying for her dream vocation and struggling for money it's finally time for change.

Following her dream to become a florist, Sadie Locke moves her two daughters, Lily and Poppy, into *The Flower Shop on Serendipity Lane*.

Discovering that her ex-husband's friend and divorce solicitor, Alex Marshal, works next door, Sadie feels her hopes of a fresh start quickly slipping away.

Pushed together at a mutual friend's wedding, will Sadie and Alex be able to rekindle a lost friendship or realise too much has come between them?

Will Sadie let the past define her future love life, or will she be able to give romance a chance, and will a lost dog Lily finds be the welcome distraction to help them all adapt to village life?

<https://books2read.com/The-Flower-Shop>