

TERESA
F. MORGAN

Meet Me
at
Wisteria
Cottage

'Warm, funny... a wonderful read'

International bestselling author
NICOLA CORNICK



Teresa F. Morgan

Meet Me at Wisteria Cottage

Аннотация

'A striking example of two pasts threatening a joint future...
A great read'Sue Moorcroft, bestselling author of Just for the Holidays'Warm, funny...a wonderful read' International bestselling author Nicola CornickA Cornish EscapeAfter her house is set on fire and her love life is left in tatters, Maddy Hart can't believe her luck when a friend offers her the temporary haven of Wisteria Cottage. Overlooking the turquoise blue waters of the Cornish coast, the fresh air feels like a fresh start for her and her broken heart.Peeking out of the cosy cottage windows, Maddy's surprised to see her gorgeous but insufferable neighbour Harry Tudor has been employed to landscape the garden. But as the wisteria winding its way around the cottage begins to bloom, an unlikely friendship starts to blossom...

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Copyright



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Dedication

For my dad, my real life hero

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Chapter 1

Maddison Hart threw her bag on the passenger seat, turned the key in the ignition and, checking the pavement was clear, reversed off the driveway. A bad memory reminded her to glance in her wing mirror just in time. She was about to hit her neighbour's pickup truck on the opposite side of the road – again. She slammed the brakes and cursed. She'd only just had her damn brake light fixed.

'Bloody idiot,' she said, screwing up her face.

Why did he park it there, on the road, and not on his driveway? It was big enough!

He always seemed to be parked there when she wanted to reverse off her drive, too! *Damn the man.*

Her neighbour, wearing only a pair of knee-length khaki shorts, and busy putting some tools into the back of the black pickup, smirked.

Oh, crap, he'd heard her too, with her window partially down. Sod it, he'd been living here three months, and now it was getting annoying. She pressed the button, and lowered her window further. She would not be intimidated by his bare chest and muscles.

'Mr ...' she glanced at the stickers reading 'Tudor Landscapes' along the truck's side, 'Mr Tudor,' she said more assertively, 'could you not park your truck right there?'

‘It’s Harry.’

‘Okay, *Harry*,’ she sniped, ‘could you please not park your truck right there.’ Everything about him, his whole demeanour, infuriated Maddy.

‘Why?’

‘I nearly hit it – again!’

‘What do you mean *again*?’ He glanced at the truck, rubbing his hand along the paintwork.

‘I said nearly.’ She lied. Last time she had clonked it, but it had done more damage to her car than his.

‘It’s easy, look in your mirrors as you reverse off your drive, lady.’

Maddy took a deep breath, her teeth clamped together and she dramatically swished her strawberry blonde hair off her shoulders before choosing her next words. ‘It’s awkward whether I look in my mirrors or not.’

‘Drive slower then.’

Maddy refrained from growling with frustration, instead she gripped the steering wheel tighter. The man was obviously too arrogant to listen. ‘It doesn’t matter how fast I go. I’m used to reversing off my drive, hassle free. The people who lived in the house before you never parked on the road. They used their *driveway*.’

‘Then reverse onto your drive, so you can see what you’re doing when you leave, if it’s so difficult.’

‘It’s not easy to reverse onto my drive either, with your

monstrosity of a truck in the road.’ The road was too narrow, as it only led to a handful of houses.

‘Maybe you should own a smaller car if you can’t handle it.’

Deep breath, Maddy. One, two, three ... She did not like his smug expression, and wished he wasn’t six feet tall and built like a marine, standing there baring his tanned torso, because she wanted to wipe that smirk off his face. *Bastard.* She hated smug bastards.

‘Are you implying I can’t drive?’ Her eyes narrowed. She drove an estate car so that her paintings fitted in the back. A smaller vehicle was not suitable – she’d tried it. However much she’d loved her Mini Cooper S in racing green, it had not been practical.

‘I can’t see why it’s so hard, but I’ll tell you what, I’ll stop leaving my truck here when you stop your damn cat from crapping in my front garden.’

‘My cat has a litter tray.’

‘Well, the thing isn’t using it!’ He slammed the remainder of the tools he held into the flatbed, and headed back up to his garage, cursing about cats.

How had this conversation gone from cars to cats? *Idiot.*

‘You’re such an arsehole!’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment!’ he called over his back, without turning round.

Maddy swore again, and forced the car into gear, crunching it with anger. ‘There is more than one cat in this close, you know!’

she shouted and sped off. Well, tried to. Her wheels spun with her quick release of the clutch and a bit too much throttle. And then her front tyre hit the kerb with the lack of turning space, making a rubber-scraping-concrete sound, angering Maddy further.

She loved her cat. Sookie was very affectionate, and Maddy liked how her little companion purred and greeted her when she got home. Her cat's love was the only sort she got lately.

And it was enough. All she needed.

Harry was obnoxious and fancied himself. It seemed to her there wasn't an affectionate bone in his body. If there was, it was probably buried under his bulk of muscle. Too cocksure, the way he flaunted himself – shirtless or with too tight a T-shirt. She hated men like that.

Bastard.

Look what the man did to her. She hadn't stopped cursing since leaving her house. She felt red with rage, and probably looked it too. She feared it wouldn't be the last time she'd have heated words with Harry.

Her thoughts whirled, mainly about the old man from across the road dying a few months after she'd moved in, and his elderly wife being put in a home by their children, and selling up. The house had been empty for nearly six months. She'd got into the habit of not really having to concentrate while manoeuvring her car off her own driveway. The old couple opposite had owned a vehicle but it had remained in the garage, the man being too ill to drive it.

She'd liked them as neighbours.

Now she had to put up with Harry and his monstrosity.

Harry slammed down his garage door. *What was it about that woman?*

Returning to his truck, he checked it over carefully, sure his neighbour, in her complete incompetence, had probably hit it before. He'd seen the lie in her eyes, the way she'd been unable to look at him, and more obviously, avoiding glancing at his chrome bumper.

He couldn't see any marks, so maybe her car had come off worse. Well, serve her right. He paid his road tax, his pickup had as much right to be on this street as did her Ford estate.

A few deep breaths and he got into the cab of the truck. He was quoting for a new landscaping job today, and he didn't want to be late. It was a big contract in Tinnors Bay, an ex-holiday home in disrepair and the garden in similar state. With rain due later this afternoon the sooner he got started the better, but that woman had him so rattled he wondered if he needed to go back to the docs to check his meds.

Actually, let's face it, he hadn't got angry, more like sarcastic. Maybe his meds were working. Although frustrated, he felt positive – his whole world wasn't closing in on him anymore. Even the nightmares had lessened. Karin played less on his mind. He'd get to work and feel better. Gardening was his new vice. You couldn't stress about gardening really, unless you had a lawn

to cut and rain was imminent, and even then it wasn't a matter of life or death.

Unlike his old job.

To turn the truck, he reversed up his drive. As he was about to pull out, he noticed his neighbour's front lawn needed cutting, and the bushes pruning ... *Even her blasted garden infuriates me.* And there sat her black cat in the front window. Ha! His neighbour was probably a witch. Did she have green eyes? She certainly had the red hair ... well, strawberry blonde his mother would call it. He narrowed his eyes at the cat. The thing was probably twiddling a whisker like some Doctor Evil, waiting for him to leave, so it could crap all over his front garden.

Being a landscape gardener, Harry took pride in his own garden – obviously. How else could he prove he was good at what he did? His own garden may be small but he made sure it showcased that he was good at his job. His intention was to build his business, then he could buy a larger property. That was the good thing about places like Padstow and Tinnars Bay: there were plenty of holiday homes and second homes needing regular garden maintenance. Perfect for a landscape gardener starting up – he'd picked up quite a few contracts, and hopefully he'd pick up this one he was attending today.

Damn cats were the bane of his life. Even in the fire service, the amount of stupid cats he'd had to rescue stuck up a tree, or in some tight gap. He understood the saying curiosity killed the cat more than ever now. He would have been more than happy

to release a well-aimed jet of water to get cats out of trees, but with an adoring owner watching you had to handle these matters with a lot more care.

Though, rescuing cats were the easy jobs ... a calm before a storm. Others were much harder ...

Harry gave himself a mental shake, bringing himself back to the present, and drove out of Annadale Close. His new home. His fresh start.

His neighbour would have to put up with his truck, if he was to put up with her annoying cat.

Maddy huffed and puffed, slamming the gallery door shut. Leaving her house in such an anxious state, she'd nearly had an accident at a roundabout, then followed a bloody camper van going at what felt like two miles an hour for most of the journey down the narrow country lanes to Tinnors Bay, flaring her temper and impatience further. *Sometimes, there was a downside to living in rural Cornwall.*

‘What has got you in such a tizz?’ Valerie said, appearing from the back of the gallery with a steaming mug of coffee. ‘This is not a good start to your Wednesday.’ Valerie was Maddy’s colleague and surrogate aunt. She was always smartly dressed, today wearing a powder blue trouser-suit and cream blouse, smelled of Chanel No 5 perfume and wore her light-blonde hair in a fashionably short bob. Valerie had always been a friend of the family. Growing up, Maddy had known her as Auntie Val,

and she could tell her things in confidence she couldn't tell her own mother. When Valerie had moved to Tinnors Bay with her new husband some years ago now, it had meant family holidays in Cornwall, which had developed Maddy's love for the area.

Maddy gratefully took the cup and hugged it for comfort. 'Oh, my bloody neighbour again. I nearly hit his truck. He's got the sheer nerve to question my driving.'

'Ah, yes, men.' Valerie chuckled. 'I assume you're talking about the one built like a brick—'

'Yes! That's him.' Maddy scowled.

'How dare he strut about showing off his tanned, taut body,' Valerie said, sarcastically, mischief and an air of envy in her eye. 'I assume that's what he's been doing again?'

'Yes, he had his shirt off! And at this time of the morning, too.'

'It is the summer. It's not a crime, Maddy,' Valerie said, chuckling. 'I wish I had a young hot neighbour I could drool over.'

'Not funny, Val.' Any other time, Maddy would have joined in and laughed with Valerie, but nothing could snap her out of her mood. Once Maddy got riled, it took a while for her rational thinking to return. 'He's vain and arrogant. He's the worst bloody type. He's been annoying the shit out of me for nearly three months, and today I had it out with him.' She regretted she hadn't said more now, and got the whole lot off her chest.

'Okay, calm down.' Valerie rested a reassuring hand on Maddy's shoulder. 'Talking about arrogance and vanity, have you heard any more from that ex of yours?'

Valerie's grimace showed she couldn't even bring herself to say his name. She never failed to express her disgust at how Connor had treated Maddy. Valerie had given Maddy the strength to leave him, too.

Maddy gently shook her head. 'No, I think he's got the message I don't want him back in my life.'

For a couple of weeks now her phone had remained silent. No texts, no calls – not that she'd reply if he did. He'd said he was returning to Bristol. *Thank goodness.*

'Good. The rage you're in I thought it was him who'd caused it, but the less we hear about that man, the better. It's about time he got the message and left you alone.' Valerie's expression softened. 'Now, go and set yourself up at your easel for a couple of hours. That always puts you in a better frame of mind.'

Maddy nodded, then twisted up her hair into a messy bun. She'd come in her not so posh clothes today, opting for old three-quarter length jeans and a short-sleeved floral shirt already with acrylic paint marking it. The clothes were clean on, but you could never get the paint out once dried. Some days she sat at her easel working on a commission, or something just for her. She'd set up an area in her gallery so that people could come in and watch her paint. Funnily enough, this had been one of Connor's good ideas. She found it helped sell paintings and got more commissions because it made her approachable to the customers.

Maddy loved painting landscapes and seascapes, and would often disappear to different parts of Cornwall, and sometimes

even North Devon, for inspiration. But most of her commissions were houses, something she'd started specialising in when living in Bristol and working from her mother's gallery in Clifton. She painted for those with cute cottages or beautiful thatched houses, wanting their homes transferred eternally on to canvas. Luckily, gorgeous houses were in abundance in Cornwall. She also did pets. However, she was at her happiest painting landscapes because she could add her own imaginative touches to those. It didn't matter if she omitted a tree or added some flowers, whereas houses and pets you had to get right. Currently, she was working on a seascape which she'd started a few weeks ago, trying to escape her thoughts of Connor. She loved creating the energy of crashing waves, of white surf and its swirling movement – a great mood improver.

‘While it's quiet, I might go upstairs for a bit,’ Valerie said. She couldn't work in public like Maddy did. She liked to tuck herself away somewhere quiet, so she usually worked upstairs above the gallery. The space was smaller, but there was a window that gave enough natural light. She worked in the room where they stored all the extra paintings, ready to go up when another sold, or commissions to be collected. Valerie and Maddy worked so well together, able to give each other advice. They knew each other well enough not to get offended by any constructive criticism. ‘When is Josie in next?’ Valerie called down the stairs.

‘Tomorrow morning,’ Maddy replied. She'd employed Josie part-time, so Maddy and Valerie weren't always stuck at the

gallery – they needed a life too. But with the holiday season rapidly approaching, the gallery had to be open seven days a week. Josie worked her shifts around her college work and covered the weekends. In the summer holidays, she upped her hours further.

Maddy's gallery exhibited a mixture of paintings from local artists – Josie being one of them. She did the same deal for them all; they were responsible for framing their work if necessary and she took thirty percent commission on anything sold. Some worked in pastel, some watercolours, oils, and like Maddy, acrylics. She even had a local photographer who sold his photographs in her gallery too. Maddy usually relied on Valerie's expertise to help price the work. Tinnors Bay attracted a mix of holidaymakers – some from wealthy areas of London, and some average families – so it was about setting the price right. Or having a good selection of affordable pieces and some more exclusive work.

This was to be her first full summer in Cornwall, and she needed to make it work. Setting up the gallery last year, coupled with the purchase of her new house, had eaten up all the funds she'd inherited from her grandfather, so now she really needed to pull in the money to survive. She did not want to return to her mother in Clifton with her tail between her legs.

Plus, Connor had returned to Bristol. And the further she stayed away from him, the better.

Maddy turned the key in the lock to the gallery, checked the handle to make sure she had actually locked the door, then slipped the key into her handbag. She looked up at the signage 'Captured by Hart' with a heart diagonally resting at the end and smiled. Her gallery.

Being holiday season, they tended to shut the gallery around seven p.m. but the rain that had come in a couple of hours ago had cleared the beach, so they were shutting slightly earlier tonight. The kids hadn't broken up from school yet so the tourists were families with very young children, making the most of a cheaper holiday. She looked out over the horizon. Now the clouds had dispersed, the clear blue sky showed the sun descending over the Atlantic. With the tide right out, it revealed a vast expanse of golden sand and she could just make out black dots of hardcore surfers amongst the white horses of the waves. Being late June, the weather was being very kind and hot. She could see there were even a couple of bathers still in the water. *Mad buggers. It's still bloody cold. Wouldn't catch me in there without a wetsuit.*

'Same time tomorrow,' Valerie said, kissing Maddy on the cheek.

'I'll be in a bit later, but Josie will be here. I want to work on my painting, the one for a commission. Might even make the most of the light evening and do some tonight.'

'Well, I'd best let you get off then, dear.'

'Would you like a lift?'

'No, no the walk always does me good.' Valerie lived locally.

‘I’ll probably be expected to cook for the rabble when I get home.’ Valerie had three sons, who had all moved out, but would still call in for their mum’s cooking. She waved and headed up the hill towards her home, in the direction of where Tinnors Bay Hotel was visible in the distance, resembling a five-star cruise liner shipwrecked in the landscape. The prestigious hotel even had some of Maddy’s paintings on display. She got the odd sale from there, which helped her cash flow.

Maddy strolled round to the back of the gallery to where she’d parked her car, feeling much happier than when she’d arrived this morning, her thoughts swirling about how well the gallery had done today, with a couple more commissions taken. Valerie always helped put her head straight too. Washing away the negatives and replacing them with positives. ‘Everything has a positive, if you look hard enough,’ was Valerie’s catchphrase. Maddy smiled to herself, thinking about Valerie. She was a woman of experience: never judged, always cared, and they always had a very good laugh about things, even the serious stuff.

Maddy had managed a couple of hours painting today, taking away her stress. She found every brush stroke therapeutic. Although the rent was high, she felt so lucky to have a gallery opposite the beach where she could watch the ocean come in and out, surfers riding the waves, and families pitching camp on the beach for the day. Sand castles, ice cream and Cornish pasties, all added to her inspiration for her pictures.

Yes, she was blessed, and she would make this work. Although

things had been messy with Connor, her life was finally back on track. Being single again wasn't all bad.

Maddy lived inland; a twenty-five minute drive through narrow country lanes if she didn't come across any tractors or cars towing caravans – *or slow moving camper vans*. As she pulled into Annadale Close, she imagined what she needed to pull from the fridge to make her dinner. *Chicken, salad ... a bit of Caesar dressing ... oh, with a glass of Pinot Grigio*. Turning the corner, she noticed blue flashing lights, reflecting off neighbouring houses. Then she became aware of the smell of something burning. The kind of smell that clung to the hairs in your nose and made your eyes water.

Carrying on, as she turned around the corner towards her home, two red fire engines, monstrous in size up close, blocked the road. It was sheer chaos with yellow hose pipes, firefighters and neighbours standing back to watch. Black smoke bellowed against the clear pink-blue sky ruining a good summer evening's sunset.

Cold fear entered her belly. *It's not ... It can't be ...*

Maddy screamed, and in seconds, her car door flung open, she was out of her car and running towards her burning house.

'Oh my God, oh my God,' Maddy cried hysterically. 'Put it out! Put it out!' She accosted a firefighter. 'Do something. That's my house!'

Chapter 2

As if a switch had been flicked inside her, Maddy lost all control. Anger, fear and hysteria replaced her usually composed personality. Rationality had gone up in smoke, like her house.

HER HOUSE.

Maddy swore every expletive under the sun. Where had she put her paintings? Were they in the house, or garage? Would she have any possessions left? As thoughts whirled around her head erratically, she fought to get past the firefighters, because none of them were working fast enough to put the fire out. NONE OF THEM. Black smoke billowed out of the back of her house and from her kitchen window.

‘Will someone get her out of here!’ a firefighter called.

‘Miss, you need to get back,’ another shouted. ‘We’ve got it under control.’

‘But that’s my house!’ Tears streamed down her face. Her voice was sore from shouting, but still she screamed. This could not be happening. *Why her house? Why?*

‘Roses, old friend, give us a hand, mate. Get her out of here.’

Despite her vision being blurred by tears, Maddy went to make another run towards her burning home, filled with an indescribable fury. Suddenly, her feet no longer touched the ground as she was lifted up and flung over the shoulder of a tall, muscular man.

Being thrown into this firefighter's carry enraged her further. She kicked and punched. 'Put me down. Put me down, you bastard.' But he was strong, holding her in such a way she couldn't break free. Her hip dug into his shoulder, but her fury relished the pain.

'I'll put you down when you stop fighting,' the man said sternly.

She tried lifting her head, but all she could see was the carnage of her house surrounded by firefighters and red trucks. She cried and cried helplessly.

The door closed behind her and the man put her down on her feet. She glared up into bright blue eyes. He folded his arms and stared back. She recognised the burly man with his black hair and his stern unforgiving expression.

Harry.

The sight of him stoked Maddy's fury further.

'Let me back out there!' As she wiped her tears, she tried to barge Harry out of the way, but he stopped her firmly, both palms pushing on her shoulders.

'You're not helping the situation. Let the fire brigade do their job. They'll get it done quicker without a hysterical woman getting in their way.' Harry stood his ground, placing his hands on his hips. 'In all my days, I've never seen anything like it.'

Maddy glared fiercely at Harry. He glared back, blue eyes like ice.

'Calm down,' he said sternly, still not budging from his post.

Maddy sucked in gulps of air, her chest heaving as slowly she calmed down. What with everything that had happened lately, this was the final straw. And she'd had such a good day at the gallery too. She should have known it wouldn't last. Why couldn't she be happy and stay happy?

'I'm sorry,' she said hoarsely, a thirst for water hitting her throat. She tried generating some moisture in her mouth by swallowing.

'They were here within ten minutes, so hopefully there won't be much damage.'

'How long have they been here?'

'Not long, they'd just arrived and gone through your back door by the time you arrived. Now do you want some tea? Or something stronger?'

Maddy shook her head. She was standing in her neighbour's house. The arrogant man she'd only this morning had a row with about his pickup truck. She didn't know what she wanted.

'Oh, hell, I left my car in the middle of the road. My handbag is in it too.' She started shaking, another form of panic racing through her. All she needed was her car and handbag to be stolen. These things came in threes. Her handbag contained her phone, Tablet and her purse.

'I'll go and move it, and get your bag,' Harry said, then instructed more sternly, 'Stay here, please.' Blue eyes narrowed on her, and she nodded.

Maddy watched him leave, locking his front door and taking

the key. He *so* didn't trust her. She tested it too, and found she couldn't get out. *Bastard*. She was using that word a lot today. *And about him*. Helpless, she stared out of the window watching the firefighters put out the fire. It looked like they had it contained now. As Harry had said, they were round the back of the house. They'd entered via the back door, into the kitchen. What would the damage be like? Would everything smell of smoke? What had caught fire?

She tried hard to think back to the morning. Had she left something on in the kitchen? Could a kettle catch fire? She'd heard of washing machines and tumble dryers being the cause of fires, but hers were in the garage. And had she moved her paintings to the garage? She felt certain she had, but couldn't remember actually doing it. Her memory was coming up blank. She was supposed to be delivering the paintings this weekend. And tomorrow she'd wanted to start on a new commission – fat chance of that happening now.

Five minutes later, Harry returned with the keys to her car and her handbag.

'Do you want to make a phone call to someone?'

She shook her head. She needed to calm down first. Valerie was her first thought. She'd need her to man the gallery tomorrow. Maddy couldn't even contemplate the mess she would need to deal with tomorrow morning. Phoning her mother was not an option either. She didn't need her racing here.

There wasn't anyone else she knew to call. Since moving to

Cornwall a year ago, she had only made few friends and she didn't know them well enough to impose. Her time had been spent building her art business. Unsociable hours painting or manning the gallery. Her closest friend here was Valerie.

She checked her handbag for its contents – *all present and correct, phew!* How stupid to leave them in the car unlocked. Cornwall didn't exactly have a high crime rate, however there was always the chance of an opportunist.

'I've just realised I don't even know your name.' Harry stood facing Maddy, hands on his hips. Large hands too, totally in proportion with the rest of him. She'd never stood this close to him and appreciated his full size. If he wanted to be intimidating, he could be, but at the moment, she could see he was trying to help her. A small voice whispered inside her head. *You're safe.*

'It's Maddison, but everyone calls me Maddy,' she said, her breath hitching occasionally, like a small child who'd been crying too much.

'Harry.' He held out his hand, so formally, Maddy shook it.

'Yes, I know, you told me this morning.'

'Ah, yes, I did, didn't I?' A hint of a smile softened his expression. 'Right, I think you need a drink. Will vodka do, or whiskey? I don't have any wine. And I avoid gin like the plague.' Maddy followed Harry into his small kitchen. His house layout was identical to hers. But his kitchen was old pine units, whereas she'd had white melamine. There would be three bedrooms above and a bathroom. 'Or I may have some rum.' he said,

opening an overhead cupboard.

‘Vodka, please. Do you have anything to mix with it?’ However much she wanted to numb her brain, she’d need to be able to concentrate tomorrow morning.

‘I have orange juice,’ Harry said, pulling a carton from the fridge.

‘Perfect.’

‘And don’t worry; you can kip here for the night.’

‘Thank you.’ Her voice was softer now, almost a whisper. Her throat hurt and she didn’t have the energy to speak. A numbing shock was taking over her now. She didn’t care where she slept tonight. She doubted she’d actually sleep. Should she stay here though, or call Valerie? She didn’t know the man who stood before her, only this morning they’d been at loggerheads with each other. His truck, her cat.

‘Oh, God.’ Maddy’s drink sloshed in the glass as she moved suddenly. ‘Sookie.’

‘Who’s Sookie?’ Harry was sipping a darker liquid, whiskey she presumed. She hadn’t noticed him pour himself one.

‘My cat!’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘It’ll be all right.’

‘What if she didn’t get out of the house? What if she tries to get back in? She must be hungry now.’ Anxiety crept up Maddy’s back, stiffening her shoulders, but she tried to keep her hysterics in check. Did she have any more tears left to cry? ‘I should go and find her.’ She placed her glass on the counter, and as she moved,

Harry held out his hand to stop her, blocking her way.

‘Wait!’ He clearly didn’t want her leaving the house. ‘Do you have a cat flap?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, hopefully she got out.’

‘But it’s in the kitchen! Oh, god, what will she do now? I usually keep her in at night.’

‘Shouldn’t cats be out at night?’

This time Maddy rolled her eyes. ‘Everyone assumes this, but actually they’re more likely to get run over at night.’

‘Annadale Close is hardly the A30.’

‘And they do more damage to wildlife. Maybe I should go and look for her. She’ll be hungry.’

‘You are staying right here.’ His eyes glared, matching his firm tone. ‘I’ll go and look for her. And while I’m there I’ll have a chat to the fire brigade, to assess the damage to your house.’

‘She’s completely black, with one white paw.’

‘I know what she looks like.’ Harry sounded irked. He didn’t need to keep Maddy locked in his house, she was calmer now. The hysteria had ebbed away. Though she wanted to cry she was now holding it in around Harry. And the vodka was helping; he’d poured a very large measure.

Harry locked Maddy in his house again, and went in search of her cat. He scratched his head, and rolled his shoulders, trying to relieve some of the tension out of his body. How had he managed

to get involved with her problems?

When he'd swept his neighbour off her feet, into a fireman's carry, he really hadn't thought things through. Maddy, now he knew her name, was not what he needed in his life. He wanted simplicity, quiet, solitude. Not a hysterical woman. Or house fires! Now he'd offered her a room for the night. *It only has to be one night.* What had he been thinking? For a start, he didn't have a spare bed. *Looks like you're on the sofa tonight, mate.*

The look in his former colleague's eyes, telling Harry to get the crazed woman out of the area and to let them work, had kicked his old firefighter instinct in. To help and protect, and calm the situation, that's what led Harry to react the way he did – the only way he knew how. Grabbing her arms, and hoisting her, full firefighter carry, over his shoulder and into his house. It was almost prehistoric. It would have been if he'd hit her over the head with his club first. If he'd had one of course.

Probably would have helped actually. She'd turned even more enraged by his actions. Kicking, screaming. Luckily he had the strength to hold her small frame though he probably was going to have a few bruises for his trouble. Fierce green eyes had glared at him when he'd set her down. *Yep, definitely a witch.*

Now he was looking for her damn cat. Could his evening get any worse? *Oh, the irony.* The thing is, he'd seen the cat in the house when he'd left this morning. He hadn't wanted to tell Maddy that piece of information. Had the thing had the sense to leave the house before the blaze caught? Cats had a sixth sense,

didn't they? Or was it just nine lives? However much he disliked cats, he hoped it was alive, and he would find it, because Maddy had been through enough tonight.

With the smell of smoke still in the air, and firemen clearing up, reeling in the hoses, Harry could see the black scar of fire around Maddy's kitchen window where the smoke had escaped. Some neighbours still milled around watching what was going on. Luckily, the small window at the top must have been left fractionally open on the safety latch. It had allowed the smoke to escape which had meant the fire was quickly detected, otherwise it might have gone on for longer without anyone realising. Guilt ate away at him. This was shit for Maddy. He'd seen the devastation over the years of people's livelihoods and family possessions destroyed, never to be replaced. You couldn't replace photos and memorabilia. He'd been the one to spot the fire and had called the emergency services. It looked like the kitchen had taken the worst of it, yet he feared her whole house would stink of smoke, and there would be a black layer of soot in places you wouldn't dream of. Despite their differences, he knew he couldn't have watched what was happening to Maddy from the sidelines and done nothing. What were neighbours for?

And at least nobody had got hurt ... unlike Karin ...

Don't think about her now. He shook his head, unclenching his fists, shrugging off his dark thoughts.

'Hey, Collins, what's the damage?' Harry called out to the fire officer in charge, jogging over to him. He wore a white helmet,

while his colleagues wore yellow ones. His first name was Phil, but the guys of blue watch had nicknamed him Collins after the singer. He'd been caught singing in the kitchen while cooking for the watch one time and it had stuck.

'Roses, good fellow.' The two shook hands. 'How are you doing? It's good to see you.'

'I'm good, thanks. Enjoying the landscape gardening.'

'We were all sorry to see you go,' Collins said. 'But hey, you've got to do what's right for you, huh?' Harry smiled his agreement. 'Did you get the damsel out of distress?'

'Yeah, she's a bit shook up but she's safe in my house.'

Collins chuckled. 'It's not like we haven't seen it before. Anyway, the boys are surveying the damage and securing her back door and kitchen window. Tomorrow a team will be back to put our report together – you know the routine.' Harry nodded. 'But it looks like one for the police.'

'Okay,' Harry replied, frowning. Did he tell Collins what he'd seen? Would it get Maddy into trouble?

'Did you see anything suspicious?' Collins asked, as if reading Harry's mind.

'How do you mean?' *See what Collins had to say first.*

'I'm not supposed to say anything,' Collins lowered his voice, 'but it looks like it could have been arson. We could smell the mild scent of an accelerant. Do you think she ...?'

Harry shook his head. 'No, no, she didn't do this. She's stressed about her paintings and her cat and all sorts. You saw

how hysterical she was. Did you manage to contain the fire?’

‘Yes, most of the damage is in the kitchen. Good job we got the call as early as we did,’ Collins said. ‘Otherwise it might have been a different story.’

‘I made the call. I saw the smoke coming out of the gap in her kitchen window. In fact, I smelled it first.’ As quick as a Beagle could pick up a scent, Harry would always smell smoke at the slightest whiff. ‘Unfortunately I couldn’t get in, otherwise I’d have tried to stop it from spreading.’

Collins nodded. ‘You did good calling when you did. Please don’t enter the house until the fire investigation officer has been. I suspect the police will leave someone outside all night to guard it as CSI won’t come till the morning now.’ Harry nodded back; he knew the procedure. ‘We’ll secure the back door for now the best we can, and tomorrow we’ll get it boarded up, so the house is secure. Has she got somewhere to stay the night?’

‘Yeah, I’ve offered to let her stay at mine.’

‘Always the hero.’ Collins slapped Harry on the back.

Harry gave a fake laugh. *What had he got himself into?* ‘By the way, you haven’t seen a cat have you – dead or alive?’

Collins chuckled. ‘A black one?’

‘Well it will look black if it’s burnt to death.’

‘Oh, it’s not dead.’ Collins pointed to a tree in Maddy’s neighbouring garden to the right. A small tree, but big enough to provide refuge for a cat. Sookie’s eyes reflected the light from the fire engines, making it easier for her to be spotted in the

dimming light.

‘Ah, yes, thanks.’ Harry shook hands with Collins then walked over to the tree. Tiptoeing, Harry reached up and grabbed the cat out of the tree while it hissed at him.

‘Hey, I’m not happy about this either, girl.’ She stank of smoke, reminding him of the smell of soot. ‘Sweep would be a good name for you right now ... or as you’re a girl, maybe Sue.’ She hissed and struggled, and when Harry held her more firmly, dug her claws into his arm. Resisting the urge to release the cat – or drop her – he rushed back to his house, one-handedly unlocking his front door, and as soon as he closed it, released the cat as she gave another hiss. Frowning, he rubbed the scratches along his forearms.

‘Sookie!’ Maddy picked up the cat, stroking her between the ears. The cat purred and rubbed its head against Maddy, its mood changing immediately. ‘Where have you been, young lady? You smell like an old pub ashtray.’

Harry noticed Maddy brighten too, stroking her cat, so it purred and meowed more. He’d rescued many animals in his time, handing them over to relieved owners. Even the times when needing rescuing had been the stupid animal’s fault, to see the happiness and relief of pet and owner being reunited always softened Harry’s heart – he just never let his colleagues know it. Setting aside his dislike for cats as a landscape gardener, the cat being alive was a positive thing for Maddy. ‘I’ll get her some food.’

Back in his kitchen, he searched his cupboards. What did he have that a cat would eat? He found a can of tuna and opened it, draining the brine down the sink. He forked out a little on a saucer and placed it on the kitchen floor. In another saucer, he placed water. He put the rest of the can in the fridge. It could be the cat's breakfast.

The cat ate hungrily, purring loudly.

'I've got some sand in the garage. I'll sort out a litter tray for tonight as she can't go back outside until it's safe.'

'Thank you,' Maddy said, smiling at Harry for the first time. Her eyes were still red and puffy where she'd been crying, and sadness shadowed them, but she certainly appeared calmer now he'd found her cat alive and well.

'Hey, this is what neighbours are for, right?'

Harry found a seed tray, lined it with a carrier bag, and filled it with some sand. He placed this too in the kitchen. He really was doing his good deeds for the day, allowing a feline pest into his house. *It had better not scratch his furniture.*

Karin had liked cats. Maybe that was another reason why he hated them.

Don't think about Karin.

He rubbed the back of his neck, taking in a deep breath, then breathed out slowly.

'Right, time for a top up on your drink,' he said, reaching for the two spirit bottles and grabbing the orange juice out of the fridge. He gestured for Maddy to sit in the lounge. She held out

her glass while he poured her another large measure of vodka, then poured himself another Jack Daniels. Harry needed to think of a way to break it to Maddy about her house, so she was prepared for tomorrow.

Maddy sat rigidly on the edge of the sofa, obviously in a stranger's house and unable to relax. Harry found himself doing the same in the opposite armchair.

'You can relax, Maddy. I don't bite, you know,' Harry said, sitting back in the seat. 'And I don't mind you staying the night – unless you have somewhere else you'd prefer to go?'

She shook her head. 'No, I haven't. While you were fetching Sookie, I phoned my friend Valerie, and there was no answer. I didn't want to leave her a distressed message either. Also, I think I've had too much vodka to drive myself anywhere even if I did.'

He would have offered to drive her, however, he was likely over the limit as well now. 'It's probably easier if you stay here. You can't go back in the house until the fire brigade have finished assessing the damage.' A fire investigation usually meant there could be something suspicious, and Collins had pretty much confirmed it, too – but maybe Harry shouldn't worry Maddy with that detail yet? She was going to find it hard to sleep as it was. 'But at least you're on site so you can talk to them tomorrow.'

'I hope I don't get burgled now. That would be just my luck.'

'There's a police car parked outside. They'll watch the house all night.' Did he confess to her tonight that they were treating it like a crime scene?

‘Really, they do that?’

‘Yeah, sometimes.’ Harry’s guilt increased. But Maddy would need to try and sleep. She’d been through enough this evening.

Maddy took another gulp of her drink. ‘Thank you, you’ve been really kind. I’m sorry I was such a mess earlier. I’m not usually violent.’

‘I might have a few bruises to show for my heroic actions.’

‘I am so sorry.’ Maddy wouldn’t meet his eye, and silence fell between them. As if on cue, Sookie emerged from the kitchen licking her lips. Tail raised, she trotted over to Maddy, who timidly smiled and stroked the top of her head.

‘Do you feel better now, girl?’ Maddy cooed. The cat jumped into her lap, and whilst purring, licked her paws and then set about routinely cleaning herself. Maddy sat back a little deeper into Harry’s sofa and looked almost comfortable.

‘Well, at least you know your cat is safe,’ Harry said, finding it hard to know what to say. The woman’s house had been set on fire – possibly deliberately. He started thinking about how much damage smoke could do. He wouldn’t worry Maddy unnecessarily. No point until they knew what they were facing. No one had died, so that was always a positive in his line of work — when it had been his line of work, that is. Now he only had to worry about plants dying. But lifting Maddy into that carry had given him a buzz. Seeing the action unfold as the fire engines had arrived, sirens blaring, blue lights flashing; a part of him missed his firefighting days, missed the adrenalin rush. However,

he knew he was no good to his colleagues in the field. One bad day, and he'd freeze, flashbacks would paralyse him, and he'd be no good to anyone. In fact, he'd be a danger to himself and others.

Karin's death would always haunt him.

Chapter 3

Maddy glanced at her watch. It was nearly eleven. The night's events were closing in on her, fogging her brain and making her eyes heavy. She yawned, and sipped her third large vodka. The heat from the spirit sent warmth from the back of her throat down to her stomach. Harry had insisted on another drink.

'It'll help you sleep,' he'd said as he'd poured it out for her.

It probably would, that's why she was feeling tired, because she felt drunk. Not hammered and out of control drunk but the giggly, light boned-feeling drunk – *if only she felt giggly. Far from it.* In fact, if she weren't careful she would burst into tears. She wouldn't stop worrying until she knew the extent of the damage to her house, and to her paintings. The house could be redecorated – although the thought of the task plagued her with worry – but the paintings were her income. It was a large commission and she didn't want to screw it up by delivering it late. She wouldn't have time to repaint the two pieces she was supplying – they'd taken a month to complete. They were ready and framed, due to be delivered this weekend, in time for the opening of a new restaurant in Padstow. The owner had asked for a couple of pieces and was happy to pay generously. She hadn't refused. If they were damaged, there would be no way she'd have them ready by the weekend.

'I'm sorry, Harry, my head is a mess.'

‘Hey, it’s totally understandable. Only this morning you were cursing me, so it probably feels a bit strange to be sitting in my house right now.’

‘Well, you still have a monstrous truck.’ Maddy looked at him, smiling to show she was teasing and he gave a hearty chuckle. Then Maddy yawned again, just about getting her hand to her mouth remembering her manners. *Not attractive.*

‘I think it’s time we went to bed,’ Harry said, standing up.

Maddy’s heart raced. Did he think she was going to sleep with him? He must have caught her worried expression because he took her empty glass out of her hand and laughed. ‘Don’t panic, you can have my bed, and I’ll kip on the sofa tonight.’

‘You don’t have a spare room?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Oh, I thought when you said I could stay I assumed you had a spare bedroom.’ He did have a three-bedroom house exactly like hers.

‘One’s a gym and the other is the dumping ground for all my crap. I’ll eventually get around to clearing it out. You know what it’s like when you move house, takes a while to empty all the boxes.’

Maddy smiled wanly at him. ‘Yes, I remember. I still have boxes in my garage I haven’t opened yet,’ she said, her voice still hoarse from her hysterics earlier. ‘I’ve been in my house barely over a year.’ She started to cry, silent tears.

‘Don’t cry,’ Harry approached Maddy, ‘it’ll be all right, you’ll

see. I think most of the damage was in the kitchen.’ His strong hand squeezed her shoulder, sending an unexpected ripple of delight through her body. She felt safe. She caught his scent; a mixture of a day’s work and a spicy Lynx deodorant. It wasn’t unpleasant. ‘Maybe we should hit the sack. It’s been a long day.’

Maddy nodded at him.

‘Come upstairs, and I’ll show you where everything is.’

Exhausted emotionally and physically, Maddy was relieved to follow Harry up the stairs. Whether she would sleep would be another thing, but she knew she needed to lie down. He gestured towards the bathroom which was the first door on the right, at the top of the stairs. Of course she knew this, it was her house, only decorated differently.

‘I haven’t had a chance to decorate yet,’ Harry said, as if reading her mind. The bathroom was very pink and floral, reminding her of the old couple who had lived in the house previously.

Maybe the tiredness made her smirk. ‘At least the suite is white, so it’s a case of just a lick of paint.’

‘And changing those hideous tiles,’ Harry said, shuddering.

Maddy giggled briefly. ‘Oh, I thought the flowers were so you.’

‘What with being a landscape gardener?’

‘Absolutely.’

Harry gave her a speculative look, as if appreciating her teasing, and opened the bathroom cabinet above the sink. ‘I think I have a new toothbrush in here. Hope you can cope with it being

blue.'

'Blue's fine. Might have been a different story if I was eight.' Maddy's eyes widened as she stared inside the cabinet. 'Wow. There's enough drugs in there to open a pharmacy.' Too late – she'd opened her mouth and said the first thing that had entered her head.

Harry slammed the door shut. 'Here you go.' He handed Maddy the new toothbrush still in its packaging.

She gulped and started fiddling with the toothbrush packaging. It was none of her business why he had so many tablets hoarded away, although if he was a complete psychopath, and she was staying under his roof for one night, maybe she needed to know. Was she safe? *Now you are being overdramatic. He probably has a very good reason for the tablets.* Maddy struggled with the packaging trying to take out the toothbrush, which was an impossible task even when sober. The perforated card would never tear.

Ignoring Maddy's comment about the prescribed drugs in his cabinet, Harry took the toothbrush and ripped it out from the plastic wrapper with ease.

'Sorry, I've had too much vodka.' She hoped this sounded like a good excuse for her blurting out rubbish, and the fact she couldn't open toothbrush packaging without scissors.

'Do you want to shower?'

Maddy shook her head. She'd have one in the morning. Now she needed sleep.

‘Clean towels are in the airing cupboard, help yourself.’

‘Okay.’

Harry led her to the master bedroom. A king-size metal framed bed took centre stage, with navy blue bed linen clashing with the pastel green chintzy wallpaper. ‘Like I said, I haven’t decorated yet. Wanted to move in and get settled first.’

‘Of course.’ Maddy became tongue-tied, the meds in the cabinet eating at her curiosity.

‘I need to pinch a couple of pillows, if that’s okay, and I’ll be downstairs. I’ll let you use the bathroom first.’

‘Oh, Harry, could I borrow a T-shirt or something, please ... to sleep in?’ She didn’t fancy sleeping naked. But she’d been wearing these clothes all day, and probably would need to wear them all day again tomorrow if she wasn’t going to be allowed back in her house.

‘Yes, of course, sorry.’ He rummaged in a chest of drawers opposite the bed and pulled out a white pinstriped shirt. ‘This is too small for me now. Use this.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking the shirt. ‘And thank you, Harry, for everything. You didn’t need to take me in.’

‘What are neighbours for?’

Sookie padded into the room, and jumped onto Harry’s bed, and immediately started washing and purring, as if Maddy and Harry didn’t exist.

‘Do you mind if she sleeps in here?’

‘No, it’s fine,’ Harry replied, but his expression didn’t match

the words he spoke. 'Right, I'll let you sleep.' Harry gave a gentle wave, and as he walked downstairs, Maddy entered the bathroom and locked the door.

She cleaned her teeth, and assessed the dark circles under her eyes, hoping some sleep would reduce their dullness tomorrow. Splashing her face with cold water helped remove some of the puffiness. She stared at her reflection in the mirrors of the bathroom cabinet. Behind those mirrors contained Harry's drugs. She thought of taking a better look, but resisted, fearing he would hear the clicking of the magnets on the cabinet as she opened and shut the doors. And anyway it wasn't any of her business.

Her mother had brought her up properly not to be a snoop. Or was it Dad?

'I'm finished in the bathroom,' Maddy called down the stairs, then closed the bedroom door behind her.

Under the watchful eye of Sookie curled up on the bed, Maddy stripped off her clothes, neatly piling them up and buttoned up the shirt Harry had given her. It may have been too small for Harry, but luckily on Maddy's petite form, although long in the arms, it covered her bottom nicely making a good night shirt. If caught out in the middle of the night using the bathroom, at least she'd still keep some of her dignity.

She slid underneath the duvet, and once comfortable turned off the lamp by the bed. She was in darkness until her eyes adjusted to the street lighting that bled between the curtains.

She closed her eyes and listened, hearing Harry leave the

bathroom, pulling the cord to turn the light off, and the sound of the toilet cistern refilling. All normal sounds, and not dissimilar to her own home's, yet she tensed, feeling alien and uncomfortable. She was sleeping in a stranger's bed. A man she'd hated this morning. Sookie didn't seem bothered, so maybe Maddy needed to take a leaf out of her cat's book and try to sleep. Things would look better in the morning, wouldn't they?

With the taste of the pills he'd just swallowed still on his tongue, Harry closed the bathroom door as quietly as he could. He winced, pulling a face. *Would he ever get used to those things?* Usually he swallowed them, then cleaned his teeth to disguise their chalky, rancid taste. But with everything running around his brain, aware he had a house guest and wondering whether she was comfortable and settled, he'd forgotten to take his medication until he was about to leave the bathroom.

Harry found the spare duvet in the junk room of bedroom three. It really was the 'box room', the amount of boxes he still had stacked up. Too small for a bedroom, one day it would be his study. One day. He needed to find the strength to sort through the boxes. He knew there would be some memorabilia, photos that would remind him of Karin. He wasn't ready for to face them yet.

Having grabbed some bed linen from the airing cupboard, he made up his bed on the larger of his sofas. In the past, he'd slept well on this sofa, as a fireman and working shifts and not wanting to wake Karin. Only in a different house ... their house

... Nowadays, his medication made him drowsy, so he'd sleep better than Maddy's cat on this sofa tonight.

Damn cat on his bed. Whatever next? The rows he'd had with Karin over that.

Feeling the tension creep up his back, he pushed his thoughts of Karin aside. Harry puffed pillows and wriggled to get comfortable. Usually, he preferred to sleep naked, but because of his houseguest, he decided to keep his boxers on. He didn't need Maddy coming down the stairs and being greeted by his bare arse – or worse!

Hoping tonight's events and the lingering smell of smoke wouldn't bring on a flashback – he'd not been near a fire in months – he closed his eyes and thought of the next gardening project he had lined up, trying to map out the garden, plan the plants he'd use. It worked better than counting sheep. And if that didn't work, his medication would soon kick in.

Chapter 4

The next thing Harry knew, daylight was streaming through the gap in the curtains, and a cat was purring on his chest, pawing and kneading at him. He pushed her off and the cat gave a hiss. It took him a minute to gather why he was sleeping on the sofa, and why he had a black cat on top of him. For one very brief moment, he had thought he was back, with Karin, still working as a fireman.

‘I guess you’re hungry are you, Socks?’ He thought that was a better name for the cat, having one white paw.

As Harry sat up, the cat persisted trying to jump back on top of him. He swung the duvet off, burying Sookie, and strolled into the kitchen, the cat trotting by his feet, tail pointed. Squinting, his eyes not yet ready to fully open, he looked at the clock on his microwave. Stupid cat, it was only five thirty-two a.m.

He pulled the tuna out of the fridge, and like last night, forked it onto a saucer. Sookie sniffed it and looked up at him in disgust.

‘What? You ate it last night.’ Harry held his hands up at the cat.

‘Last night it was at room temperature. It’s probably too cold for her at the moment.’ Maddy had appeared in the kitchen doorway, wearing only his shirt, unaware how sexy she looked, with her hair tousled and barelegged. *Wow!*

‘Good morning,’ Harry said, quickly turning and busying himself. *Why hadn’t he slipped a T-shirt on himself?* He flicked

the switch on the kettle and pulled two mugs from the cupboard.

‘Morning.’ Maddy sounded grumpy, splashing cold water over his hot thoughts.

‘You sure your name’s not Moody, rather than Maddy?’ He teased over his shoulder. Maddy scowled.

‘I’m not a great morning person at the best of times,’ Maddy said, curtly. ‘But if you haven’t forgotten, my house was on fire last night. Not exactly something to wake up to and put you in a good mood.’

Maybe she had a point. ‘Did you sleep okay?’

‘Not bad. It was broken sleep, but the bed was comfortable, thank you.’

‘Maybe you should take a shower while I get us some breakfast on.’ Harry focussed on her green eyes, and tried not to let his own stray lower, to how her amber-blond hair fell softly over her shoulders, and onto her breasts, curling at the ends. *Stop it.*

‘Yes, I will, but I’m worried my face will feel dry and itchy as I don’t have any moisturiser.’

‘Ah, I might be able to help you out there. I’ll put it on my bed. Go get in the shower.’

‘Oh, that would be great. It’s amazing how much you take for granted when you can’t get into your own home.’

He let Maddy return upstairs before he followed, throwing on a T-shirt and his shorts from yesterday. He waited until he could hear the shower running then darted into his box room, opening up some cardboard boxes. ‘Now where is it,’ he mumbled. In his

attempt to tidy the room he'd stumbled across some of Karin's cosmetics and skincare bottles. It had stopped him from opening any more boxes.

Karin had been a hoarder of beauty products, and all of these tiny bottles were samples or freebies which hadn't even been opened. At the time, when he'd found them, he hadn't the heart to throw them away, so they'd been thrown back in a box instead. In fact, he wondered if his mother had packed them into his boxes by mistake, because until moving here, he hadn't been aware he had any of Karin's belongings. In his grieving state, his mother had helped clear out Karin's things, taking them to her parents. But he knew there would be some things left to remind him of her.

And he shouldn't forget the good things.

The scents of some of the moisturisers and perfumes reminded him of Karin, and he clung to them from time to time, worried he was forgetting the good stuff about her. He wanted to remember her alive, not how she died. Now, nearly two years after her death, he should be healing – his intention was to see if a charity shop would want the items so had set them aside – but he still couldn't face the other boxes. Harry found the carrier bag on the top of a box. It contained make-up and skin care samples, full pots Karin hadn't started. With the shower still running, he placed it on his bed ready for Maddy to find.

Maddy returned to the kitchen in the clothes she was wearing last night – a flowery short-sleeved blouse and three-quarter

length jeans, both items covered with splodges of dried paint. ‘Thanks for the toiletries,’ she said, towelling her hair dry.

‘Not a problem. You can keep them if you like. I was only going to give them to a charity shop.’

‘Whose are they?’

An unease churned inside his stomach as he frowned, not wanting to answer. He’d turned his back on Maddy so she couldn’t see the discomfort her question had caused in his face. He wasn’t ready to talk about Karin. Not to a stranger. He popped two slices of bread into the toaster. ‘No one’s. Like I said, you can have them.’

‘Sorry, I’m doing it again. Only this time I no longer have the vodka to blame.’

Harry smiled, trying to relax. It wasn’t Maddy’s fault. ‘It’s okay, just a very long story.’

‘I could really do with some clean underwear, but I suppose you don’t have any?’

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. ‘No sorry, I can’t help there.’

After a small breakfast – Maddy couldn’t stomach eating much – she took her coffee into the lounge. From here she had a better view of her house and wanted to wait for the fire brigade to show up and go through the charred remains of her kitchen. Dread filled her at the amount of work ahead of her, because even if only the kitchen were damaged, the rest of the house

would probably need redecorating to get rid of the smoke stains and stench.

And then there were her paintings ...

The first thing she'd do when allowed back into her house was check the paintings, and then dig out her insurance details.

Last night she hadn't taken much notice of Harry's lounge. His dark leather sofas clashed with the pastel chintz borders around the top of the wall and the floral curtains. Maddy's house wasn't the only one in need of decorating.

Harry, after showering and changing, joined Maddy in the lounge with a mug of coffee, cupping it with both hands.

Last night she hadn't taken much notice of Harry either. He created quite a presence. She tried not to stare at his bum as he walked around his lounge, his small, tight buttocks accentuated by his khaki cargo pants. Her eyes roamed upwards – *because staring at his bum was totally unacceptable* – to appreciate his narrow waist spreading to broad, muscular shoulders, which his black T-shirt stretched across. His clothing didn't leave much to the imagination. *He would make a fantastic life model.* She gave herself a mental shake. She shouldn't be ogling him. What was she thinking? *He fancied himself, remember? This is the same guy you were rowing with, only yesterday morning.* Although, he was being very nice currently, and he didn't have to be. Last night he could have left her on the pavement outside screaming at the firefighters.

'Do you need to go to work?' she said.

‘I’ll call them to say I’ll be over later.’ Harry turned to face her. ‘I’ll wait with you to see the fire brigade.’

Maddy nodded. She’d already made the call to Valerie this morning while Harry was showering, who had been sympathetic. ‘Oh my dear girl,’ Valerie had said. Her casual tone had immediately sharpened to more alert when Maddy had said there had been a fire. ‘I’m so sorry I was out last night. You should have left a message.’ Last night Maddy hadn’t wanted to leave a distressed message on Valerie’s phone, though. ‘Don’t you worry about a thing with the gallery. Get yourself sorted and keep me posted.’

Maddy wished the fire brigade would hurry up. ‘I’m dreading what it’s going to look like inside,’ she said, feeling her lip quiver uncontrollably. Tears began to well in her eyes, and so she glanced away from Harry’s gaze, not wanting him to see her falter. The damage that would need to be fixed worried her. And she’d been doing so well this morning, too.

‘Hey.’ Harry sat himself down beside her, placing a hand on hers. It was warm from holding his mug of coffee. ‘This is what insurance is for. The fire brigade arrived quickly; the fire was contained in the kitchen.’

However reassuring Harry was trying to be, Maddy couldn’t help worrying. Anxiety crept up her spine and weighted itself on her shoulders. This year she needed to make the gallery successful – her business. Would the house fire destroy everything she’d tried to achieve in this past year?

Chapter 5

Maddy heard the truck before she saw it, the morning song of the birds drowned out. One large fire truck pulled up, impressive and intimidating as it parked in the narrow street of Annadale Close. It was just after eight-thirty a.m. *What must the neighbours think?* With the arrival of the fire service, the police car stationed outside her house moved off, turning around at the end of the close.

‘They’re prompt,’ Harry said, heading out of the front door. Maddy put her coffee mug down and followed.

Four men jumped out of the fire truck, and each shook Harry’s hand and greeted him. It suddenly dawned on Maddy — he used to be a fireman. How else would he know this stuff, and the crew all know him? It explained his build, too. And the way he’d carried her into the house last night. It couldn’t all be down to landscape gardening. She’d noticed the impressive equipment in his second bedroom – his gym.

‘All right, Roses,’ one said, patting Harry on the back. ‘You’re looking good, my man. Collins said he’d bumped into you last night. All that weeding must be doing you good.’

Maddy’s thoughts exactly.

‘Thanks, Dixons.’ Harry laughed with the fireman.

‘We should go out for a drink sometime.’

‘I’d like that,’ Harry replied, but Maddy saw the flash of

anxiety in his expression as if he wasn't sure about socialising with these men.

A red car pulled up behind the fire engine, and the driver approached them, carrying a clipboard. He too wore a fire brigade uniform, but there was something much more formal about him.

'Right, Miss ...?' Dixons turned his attention to Maddy after acknowledging the other man.

'Hart,' Maddy said, blushing with embarrassment, remembering her hysterical actions the night before. 'And I'm so sorry for being a pain last night.'

'Think nothing of it. Your house was on fire. Most people don't react too well to that, miss. Our boys take it all in a day's work.' When he smiled, creases around his eyes gathered. It was hard to tell his hair colouring under his white helmet, but his clean-shaven face was attractive enough. Age-wise, he had to be mid-forties, Maddy guessed. 'This is Gary. He's our fire investigation officer. He's here to put a report together.' Gary said a hello, tucking the clipboard under his arm and headed towards the back of Maddy's house with a couple of the fire crew.

'Can I see the damage?' Maddy asked, wringing her hands and glancing over Dixons' shoulder, watching the men enter her house.

'Yes, but I need to let Gary take a look first with CSI – Crime Scene Investigation.'

Maddy knew what it stood for. Sounded like the American

TV show ... was her house fire turning into a TV show? It all felt very surreal. And why were they treating it like a crime scene?

To add to the dream – or Maddy’s worst nightmare –three vehicles pulled up, a dark Ford Focus and two vans with detailing down the side ‘Scientific Investigations’ and more men and women got out. The people who got out of the car were smartly dressed in suits. The people who emerged from the vans were dressed as police officers with black combat trousers and blue polo shirts with epaulettes and ‘FORENSICS’ printed on their back. They started to don red protective overalls and hard hats from the back of the vans. The narrow, quiet, and usually sleepy Annadale Close was full of people again. The small close felt even smaller crammed with vehicles. Neighbours twitched curtains or opened their front doors pretending to put their cat out. Maddy wanted to be whisked off by the wind, Mary Poppins’ style, and returned firmly back on her feet, once this was all over.

Harry came out of his house with a tray of mugs, steam rising from them. He’d done the tea run. He handed Maddy the first mug. ‘I made you a fresh cup of coffee.’ His smile was so gentle and caring for a man she didn’t really know. Then, clearly noticing she needed some reassurance, he said, ‘Don’t worry, this is usual procedure when the fire looks suspect.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking the mug from him. ‘But why is it suspicious?’

Harry shrugged and continued to give out the mugs of tea and coffee. *Did he know more than he was letting on?*

Maddy remained static, frozen on the spot, whilst the world continued to spin, and she observed everything going on around her. As the team in red overalls dusted her front door for fingerprints, another took photos. Fire officers worked around the back of her house, securing her back door and kitchen window. Some of the plain clothed officers were knocking on doors, with notepads in hand. It looked like they were taking statements from neighbours.

What will they all think? At least Harry was one of them. He could calm the neighbourhood gossip.

‘Hi, I’m Rachel,’ a woman in red overalls approached Maddy, shaking her out of her reverie as she stood motionless letting the earth rotate. ‘Are you the house owner?’

‘Y-yes.’

‘I need to take your fingerprints for elimination.’ Rachel waved a kit at Maddy. ‘Is there somewhere we can go?’

‘Yes, sure.’ Maddy gestured towards Harry’s house.

In Harry’s dining room table, Rachel unrolled an A4 piece of paper and took Maddy’s prints using pre-inked flimsy plastic strips. Rolling each finger and thumb into its designated space, then turning the page over, she took a print of Maddy’s palms, too.

I feel like a convict.

Rachel left Maddy to scrub the inky mess off her hands. It was stubborn and took three attempts with washing-up liquid leaving her hands red and her skin feeling dry. She kept telling

herself this was all procedure and she had nothing to worry about. However, she couldn't help feeling confused by the whole situation. She'd expected to just be let into her house to assess the damage with the crew. *Not be fingerprinted by forensics!*

Maddy shut Harry's front door and joined the throng in the close once more, not exactly sure what she could do to help. She'd never felt so useless. She was met by two smartly dressed, plain-clothed officers, one female and the other male.

'Miss Hart?' said the male officer, flashing his badge – *God, it really was like something out of Life On Mars, only without the flares. Would a gold Ford Granada appear and wake her from this nightmare?* She'd only been watching some old episodes a couple of nights ago ... was this *her* subconscious?

If only she could wake and find out this was all a dream.

'Yes. That's me.' Maddy's heart chilled, goosebumps travelling down her arms. *No, this was real.* The sun was already warm; there was still the smell of old bonfires in the air.

'I'm DC Adams, this is DC Stone, we've been asked to investigate the fire at your property. Is there somewhere we could go to ask you some questions?' Both officers looked a similar age to Maddy, in their late twenties, yet their presence intimidated her, whether intentional or not. She hadn't done anything wrong, yet guilt, dread and anxiety washed through her.

I haven't done anything wrong.

'Officers, you can use my house.' Harry had come along yet again to Maddy's rescue.

‘Yes, yes, I’ll lead the way,’ Maddy said.

She crossed the road, and welcomed them into Harry’s house offering teas and coffees. The three of them sat in Harry’s lounge, one making notes while the other officer talked. They asked what time she’d left the house, where she’d been all day, did she have a witness? Why did Maddy feel like a criminal? She had nothing to hide.

‘I didn’t do this!’ she blurted, unable to hold in her tears. Her chest had tightened, rising to her throat. ‘Why would anyone want to burn down their own home?’ The female DC pulled a packet of tissues from her jacket pocket and handed one to Maddy.

‘It’s okay to be upset,’ she said, smiling tenderly.

‘Miss, we have to ask these questions as a matter of procedure. To rule you out as a suspect,’ said DC Adams. His expression was sympathetic towards Maddy, putting her at ease. ‘Our team are making enquiries with the neighbours to see if anyone saw anything. And we’ll speak to,’ he flicked through his notes, ‘Mr Tudor, too.’

‘Yes,’ Maddy nodded, wiping her tears and then her nose with the tissue, ‘Harry.’

‘Miss Hart, do you know of anyone who would wish you harm?’

Maddy shook her head. ‘No.’ She tried hard to hold in her tears, taking a deep breath to steady her fear.

‘Does anyone else have a key to your property?’

She shook her head again. ‘No.’

‘Have you always lived at the property on your own?’ DC Adams asked, always keeping eye contact with Maddy while DC Stone continued scribbling notes.

‘No, I used to live there with my boyfriend, Connor.’

‘Did he used to have a key?’ DC Stone looked up from her notepad. Both officers suddenly focussed intently on Maddy.

‘Yes ... of course, but he gave it back.’ Maddy frowned. Would Connor do something like this to her? And if so, why?

‘Even so, we’ll need to follow this up.’

More notes were made as the officers took more information from Maddy, everything she could give them on Connor, and also Valerie’s contact details, so she could verify Maddy had been at the gallery all day, and then they let her go.

Maddy left Harry’s house with her brain in a whirl. CID had asked so many questions; she couldn’t believe how long she’d been sitting with them. She prayed she’d repeated strongly enough that she wouldn’t want to set fire to her own home. The officers had been nice, not condescending. So hopefully they believed her.

She found Harry outside talking to a couple of the fire crew while wiping his hands on an old rag. As soon as she drew near, he turned his attention to her, so she smiled meekly. ‘The police would like to speak to you, as you discovered the fire,’ she said, hoping her eyes weren’t swollen and her face too blotchy from crying.

‘Of course, I’ll go talk to them now.’ Harry nodded

thoughtfully. 'I need to go wash my hands, too.' He showed his large, ink-stained hands to her – the black ink ingrained into the creases of his palms and fingers. CSI had taken his fingerprints too.

'See you in a bit.'

Maddy found herself watching everything going on around her again. What she desperately wanted was some clean clothes.

A lady wearing red overalls and a hard hat stepped out of Maddy's front door. Maddy recognised her as the same woman who'd taken her fingerprints earlier.

'Excuse me ... Uh, Rachel, isn't it?' Maddy asked.

'Yes.'

'Is it possible for me to go in and get some clothes? And I need to get my insurance details.'

'Yes, of course,' the woman replied, smiling. 'Hang on a minute, though, and I'll check it's okay to bring you through.' Rachel came back five minutes later and ushered Maddy through her front door. 'It's safe to come in, but please don't touch anything downstairs.'

Straight away, the stench of smoke, so much stronger than outside, hit her. The burnt, blackened smell turned her stomach, making her hesitate in the small hallway. Usually, her habit would be to kick off her shoes here. *Little point today.* She shrugged off her fear, needing to face the devastation, and followed the crime scene investigator into the house. Walking through the lounge, it

seemed untouched, although there was some black soot in places around the ceiling. A small wave of relief flashed over her – Maddy couldn't see the two canvases she'd wrapped up for a commission. The fact that her paintings weren't in the lounge meant she had moved them into the garage. She still wanted to check on them to put her mind at rest. Currently, her brain was doing cartwheels with all the thoughts and worries buzzing around.

'You're lucky you'd shut the door to your lounge, otherwise there may have been a lot more damage in here,' Rachel said, leading Maddy through her own house, her overalls making a swishing noise as she walked.

Weird, I don't remember closing it. Maddy always left the door between her dining room and her lounge open so Sookie could go out of the cat-flap in the back door. *Should she mention this? If she did, would they think she'd set fire to her house? Maybe she'd discuss it with Harry first.* The lounge had minimal smoke damage because the smoke had travelled up the stairs instead.

They entered the small dining room, and Maddy felt transported into a film set where a crime scene investigation was taking place; people working, wearing overalls, photos being taken. Only it was real. She could smell it. The reek was even stronger here. The door between the dining room door and the kitchen was charred, hanging off its hinges, and the carpet was black and sodden near the kitchen entrance. Her dining room was blackened by the soot and the smoke, stinking worse than

a working men's club in the days when you could smoke inside a pub. The smell clung to her nose. The dining table was grey and dirty with the soot. On the wall closest to the kitchen, hung a frame, the family photos of her niece and nephew inside ruined. A tear trickled down Maddy's cheek. The devastation fire could do overwhelmed her. But she had to look at this more logically and less materialistically. Importantly, no one was hurt; she and Sookie were alive. The kitchen could be replaced. Everything could be replaced. But not a life. Even in this day and age, so could the photos. She'd printed them off, taken from her own phone. And as the disaster had happened in the kitchen, her old family photo albums and other irreplaceable items stored in the loft hadn't been lost either. *This situation could have been a whole lot worse.*

'Can I ... can I ... take a look at the kitchen?' Maddy asked Rachel, who nodded.

Maddy approached the door leading to the kitchen, hands in her pockets so she wouldn't be tempted to touch anything, wanting to make herself as small as possible, and surveyed the wreckage before her. The uPVC back door was distorted and was being boarded up on the outside by two burly firemen. The fire investigation officer – Gary she'd heard him called – and another member of the CSI in red overalls were in the small kitchen, taking photos and analysing the ash around the hob. Maddy stood silently observing the horrific scene. Not only was there fire damage to contend with, there was water damage too

from the fire hoses. There was a black puddle of water on the kitchen floor.

‘As you can see, the fire came from the hob,’ Rachel said, still accompanying Maddy. This was where the fire had attacked her kitchen the worst. Maddy assessed the damage. The cupboards either side above the hob were burnt out, the only contents remaining were those that could take the heat, like tins, but even they were misshapen, the paper labels burned clean off. What had been white cupboard doors, were now blackened and scorched. Other units had bubbled due to the heat. Grey and white ash lay everywhere. Bits of plaster were missing from the ceiling. Maddy hoped the fire hadn’t reached the room above.

Amongst the charred remains were what looked like her recipe books. She glanced at the top of the fridge where she kept them. All her books had been removed. Had they been used to feed the fire? Should she raise this, or again, would they assume she’d done it?

No wonder it looked suspicious. Someone had set fire to her kitchen.

‘It looks like you left your hob on,’ Dixons said, appearing beside Maddy, Rachel making room for him.

Maddy frowned at him. ‘That’s impossible. I was out all day. And I didn’t even use it in the morning.’

‘A lot of people forget. Anyway, with the white spirit on the rags and oil paints so close by—’

‘Oil paints?’ It was hard to tell, but there were some remains

of metal tubes on the floor which could have contained oil paints.

‘Yes, they didn’t help matters. I suggest you store those in your garage in future.’

‘But I don’t use oil paints!’ Her favourites were acrylics, far quicker drying, or she dabbled in pastels or watercolours. She liked working with acrylics because they were water based, so there was no need for white spirit to clean the brushes. The white spirit she did own was in her garage, left over from the last time she’d done some decorating – when she’d first moved in.

Dixons explained the damage, indicating where the worst of it was.

‘I didn’t do this by the way. I was at work all day. It’s not like I needed a brand new kitchen or anything stupid like that.’

‘Bit of a drastic way to get a new kitchen,’ another fireman piped up. ‘But you’ll be surprised what some will do.’

‘I swear, I didn’t leave the hob on,’ she insisted.

‘I know, Miss Hart, but it does look deliberate,’ Dixons said, his tone noncommittal.

‘I didn’t do it!’

‘Well someone did.’ Dixons’ wore a grim expression. Anger bubbled inside Maddy. She didn’t know which made her angrier: being tacitly accused of arson, or the idea that someone had entered her house with the intention of burning it down. ‘All I can say is, it’s a good job Harry noticed the fire when he did, otherwise your house would be looking a lot worse.’

‘Harry?’ Maddy’s breath caught.

‘Yeah, he made the call.’

Gosh, she had a lot to thank Harry for.

‘We’re making the back door secure and boarding up the kitchen window too, so your house will be safe. We suggest, to access your home, you only come through your front door for the time being.’ *Didn’t most people usually access their home through the front door?*

Maddy bit down her sarcasm – the firemen were only trying to help her – and nodded in agreement. It all made sense, yet it didn’t. How had a hob she hadn’t left on caught fire? Someone had to have done it. These things didn’t turn on by themselves. Her recipe books didn’t just move. But who would do that? And why?

‘But we’d rather you didn’t access the house at all until we’ve finished our investigations,’ Rachel said. She looked at Maddy with sympathy. Maybe she believed her? After a moment of silence, Rachel continued, ‘Would you like to go upstairs and get some things?’

‘Yes, yes, that would be great.’ Maddy nodded, her heart heavy, remembering the reason why she was in her house and walked up her blackened staircase, refraining from touching the bannister as she climbed. Rachel followed.

‘Everything is clear upstairs,’ Rachel said, as if trying to reassure Maddy. It wasn’t working. Downstairs looked like a bomb had hit the kitchen. ‘It smells a bit smoky up here, where there’s a little smoke damage, but nothing that can’t be fixed

with a lick of paint. Up the stairs is the worst of it. Luckily all the bedroom doors were shut, so they haven't got any smoke damage.'

'I always shut them to stop the cat going in there,' Maddy said, reaching her bedroom door.

Rachel stood outside while Maddy grabbed her everyday essentials from her bedroom, putting them into a woven cloth bag, including her phone charger – a crucial piece of equipment, as how else could she make all her calls if her phone was dead?

She rummaged for some fresh clothes but everything reeked of smoke despite the bedroom door being shut. They would have to do for today. Fortunately, having a small kitchen, her washing machine was in the garage, so she'd be able to access it. She thought of the mammoth amount of washing she would have to do. The bed would need changing, the duvet and pillows would have to go to the laundrette and then there were the towels in the bathroom. For now, she needed a change of clean underwear, whether they stank of smoke or not. With everything going on downstairs and knowing Rachel was standing outside, Maddy opted for changing at Harry's, so stuffed a couple of pairs of clean knickers into her bag. Then, she bundled some clothes together to wash, throwing them into a plastic wash basket.

Laundry basket balanced on her hip, bag over her shoulder, Maddy closed her bedroom door behind her, as if it would keep the room from being contaminated further by smoke and soot, and went into the bathroom to grab her toothbrush and her other

indispensable toiletries. Then, closing that door too, she walked past Rachel and entered her third bedroom – the box room like Harry's. Only hers was a study. In her small filing cabinet under her old oak desk, she found her house insurance details.

She closed the bedroom door behind her as she exited. Rachel smiled. 'Got everything?'

Maddy paused, thinking of everything she'd grabbed. *Had she forgotten anything?* Satisfied she hadn't, she nodded, hugging the basket full of clothes, the heavy bag full of her essentials weighing on her shoulder as she followed Rachel back down the stairs.

Rachel escorted Maddy out of the front door and left her on her driveway. Maddy made her way through her decrepit back gate, dodging firemen and planks of wood, as they boarded her kitchen window and back door. The back gate had taken a beating more from the firemen to gain access to the kitchen, than actual fire damage, as it hung off its hinges lopsidedly. The gate would have been locked from the inside. It had had a fight with an axe. The axe had won.

Maddy would need a notepad and pen to list everything that needed repairing.

While juggling the laundry basket between hands and hip, she pulled the key out of her pocket and unlocked her garage door. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. *Please let her paintings be safe.*

As she opened the door, she switched on the light, and relief

flooded over her. A weight of worry lifted. There, nice and safe, were her paintings for the Trewyn commission. All wrapped and sealed, ready for delivery. Another painting stood on an easel, started, but by no means completed. This was another big commission she'd received, and she didn't want to let the buyer down. She would move the paintings to the gallery as soon as she could, but for now, the summer warmth kept the damp out of the garage, so it made the perfect storage place. In the winter it would be a different story.

With the clothes bundled into the drum, she switched the washing machine to a quick wash setting. Dread filled her at the amount of washing she now faced. Hopefully, if it stayed sunny over the next couple of days, she would get most of her clothes dry. The rain usually arrived just as the school holidays started, so she had time yet.

Then she'd have to iron it all. *I might consider paying someone to do that bit. Or just wear creased clothes.*

Maddy locked up her garage and headed over to Harry's house with her bag. The front door was open, which she was grateful for. She found Harry still talking to the police in his lounge as she entered.

'Oh, sorry, is it okay if I use the bathroom? It's a bit busy over at mine.' *Understatement of the year.*

'We were just finishing up, Miss Hart,' said DC Adams, standing up. Harry and the other officer, DC Stone, also rose from their seats.

Awkwardly, Maddy smiled, fearing at any moment the police might arrest her – even though she was innocent – and headed up the stairs to the bathroom. Locking the door, she used the bathroom, changed her underwear, giving herself a spray with her bodyspray afterwards – almost emptying the can. *There, no one will smell smoky knickers.* Entering her house had left a whiff of smoke lingering around her. She checked her face in the mirror sensing her eyes were puffy. She splashed her face with water and slapped on some of her own tinted moisturiser, hoping this would give her some colour and reduce any redness in her cheeks.

When she came back downstairs, the house was empty. Outside, Harry stood on her drive shaking hands with the fire crew. He fitted in with them; big, muscular, burly men. He waved them off, then turned to face her, putting his hands in his pockets. He smiled as she crossed the road towards him. For someone so powerfully built and who could appear intimidating, he had a kind, gentle expression and his blue eyes emanated trustworthiness. She'd never noticed this before. *Usually too busy being angry with him and seeing red.*

‘The fire brigade have finished. They’ve boarded up the back door and the window until you can get them replaced,’ he said. ‘And CID have gone, but they’ve left their card with contact details for you to give to your insurers. I’ve left it on my mantelpiece. The crime scene investigators are still working, though, so you can’t enter your house yet.’

‘I need my back gate repaired too.’ She hated the thought of someone having access to the back of her house – especially with the back door damaged. They could attempt to get into the garage, if not the house.

‘I can do it.’ They walked around to the back where Harry examined the gate, assessing how it could be repaired. ‘I’ve got to go to Truro at some point anyway; I can pick up the materials I need there.’

‘Oh, no, you don’t have to,’ Maddy said.

‘It’s what neighbours are for. I mend a lot of fencing and stuff. I’ve probably got something knocking around in my garage that will do the job. Some of the wood is salvageable,’ Harry said. ‘And you’ll sleep easier if you know your house is safe.’

‘Thank you.’ Maddy’s chest heaved as she tried to hold in her tears. He was being so considerate. After the past few months of badmouthing Harry, and cursing him behind his back, did she deserve him being so good to her now?

She wanted to call her insurance company, which the police said she could do as they would be forwarding on their report. Was she insured for arson? Why would someone want to set fire to her house? And would her insurance company believe it wasn’t her? Insurance companies were good at finding some small print that meant they didn’t need to pay out money.

Everything appeared very black and bleak for Maddy right now. A bit like her kitchen.

Chapter 6

‘I’m popping over to Truro today,’ Harry said, placing a toasted cinnamon bagel dripping with melted butter and honey in front of Maddy. ‘Why don’t you come with me?’

After a sleepless night, worrying about who would want to set fire to her house, Maddy wondered if the distraction would be a good idea. ‘Yeah, might do.’ She licked the sweet honey on her fingers.

‘It’s not like you’re allowed back in your house yet.’ Harry sipped a coffee, having had his breakfast earlier. Apparently, Sookie had woken him up – again.

‘True.’ CSI wanted to come back this morning and finish off and had told Maddy she still couldn’t enter her house.

‘Come with me, and you can get some items you need to tide you over. A bit of retail therapy may do you good.’

‘I need to call my insurance company first. Get the ball rolling there.’ She’d held off yesterday, fearing she’d burst into tears down the telephone to some poor agent. Today she was stronger. Or at least she hoped she was.

‘Of course. I’m in no rush.’

‘And I’d better call Valerie, to update her.’

‘OK, I’ve got to pop out for a bit to see a customer I missed yesterday. I’ll be back in an hour.’ Harry grabbed his truck’s keys hanging off a hook in the kitchen by his back door.

After finishing her breakfast, Maddy made a call to Valerie who reassured her the gallery would be fine. It didn't stop Maddy pacing around the living room while she spoke.

'I've organized for Josie to be in all day today, and over the weekend,' Valerie said. 'You must have so much to do, so don't worry about the gallery, I will manage it. The summer holidays don't start for a couple of weeks yet. You get yourself sorted.'

'Thanks, Val.'

'Are you sure you don't want to stay here?'

'I'll see what Harry says. Thank you so much for the offer.'

'I'm here if you need me, Maddy. Please don't forget that,' Valerie said. The sincerity in her voice choked Maddy. She really didn't want to blub down the phone, though, otherwise Valerie really would worry. 'But you can do this, my dear. This is only another of those obstacles that life likes to throw in your way.'

'Just when I thought everything was going along smoothly.'

'I'm afraid, as you get older, you soon learn life was never meant to be easy. I'm sure these things are sent to test us. To weed out the weak from the strong.'

'Which am I?' Maddy asked.

'You'll come out the stronger – if you're anything like your mother.' Valerie laughed, and Maddy found it contagious and giggled with her. Valerie always had a positive influence on her. 'Let's face it; life would be dull if it was all plain sailing.'

Next, notepad and pen in hand with her insurance documents in front of her, Maddy took a deep breath and called her home

insurance company. She tried not to get frustrated with the automated messages directing her to the right department. ‘All I want to do is talk to a human being!’ she said to the automated voice, tapping the end of her pen against the pad.

When she finally spoke to someone, some ten minutes later due to the high volume of calls – *how many other people had had house fires, for God’s sake?* – she found them extremely helpful, putting her mind at rest. They asked a lot of questions, possibly more because she’d confessed the police were involved, providing their details. They couldn’t arrange for a Loss Adjuster to inspect the damage until they’d received the reports from CID. Maddy put the phone down feeling a little less stressed – but it still meant she couldn’t really do anything with the house until sometime next week. Today was Friday.

They’d asked her if she had somewhere to stay or if she would need rented accommodation. However, because of the situation, and the company needing to ensure she wasn’t the one who’d caused the house fire, she was made aware they would have to recover payments from the policyholder – i.e. her – if found negligent for starting the fire or allowing someone else to start it.

The insurance company offered to put her up in Bodmin, and although it wasn’t far away, Maddy thought it too far for her. ‘I think I’m okay, I can stay with a friend, but I’ll call back if I need further assistance,’ she said. Worst case scenario, she could sleep at the gallery. The insurance company had said they paid a daily accommodation rate, so even if she stayed with a friend,

she could give them compensation.

Once the insurance company received the police and fire reports, they would be able to send out a Loss Adjuster, and the ball could get rolling in getting her back into her house. But this all depended on the police reports. Clearly, if they believed she'd set fire to her own house, the insurance company wouldn't pay out.

Harry was still out, so Maddy busied herself with the dishes in his kitchen, clearing away the breakfast things. She was generally a tidy person, and it appeared Harry was meticulous, too – which wasn't a bad trait in a man – so she liked to keep everything straight, as if she wasn't even here. She decided to let Sookie out who had been sitting by the front door and meowing noisily. She'd been looking very unimpressed at being stuck in Harry's house yesterday. Maddy knew she liked to be outside if the sun was shining. She had a favourite place in the garden underneath a rose bush, where she would pretty much sleep all day. With her backdoor firmly sealed, Sookie couldn't get into Maddy's house and she would soon find her by the front or back door of her house when it was feeding time.

When he returned, Harry found Maddy in her back garden, her strawberry-blonde hair tied back in a ponytail, swishing as her head moved. She stood in the sunshine, an easel before her, with a metal plate in one hand covered with blobs of different shades of blue paints, staring at a canvas.

‘Everything okay?’ he said, standing beside her and admiring her preliminary sketch for a new painting – the ocean and waves crashing against rocks. He recognised the beach as Tinnors Bay.

Maddy nodded, chewing on the end of the paintbrush. Once she’d removed it, she said, ‘As I wasn’t allowed in the house this morning, I thought I’d come out here and start on this painting. I don’t feel so bad not being at the gallery and at least I feel like I’m doing some work.’

‘It looks like they’ve gone now.’ There were no more vehicles parked in Annadale Close outside Maddy’s house.

‘Yes, yes, they handed my keys back about half an hour ago and said I’m allowed back in now. The first thing I did was grab some more washing.’ Maddy laughed. ‘Sad, aren’t I?’

‘Not at all, more like practical. What did the insurance company say?’

‘They can’t send a Loss Adjuster out until they’ve received the reports, but they can put me up in rented accommodation in Bodmin.’

‘Nonsense, you can still stay at mine,’ Harry said, before thinking through the implications. It would mean a few more nights on the sofa. But he knew it made sense. Maddy could keep an eye on her house this way. The sofa wouldn’t kill him.

And he could keep an eye on Maddy.

Where did that thought come from?

‘Are you sure?’ She looked up at him, squinting as the sun shone behind him. She raised her hand holding the brush to

block the sun, but it didn't stop the light brightening her green eyes, drawing Harry to her gaze. Their eyes locked briefly until suddenly, a scratching sound came from the fence and they both looked in the direction of the scrambling noise. Sookie's head appeared, then she swiftly jumped over the garden fence and trotted over, weaving around their legs, purring. Maddy stroked her. 'It would make it easier for Sookie, too. Less of an upheaval.'

Harry hadn't thought about the cat. But however much he didn't like cats, it did make sense. This was about making life easier for his neighbour – who he'd developed a soft spot for. *Nonsense.* He was even, ever so slightly, becoming fond of the cat, too. *I'll never admit that.* 'Yes, I'm sure. This way you can pop back and forth, and when the insurance guy comes you can tell him to call for you at my house.'

'The insurance company said something about paying for my accommodation, so I could always pay you.'

'I don't need paying.'

While Harry waited for Maddy to finish up and put her easel back in the garage, he took a closer look at her back gate to see if he would need any extra materials to repair it. Maddy stepped out of her garage laden down with a laundry basket piled high with damp clothes and a peg bag. He went to her aid, taking the basket off her, and helped peg out her washing. He grabbed the larger items like T-shirts and let Maddy hang out her underwear. *Because that would just be weird.*

'I'll fix the back gate tomorrow for you,' he said, focussing

back on the job. He would pick up some hinges and better locks in Truro.

‘Thank you. I can definitely pay you for replacing the back gate. It will come out of the insurance payment, so tell me what I owe you. I don’t expect you to do it for free.’

‘I’ll keep the receipts.’ *Anything to keep the woman happy.*

While Harry drove, Maddy enjoyed the views of the Cornish countryside and tried to forget about her scorched kitchen. Once the police had left her house, and she’d gone in to retrieve some washing, she couldn’t help taking another look at her devastated kitchen. Tears had fallen but, giving herself a pep talk, she’d wiped her eyes and ran upstairs. Valerie was right, she couldn’t change the situation, she couldn’t go back in time – time machines hadn’t been invented! – so she needed to get on with life and everything it threw at her. She could do nothing about her kitchen until her insurance company contacted her, but she could at least tidy and clean the upstairs.

Sitting up higher than she was used to in the cab of Harry’s pickup truck, and not having to concentrate on the road as a driver, Maddy was able to see so much more of the lush Cornish landscape. She watched the wind farms on the horizon, how some turned faster than others – what was all the fuss about those things? Surely people would prefer a windmill outside their house rather than a nuclear power station.

‘Your phone’s ringing,’ Harry said, pointing towards Maddy’s

handbag where a muffled Bruno Mars' *Uptown Funk* could be heard.

'Oh, yes.' Maddy scrabbled for her phone. Would she get to it in time? When she saw the caller, she wished she'd let the call go to voicemail. *I must designate her a different ring tone.*

'Hi, Mum,' she said as cheerily as she could. Maddy had avoided calling her mother until she had everything organized her end. Plus, she didn't need Harry seeing her turn into another blubbering mess. She'd hoped to call her mother as soon as she believed she wouldn't break down.

'Are you all right? Gosh, I phoned the gallery, and Val told me everything ... why didn't you call me?' Sandra Hart said with exasperation. She'd spoken so fast she sounded out of breath. Her mother was possibly more put out that Val knew more than she did. Although Valerie and Sandra were the best of friends, Maddy always wondered if there was a hint of jealousy in her mum over Maddy and Valerie's closeness.

'Mum, calm down. I'm fine. I haven't had a chance to call you.'

'Not a chance to call your own mother!' Sandra shrieked. Maddy winced, taking the phone away from her ear briefly. 'Where are you now?'

'I'm heading into Truro.'

'Are you driving? Should I call you back? You know you shouldn't answer the phone while you're driving.'

'No, I'm not driving.'

'Who is then?'

‘Oh, Mum, enough with the questions.’ She stared at the roof lining of the cab, biting her tongue and trying to remain cool, especially with Harry right beside her. He glanced at her but then returned his attention to the road.

‘Maddison, dear, why don’t you come home for a bit?’ This was another of the reasons why Maddy had postponed calling her mother. She knew her dad would worry unnecessarily and Sandra would urge her to come home. ‘It must be awfully scary there. And with so much work needing to be done to the house.’

‘Mum, it’s not scary, and there’s not that much work,’ *lie mode cancelled*, ‘but what work there is will need to be overseen.’

‘The insurance company will sort that—’

‘And then there’s the gallery.’

‘Valerie can manage there—’

‘And besides,’ Maddy wasn’t going to let her mother bully her into anything if she could help it, ‘Harry has said I can stay with him.’

‘Who’s Harry?’

‘My neighbour.’

‘Not the one you moan about all the time?’

Maddy gulped. She hoped Harry couldn’t hear her mother on the other end of the phone. She switched the phone to her left ear, just in case.

‘Yes, him,’ she hissed.

‘Pardon? I can’t hear you ... You said you disliked the man.’
Is it me or is she shouting down the phone?

Maddy's cheeks flushed. The cab was getting hotter. Had Harry turned off the air-con? 'Mum, I can't talk about this right now,' she glanced at Harry, who appeared to be concentrating on driving and not listening to Maddy's conversation – *Thank God* – 'but Harry has been a tremendous help.'

'Nothing any neighbour wouldn't do.' Harry winked at Maddy. The creases around his eyes, the dimple in his cheek sent heat rushing to Maddy's inner thighs. What with Sandra's embarrassing nagging combined with Harry's good looks — Maddy's body was suddenly on fire!

'Connor would take you back.' As Sandra blurted out the words, a chill coursed through Maddy, as if she'd had a bucket of icy water thrown over her. Her hackles rose.

'Mum!'

'Don't bite my head off,' Sandra said. 'Only I saw him this morning, and he asked how you were, and said how sorry he was it hadn't worked out with you, how much you meant to him. So I called the gallery, and here we are talking about him.'

'I would *not* go back to Connor if my life depended on it,' Maddy muttered, cupping her mouth over the mouthpiece as if it would help keep her conversation private. *Fat chance*. She knew Harry had heard what she'd said, but her mother needed putting straight. Connor did not bring out the best in Maddy, and now, having realised this, the better off she was without him. Until her kitchen fire, her single lifestyle had been treating her well. Yes, deep down she really wished she had someone to share this

burden with, give her a hug, but she had to deal with it – on her own. Harry was helping, actually, keeping her strong, but she had to stand on her own two feet.

‘Okay, okay, I’m sorry I mentioned Connor. I thought he was a nice enough chap.’ Maddy bit her tongue. *He was a control freak. And was her mother forgetting how he called her Sandy and she hated being called Sandy?* ‘Please be careful, though, darling, you don’t know this Harry. He’s only a neighbour and you hear terrible things in the news. You don’t know what your neighbours get up to behind closed doors. You said you two didn’t see eye to eye, so for all you know he could have started the fire.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Maddy glanced at Harry as a momentary coldness ran down her spine. He was an ex-fireman. He would know how to make a fire look like an accident. Even the firemen had hinted it was suspicious.

It was suspicious! The police were looking into it as arson.

Maddy had seen the evidence with her own eyes – it had to be arson.

But then he was the one who had alerted the fire service.

He could have started it and then felt guilty.

And why would he let you stay at his house?

Maddy’s mother continued to warble on while Maddy had this ridiculous internal argument.

‘Well, I’d best let you go. You know where I am. Let me know how you get on, and if you need to escape, then there is still plenty of room for you here. Maybe Dad and I will pop down

to see you.’

‘No. Don’t.’ Maddy snapped back to the reality of the conversation.

‘Why not? We’re worried about you.’

‘I can’t put you up.’

‘We can stay in a hotel.’

‘It’ll be very expensive this time of year.’ Maddy tried to think of a million excuses why her mum shouldn’t visit.

‘Nonsense, that doesn’t matter—’

‘And probably everywhere will be booked up already.’

‘I’m sure somewhere will have availability. Think about it, dear.’

‘I will.’ Maddy winced. ‘Bye, Mum.’

‘Love you, dear.’

‘Love you, too.’ Maddy returned her phone to her handbag and looked at Harry, who smiled. Did she look flushed scarlet, riled by her mother? *Probably*. Oh, the joys of having a pale complexion that gives you away immediately. She could never play poker.

‘All okay?’ he asked.

Maddy sighed. ‘What do you think?’

He chuckled, emitting such a calming warmth. The side she’d never seen because she’d been too busy arguing with him about his monstrosity of a truck – which she was currently comfortably sitting in. *Oh, the irony ...*

Of course Harry hadn’t started the fire. Had he?

Chapter 7

Maddy waited for Harry at the place where they'd agreed, on a bench in the cobbled area at the front of the cathedral. Sunglasses perched over her eyes, she relaxed in the sunshine, soaking up the warmth and the busy atmosphere, listening and watching. They'd arrived in Truro soon after midday, and although she'd only been shopping for a couple of hours, her feet were sore and her legs ached. Knowing there were seats, she'd decided to head to their meeting place early. To fill the time, she took a photo of the cathedral, the cloudless blue sky as a backdrop and posted it to her Instagram account.

Truro reminded Maddy a little of Bath, only smaller, with the Georgian architecture and mellow stone buildings. Cobbled streets ran through most of the original parts of the city. The cathedral, grand and impressive, stood tall, prominent on Truro's skyline. The cathedral could be seen from most of the streets, and heard as well when the bells chimed, as if to ensure you hadn't forgotten its presence. The seagulls gave occasional cries, a reminder you were in Cornwall, albeit inland, and the coast wasn't too far away. She wondered if they were as cheeky and aggressive here as in Padstow or Tinnors Bay, and would have the audacity to steal a pasty right out of your hand. *Probably*. Maddy wasn't prepared to find out.

She spotted Harry approaching before he saw her – over six

foot and with broad shoulders, the man stood out from the crowd. She gathered up her shopping and walked towards him.

‘Get everything you need?’ he asked.

‘I think so, I lost interest after a while,’ Maddy said, shrugging her shoulders. ‘I’m not really in the mood.’

She wasn’t a huge shopper at the best of times. It was always when you fancied a spending spree you could never find anything, and when you didn’t have the money, all sorts of lovely things jumped off the rails at you. This apparently was true for everyone, not just Maddy, so her friends assured her.

Today, she’d strolled around her usual favourites, Next, Topshop, and even TK Maxx hoping for some inspiration. She’d bought some essentials, like underwear and toiletries, to tide her over and a couple of pairs of shorts and some summery vest tops on offer – good job the weather was holding. But to be honest, her heart wasn’t in it. She was stressed at the mound of things to sort out at home, and although it had taken her mind off it for a while, she now needed to return and get things in motion. At least do the chores she could be getting on with before the Loss Adjuster arrived, like stripping the beds. *Oh, the high life.* Whether the insurance paid out or not, these things would need doing.

What was she going to do if the insurance didn’t pay out?

Maddy pushed the chilling thought aside. She had no more savings. They’d been used up buying the house and setting up the gallery.

Thoughtfully, Harry had left her to her own devices, realising she needed privacy to shop. He was only her neighbour after all. The poor man didn't want to traipse around a load of women's stores. He was hardly her boyfriend. Even Connor had hated shopping with her.

'Shall we find somewhere to have a coffee? Then I'll drive us home.' Catching Maddy off guard, Harry took her shopping bags from her, adding them to his own, like the perfect gentleman. Connor never offered to hold her bags; she'd always had to ask him to carry them. She certainly hadn't expected Harry to insist on it.

'Yes, that sounds like a good idea.'

Harry led the way and found a quaint coffee shop down one of the narrow lanes. As it was so warm, Maddy opted for an iced skinny latte feeling the need for caffeine but not fancying something hot, while Harry asked for a normal latte.

'Do you want anything else? Cake or a sandwich?' he asked.

Even though the cakes did look delicious, Maddy shook her head. She'd lost her appetite, which usually happened when she was stressed. 'No thanks. Better not.'

The woman behind the counter patiently held her hand out for payment as Harry opened his wallet. 'I'll pay,' Maddy said, purse in hand, taking a five-pound note out.

'No, I'll get these.'

'No, it's the least I can do. I insist. You've done so much for me since Wednesday evening.' Harry frowned as Maddy handed

over the money. With a playful nudge, she said, 'I'll let you carry the tray.'

With the sun shining, Maddy and Harry opted to sit outside at one of the small bistro tables. Maddy stared in horror while Harry emptied four sachets of sugar into his coffee.

'You'll never stay fit if you keep putting sugar in like that.'

'I burn it off,' Harry said, grinning. 'I have a high metabolism.'

'Can you actually taste the coffee?' Maddy sipped her iced latte, not having to wait for it to cool down.

'I like sweet coffee.'

'It'll catch up with you one day. You'll wake up and wonder where all your muscle went.'

'I don't take sugar in my tea, though – and I drink that mainly when I'm at work.'

'I drink too much coffee. I'd be the size of a house if I put four sugars in every cup. I barely make time for the gym as it is.' Just looking at Harry's tanned arms, his biceps bulging under the light blue T-shirt he was wearing made Maddy feel flabby. Now the weather was getting warmer, she'd have to make sure she took more dips in the sea after work. She enjoyed body-boarding and the exhilaration of catching a wave, even though she wasn't as good as those who did it regularly, those who had been born surfing, living in Cornwall all their lives.

A silence fell between them. The cathedral bells chimed three o'clock. Shoppers and holidaymakers passed them by, seagulls squawked from rooftops, and for a while, they people-

watched and drank their coffee without talking. Two people who barely knew one another and thrown together under unusual circumstances, Maddy thought to herself. If this were a date, they'd be trying to get to know one another better rather than sit in silence. It was an odd situation. Would there be any harm in finding out more about her neighbour?

'So ... you know the fire crew then?' Maddy asked, wanting to break the now awkward silence developing between them.

'Yes,' Harry said, nodding. 'I used to be a fireman. I transferred from Exeter, but I was only with them six months.'

'Oh, why did you leave?'

Harry grimaced for a split second, and he looked at his half-full latte glass. Without meeting Maddy's gaze, he said, 'I'd rather not talk about it.'

'Oh, okay, sorry ...' Maddy found herself fumbling with the straw in her iced latte. *Change the subject. Quick.* 'So, can you tell me why one is called Shep?' She'd heard one of the firemen call another by this name, and had thought it unusual.

Harry's expression softened. 'His real name is Shaun.' Maddy frowned at him in confusion. 'As in Shaun the Sheep? At first he was Sheepy, but it got shortened to Shep.'

'Oh, I get it, as in a sheepdog.' She smiled her understanding. 'And Barrows?'

'That's his surname.' Harry chuckled.

'That's not very exciting. Why do they call you Roses?'

'Tudor ... War of the Roses ...'

Maddy laughed. 'I get it! Firemen are odd. Why don't you all call each other by your real names?'

'Where's the fun in that?'

'And Dixons ... because he likes spicy curries? Get it – Curry's – Dixons?'

Harry chuckled. 'Not quite, but I like your line of thinking. It is actually because he has to have every latest top of the range gadget going. 3D HD TVs whatever they are ... surround sound, you name it the man's got it. He was named Dixons before they merged with Carphone Warehouse – obviously.'

'Obviously.' Maddy nodded, finishing her drink and feeling more relaxed in Harry's company. Harry emptied his glass.

'Shall we head back? Have you got all you need?' Harry crumpled his paper napkin and poked it inside the empty glass so it wouldn't blow away.

'Yes, I have so much to do, it doesn't bear thinking about.' However, she wasn't sure she'd get much done by the time they returned. Maddy stood, gathering her shopping bags. Harry took them off her as if it was the most natural gesture in the world – that a man should carry a woman's bags. To remove the temptation to link her arm through Harry's, like she would have with a close friend or Connor, and cause herself more embarrassment, Maddy pushed her hands into her pockets, unsure what to do with them. They started walking, weaving their way through the crowds, towards Lemon Quay where Harry's truck was parked.

‘Oh, cat food!’ Maddy said, spying a Tesco supermarket by the car park. All of her food had been destroyed in the kitchen.

‘Good idea,’ Harry said. ‘I only had the one can of tuna.’

‘What did you feed her this morning?’ Maddy asked. Her brain was all over the place, and she was even forgetting to feed the cat.

‘I nipped round to number twenty-two – I know she has a cat, too. She gave me a can.’

‘Oh, it’s all right that *she* owns a cat,’ Maddy said, smirking. ‘I bet you haven’t fallen out with her over *her* cat.’

‘Funnily enough she’s never moaned about where I park my truck.’ His eyes narrowed on Maddy, but there was mischief behind them.

‘You know, she has two cats, don’t you? So there are plenty of cats in the close that could be crapping in your garden.’ Maddy pouted. Her ponytail swished as she picked up her step more confidently next to Harry.

‘I know, I know, I take it all back – about your cat! She’s living with me isn’t she?’

‘I bet you twinkled those blue eyes of yours and made the poor old woman at number twenty-two weak at the knees. She didn’t stand a chance.’

‘Nothing wrong with using the charm. If you’ve got it, flaunt it.’

Maddy gently elbowed him, chuckling. The touch of his hot skin against hers sent a shot of electricity through her. *He had it all right.*

Between them, they picked up some groceries and food for Sookie, Harry pushing the shopping trolley around the store. Then, laden with heavy shopping – Harry carrying most of it – they made their way back towards the car park.

‘So why’s she called Sookie?’ Harry loaded the shopping into the back of the flatbed then closed the tailgate and pinned the cover back down. ‘Anything to do with socks?’

Maddy laughed, shaking her head. ‘No, at the time I adopted her, I was reading the Sookie Stackhouse series by Charlaine Harris. Because Sooty is a common name to call a black cat, but it’s more a name for a tom, I thought, being a girl, Sookie would suit her better.’

‘Oh, so it’s nothing to do with her having one white paw then. I keep calling her Socks.’

‘If you feed her, she’ll answer to anything.’

Twenty minutes into their journey, the traffic had come to a standstill on the A39 northbound, while traffic whizzed by on the other side. Unlike the A30, this road was single carriageway for most parts.

‘All we need – there’s been an accident,’ Maddy said, presuming that was the cause of the delay. She huffed out a breath, anxious to get home.

Momentarily, Harry’s eyes widened, then he breathed as if trying to calm himself down.

‘No, no, it looks like they’ve just broken down,’ he said, pointing out the windscreen.

He sounded relieved. Maddy was pleased too. It might mean the traffic would get moving quicker. She'd been deep in thought, her head heavily clouded with stress, processing the amount of jobs stacking up, from the small menial tasks of the washing coming off the line, to where to start on the house so she could move back into her home. Plus, when she could go back to work at the gallery.

'Let me see if they need a hand.' Harry pushed the button on the dash and his truck's hazard lights flashed. Before opening his car door, he said, 'Stay here, Maddy, please.'

As Maddy watched Harry jog up to the vehicle three cars ahead, she wondered if she'd imagined his expression of panic when she'd assumed it was an accident in front. It was as if he'd physically relaxed as soon as he'd realised it was only a broken down car.

She waited patiently in the truck as Harry spoke to the driver of the car – a distressed looking man in his forties, who had his young family out on the side of the road, up on the bank for safety. The mother carried a crying toddler, while an older child held her hand. Maddy watched Harry take control of the situation. With the window down, she could hear some of his instructions. He gathered a couple more helpers from the cars in front and sent an older man in his sixties back along the traffic, to keep any cars from passing. The last thing anyone needed was an accident. With the help of the other men, Harry pushed the car along to a safer position on the road. There was a lay-by not

far ahead.

Panting and sweating from the exertion of pushing the car, Harry jogged back to his truck. Maddy was looking at her phone, with a finger poised, scrolling along the screen. As he opened the driver's door, Maddy jumped.

'Harry, don't do that!'

'Sorry,' he said, his breath still heavy. He could see worry etched on her face. This was a woman with a lot on her mind. 'Are you okay? I didn't mean to make you jump.'

'Yes, sorry, I was away with the fairies, worrying. Thought I'd try to distract myself with Facebook.' She waved her phone at him, then gestured ahead to the cars starting to move. 'We're lucky it was only a breakdown. An accident could have meant us sitting here forever.'

'Yeah, he's called the roadside recovery service. This way the car and his family are safe. I don't like seeing people stranded.' Turning the ignition, Harry started his truck and pulled away as the traffic moved again, turning off his hazard lights.

'What's wrong with the car?'

'He's run out of petrol. Thought he had enough to get to the next station.'

'A holidaymaker?'

'Yes.' The amount of gear on the back seat in between the two child car seats gave it away. 'I usually have a can of petrol for the lawnmower in the back of the truck. But it needs filling up.'

‘How very unprepared of you.’

‘I know.’ His grip tightened around the steering wheel. Even though he could tell by Maddy’s tone she was joking, it had frustrated Harry that he was unable to help the family more. He gave a wave to the man and his family as he drove past. Hopefully, they wouldn’t have too long to wait until the recovery services arrived.

‘Are you always this helpful?’ Maddy turned from the window and looked at him.

‘Must be the firefighter in me.’ *Shouldn’t have said that.* But it was true. It was in his blood to help people – however reluctantly recently. It’s what had driven him to become a fireman. He glanced at Maddy.

‘If you enjoy it so much, why did you give it up?’ she asked curiously.

Harry gave another fleeting look at her then turned his attention back to the road. ‘I’d really rather not discuss it, Maddy.’

There was a moment of silence, where Harry knew he’d killed the conversation. *Just like at the coffee shop.* But Maddy, in true female style – *they usually know how to break the silence!* – spoke up, ‘Well ... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to thank you enough for noticing the fire at my house. I mean if it had burned for much longer, who knows how much worse the damage would be? It could even have spread next door.’

‘Luckily, due to the rain, I’d returned home early from work.’ Harry wasn’t sure he believed in fate, not when he thought about

Karin, but it had certainly been lucky he'd still been around Annadale Close at the time. He'd had a number of jobs to do, but he'd been in the right place at the right time. 'I was loading my pickup with some tools for another garden job the next day.'

He'd been considering digging over one of his regulars' vegetable patch – a frail lady in her seventies who lived at the end of Annadale Close and who liked to feed him up with tea and biscuits every time he cut her lawn. In the summer sometimes he preferred doing some jobs in the evening, as it was a cooler time to work. The lighter evenings allowed him to do it too.

'Well, my mum thinks you might have started the fire—' Maddy's hands shot to her mouth and her cheeks grew pinker. Her redhead's complexion always gave her away. 'Sorry. I have a way of speaking before engaging my brain.'

'I know. I heard.' Harry smiled, pretending not to notice her embarrassment. If he mentioned it, she'd probably turn even redder. 'I mean about your mum, not about you speaking without thinking.' He'd watched out the corner of his eye how Maddy had blushed while speaking on the phone to her mother on the journey to Truro – like she was doing right now. He'd found it highly amusing, and a good way to read Maddy. She certainly couldn't keep secrets. 'And I definitely didn't do it, okay? I was trained to put out fires, not start them.'

'I know. And helping me so much wouldn't make sense if you'd wanted to burn my house down in the first place.' Looking at her lap, Maddy twisted the gold ring on her middle finger.

‘Unless you just wanted me out of the neighbourhood ...’

‘I wouldn’t have offered for you to stay at mine now, would I?’

‘No, true, I didn’t think of that. But we have had our differences.’

‘Differences aside, Maddy,’ Harry glanced at her sternly, his eyes fixed on hers for a moment, ‘I didn’t want to tell Collins this at first, on the night of the fire, because it could slow the process with the insurance company if it’s arson. But the fire brigade were already suspicious and informed the police, so I had to tell the police in the end. I saw someone on your driveway. He just appeared, as if he’d come out of your front door. I didn’t see if he had done that because I’d been in my garage. And then not long afterwards smoke was seeping out from your kitchen window.’ Because he’d been putting some tools on his truck at the time, he’d a clear view of her window, and her front door was on the side of the house like his. If what Dixons had said was true, whoever had started the fire, had lit it on the hob, and fuelled it with items from Maddy’s kitchen. It didn’t take long once a fire caught hold, and if accelerants had been used flames would lick at the cupboards and spread quickly.

‘Really? I know I didn’t leave the hob on ... but a small part of me hoped it would be an accident, not arson.’

‘Smoke was escaping via the kitchen window. Fortunately, you’d left it slightly ajar—’

‘Yes, I usually leave it on the latch to let steam out while cooking, and it lets air in. It stops the house smelling stale.’

‘It’s how I caught the fire early. I could smell it. I’m sort of attuned to the scent you could say.’ Remembering the smell of Maddy’s house burning had sent the hairs up on the back of his arms and neck, setting off nightmares he hated reliving. He loathed the stench of burning now. It was why he could no longer be a fireman.

‘Maddy, does anyone else have a key to your property?’ Although evidence of any forced entry might well have been destroyed by the fire, and by the firemen gaining access to the house, it would complicate matters for the insurance company if they believed the fire to be deliberate. Maddy could lose everything if they thought she’d had anything to do with purposely causing the fire. He wouldn’t worry her with that bit of news yet, although she was probably well aware of this.

‘No.’ She frowned at him. ‘The police asked me the same thing. Connor used to.’

‘Who’s Connor?’

‘My ex-boyfriend ...’ Maddy said. ‘But he gave the key back.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I did tell the police all this.’

‘He could have had another key cut without you knowing.’

‘No, he wouldn’t do such a thing. Why would he?’ Maddy frowned.

‘I don’t know. He’s your ex-boyfriend. I’ve never met him.’

‘We split up before you moved into the neighbourhood.’

Harry nodded. He certainly hadn’t recognised the man. ‘What

does Connor look like?"

'A controlling bastard.'

'I need a bit more to go on than that.'

Maddy rolled her eyes. 'Gosh, he's about five-nine, brown hair.'

'The guy I saw was wearing a baseball cap, with his head down so I couldn't see his face.' Harry grimaced but remembered one thing, though. 'Does he smoke?'

'Yes, yes he does. Much to my distaste.'

'I did see the guy throw away a cigarette butt,' Harry said, rubbing his chin. But this really wasn't enough proof the man he'd seen was her ex-boyfriend. Lots of people smoked. Harry wished he'd taken a lot more notice of this guy. At the time it had seemed odd, but not important. He could have been delivering pamphlets, anything, so Harry had forgotten him and carried on with his own business. 'Did he jointly own the house with you?' There was no relevance to that question, only Harry was intrigued. But if he owned the house he could have a set of keys.

'No – luckily. He had no money to invest in the property at the time, and deep down I think I knew our relationship wasn't going anywhere. He lived with me, but it was my house.'

'So ... do you have anyone else who might wish you harm? Any enemies I should know about?'

'No!' Maddy glared at Harry. 'Not that I can think of. I'm an artist. I run a gallery and take commissions, and sometimes I even exhibit.'

‘Oh yeah?’ Harry raised his eyebrows at her, still smiling.

‘My paintings. I exhibit my paintings! Seriously, Harry, I’m in no mood to joke.’

‘Okay, Moody.’ Maddy shook her head, sounding more frustrated as she reiterated, ‘No, it couldn’t have been Connor.’

Chapter 8

Maddy breathed a sigh of relief to see her house still standing as Harry drove into Annadale Close. *Fire couldn't strike twice, could it?* She went to her washing line and removed the clothes, all dry and fresh from the sunshine and the Cornish breeze. Harry had opened up his house, washed his hands, and then come over and helped.

'Can I borrow your ironing board?' Maddy asked as Harry took the basket of washing off her. This man was doing so much for her and he really didn't need to. 'I should have bought a new cover for mine. It probably stinks of smoke.'

'Yes, of course. You can do my ironing while you're there.'

'I have enough of my own, thank you!'

Harry chuckled, holding up his hands. 'I'm joking.'

She worried she was over imposing by staying at Harry's. Maybe she could go back to her house soon. But the smell of the smoke ... would she even be able to sleep? Maybe she should stay at Valerie's.

'Are you sure you don't mind me staying with you? I could stay with a friend.'

'Maddy, how many more times do I have to tell you, no I don't mind.'

'Even the cat?'

'Well,' Harry pulled a face, making Maddy laugh, 'obviously,

I'd have preferred it if you didn't have a cat, but I can't do a lot about it now.'

They walked over to his house, Harry carrying the basket, like he'd carried her shopping. 'Did you want to do some of your ironing while I cook us dinner?' Harry set the basket down in his lounge.

'Oh, good idea, I'll pop across and get my iron.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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