

An
A to Z
of
Love



SOPHIE PEMBROKE

Sophie Pembroke
An A To Z Of Love

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Everyone's talking about Mia Page. Again. Mia Page has been the subject of gossip in Aberarian for half her life, ever since her father ran off with his secretary—and the contents of the local museum safe—when she was fourteen. Still, Mia loves her hometown, loves working at the A to Z shop, eating seafood with her best friend Charlie at his restaurant, catching the classic midnight movie at the crumbling Coliseum cinema. And if she ever wonders if things might be even better if Charlie were more than just a friend, well, it's only an idle thought in a lonely moment. After all, friendship always trumps romance, doesn't it? And she's never been one to rock the boat. But everything she loves is suddenly under threat from Charlie's ex-girlfriend, Becky, and her plans to turn Mia's beloved Coliseum into a casino, transforming the sleepy seaside town forever. As Mia tries to pull the people of Aberarian together to save the town they adore, her father reappears, and people start asking what he wants to take from them this time... Praise for Sophie Pembroke's Love Trilogy 'A very sweet story which I really loved; I finished it in no time.' - Rachel Cotterill Book Reviews 'What a delightful story! I loved the descriptions of the old inn and surrounding countryside and the occupants of the inn were irresistible. This book is a real treat' - cayocosta72 – Book Reviews 'Well, I have never met a sweeter hero!' - Random Book Muses The Love trilogy by Sophie Pembroke: Room for Love An A to Z of Love Summer of Love

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But everything she loves is suddenly under threat from Charlie’s ex-girlfriend, Becky, and her plans to turn Mia’s beloved Coliseum into a casino, transforming the sleepy seaside town forever. As Mia tries to pull the people of Aberarian together to save the town they adore, her father reappears, and people start asking what he wants to take from them this time...

WARNING: Some sexual scenes. Also contains seafood.

[Also available from Sophie Pembroke](#)

Room for Love

Summer of Love

An A to Z of Love

Sophie Pembroke



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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HQ

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SOPHIE PEMBROKE has been dreaming, reading and writing romance ever since she read her first Mills and Boon as part of her English Literature degree at Lancaster University, so getting to write romances for a living really is a dream come true!

Sophie lives in a little Hertfordshire market town with her scientist husband and her incredibly imaginative five-year-old daughter. She writes stories about friends, family and falling in love, usually while drinking too much tea and eating homemade cakes. Or, when things are looking very bad for her heroes and heroines, white wine and dark chocolate.

She keeps a blog at www.SophiePembroke.com, which should be about romance and writing, but is usually about cake and castles instead.

For Mum and Dad

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[Chapter One](#)

People could say what they liked about Welsh seaside towns, but in Mia Page's opinion, there weren't many better ways to start a June day than walking barefoot on the beach.

Shoes in hand, she wriggled her toes against the dry sand and stared out over the glistening waves, cheerfully ignoring the line of dead jellyfish left behind by the retreating tide. Even at eight-thirty in the morning, the salt air was already filling with the familiar seaside scents of frying chips and a hint of sugary rock.

‘Magda’s trying to persuade me to open StarFish for breakfasts, and close two nights a week,’ Charlie said, walking beside her with his hands in his pockets. He still had his shoes on, even though Mia had tried to explain to him a hundred times over the course of their friendship that the only proper way to walk on a beach was barefoot. ‘Says we’ll get more customers that way. More people can afford a quick breakfast than a three course dinner.’

‘Makes sense,’ Mia said. ‘But you don’t want to?’

Charlie sighed, and Mia snuck a sideways glance at him as they walked. He looked tired, his broad shoulders slumped. ‘I just always wanted StarFish to be a proper seafood restaurant, I guess. Not just another café diner surviving on serving coffee.’

‘Can’t you be both?’ Mia laughed at the filthy look he gave her. ‘Your problem is that you still think you’re in London, where enough people can afford to eat out every night of the week if they want.’

‘Oh, it’s pretty clear I’m not in London any more,’ Charlie said, gesturing to the seafront and then the rows of pastel coloured houses up above. ‘The smell apart from anything else.’

‘You mean the glorious, reviving sea air,’ Mia corrected him.

‘Something like that.’ Charlie shook his head, then gave her a lopsided smile. ‘Besides, as Magda keeps pointing out, without a few more customers I’ll never be able to afford to move back there anyway.’

A chill hit Mia’s chest, and she tried to convince herself it was the breeze. It was easy to forget, sometimes, that Charlie didn’t want to be in Aberarian. That, but for an evil ex-girlfriend and an economic downturn, he wouldn’t be there at all. When it was just them, catching a midnight movie or tasting new dishes at the restaurant, she could almost believe this was enough for him – their friendship, her hometown.

But every now and then, she couldn’t forget that her best friend would be hightailing it back to London, the first chance he got. Which was just enough to make sure she never let on how much she didn’t want him to.

‘I can’t imagine why you’d want to,’ she said, as lightly as she could. ‘I mean, who could bring themselves to leave all this?’

Mia turned slowly around, surveying her domain as Charlie watched her with an amused grin on his face. The caves, just up the coast, where A to Z Jones’s smuggler gang were said to have hidden, back in the day. The lighthouse on the cliff above, and beside it the tumbledown lighthouse keeper’s cottage she’d dreamt of owning as a child. The Esplanade, with its dated hotels and faded guesthouses, spanning the length of the beach.

Her boss, attacking the postman on the Esplanade.

‘Oh hell. What is she doing now?’ Mia gave her toes one last wriggle, then tugged her shoes back on. ‘Sorry, it looks like I have to rescue Jacques from Ditsy. I’ll see you later, though?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Charlie stared up at the Esplanade. ‘And you’re right. I can’t imagine how I could ever think of leaving this place,’ he added, as Ditsy walloped Jacques in the stomach with her handbag.

Mia stuck her tongue out at him and dashed up the stone steps from the beach to the town above. Ahead of her, Ditsy Levine, seventy-six and still spectacular, dressed in a shocking pink and green floral tea dress, had Jacques’ arm twisted up behind his back and was trying to prise a selection of envelopes from his hand. Jacques was not giving in easily.

‘Ditsy, what on earth are you doing?’ Mia grabbed the much older woman around the waist, more to steady her than stop her, since Ditsy looked about to topple over.

‘Getting our post,’ Ditsy said through gritted teeth, succeeding at last in peeling one of Jacques’ fingers out of the way.

Jacques – who’d arrived in Aberarian from France two months before Mia was born, twenty-eight years ago, yet still complained about the weather – was not the world’s most efficient postman. But he did have a system. He started his deliveries on the outer streets of the small seaside town and

spiralled his way in to the centre until he reached the post office again. Ditsy's A to Z shop, being next door to the post office-cum-newsagents on the main street, was his last stop. Quite often, the workday had effectively ended by the time he handed Mia her mail.

'If somebody would employ a sensible delivery system,' Ditsy carried on, separating another finger from the letters, 'I wouldn't have to resort to such actions.'

'Fine, fine!' Jacques finally released the post, and the sudden action caused Ditsy to jerk backwards, pushing Mia against the railing separating the Esplanade from the rocks leading down to the sandy beach. Glancing down, she could see Charlie walking back along the beach the way they'd come, heading for StarFish and another day not serving breakfasts. From the slump of his shoulders, he didn't look happy about it.

With a sigh, Mia turned back to see Ditsy settling her skinny frame onto a nearby bench and sorting through her mail. Jacques rooted around in his inside pocket and pulled out another envelope. Ditsy made a disgruntled noise from the bench, obviously personally offended he'd kept any mail hidden from her.

'Since we're ignoring any sense of order today, you might as well have this too.' Jacques shoved the letter into her hands. 'It was addressed to your mother's old house, but I would have brought it over to you.' He sounded hurt at the accusations thrown at him for doing his job in an orderly manner, and for a moment Mia wondered if he was hanging around for an apology from Ditsy, in which case she suspected everyone's post would still be waiting to be delivered tomorrow.

Then she glanced down at the envelope. Written across the reverse flap was a return address: G E Page, 15 Cottle Way, Cottlethorpe, East Yorkshire. Well, at least she knew where dear old Dad had got to now. And it had only taken him fourteen years to write. Suddenly it was very clear why Jacques was still there.

Mia pushed the letter into the corner of her handbag. She wasn't giving Jacques, and by extension everyone on his post round, the satisfaction of knowing what her father had to say to her. She wasn't even sure she wanted to know herself.

'Thank you.' She turned away and grabbed Ditsy's arm, pulling her up from the bench. 'But we've got a shop to open.' Ditsy followed, after returning to Jacques all the letters addressed to other people. They left him reordering it according to his spiralling system.

'You really shouldn't attack people in broad daylight, you know,' Mia said, once Jacques was out of earshot and they were safely headed up Water Street. 'It's not going to make these people like us any more.'

Ditsy bristled. 'They like me just fine, thank you very much. They just preferred my sister.'

'They think you're ornery,' Mia corrected, peeking through the window of StarFish seafood restaurant to see if Charlie was at work yet. He wasn't.

'I'm seventy-six. It's my right.' Mia didn't have an argument for that. As far as she was concerned, Ditsy had earned the right to do whatever the hell she liked. It was just a shame the rest of the town didn't always agree.

Passing the crumbling Coliseum cinema, with its peeling yellow paintwork and faded movie posters three years out of date, Mia waved to Walt Hamilton, who was opening up for another day of classic movies and stale popcorn. Walt raised a hand to wave back, but lowered it when his wife, Susan, glared first at him then at Mia.

Susan thought Mia was more than ornery. Mia was pretty sure Susan thought she was a disgrace. Another reason to be glad that she'd turned down Dan Hamilton's proposal and gone to university instead, ten years before. Susan as a mother-in-law would have been unbearable.

'So, who's the letter from?' Ditsy went on, sounding like she didn't care, as they turned onto Main Street and the tarnished brass sign above the A to Z shop came into view.

Mia rolled her eyes. ‘Don’t pretend Jacques didn’t tell you. I’m sure he’s told every single person on his rounds this morning. And I don’t for a second believe you were actually attacking him to get the phone bill and a Fish Festival flyer.’

‘I just can’t believe he was hiding it in his pocket,’ Ditsy grumbled, fumbling for her keys. ‘All that wasted energy. I’m going to need a nap today. You might not get your afternoon off, after all.’

Ditsy’s A to Z shop was an institution in Aberarian. It had been there all of Mia’s life, and before, and any visitor to the town always remembered it long after they’d forgotten the jellyfish and the boat trips. Usually because they’d spent twenty-five minutes searching for mustard before realising every item in the shop was stored alphabetically on the twenty-six antique wooden shelves, each with a gilt letter resting atop them. It wasn’t practical, or particularly profitable, but it was certainly memorable.

‘Speaking of the Fish Festival,’ Ditsy said, pushing the door open, ‘they’re in trouble again.’

Ditsy struggled out of her camel hair jacket, revealing the full glory of the floral fantasia of fabric draped over her skinny body and tied with a pink and yellow beaded necklace for a belt around the waist. ‘The only person who ever cared what I looked like died a decade ago,’ Ditsy always said. ‘Besides, I like flowers.’ The camel hair coat found its way onto the usual peg behind the counter, next to Mia’s apron, and Ditsy dropped onto the stool by the till.

Mia pulled off her jacket to reveal her more sedate tea dress. As uniforms went, she supposed it wasn’t a bad one. Ditsy claimed they gave the shop a retro feel. Mia secretly believed the tea dress choice had more to do with Ditsy’s reluctance to go clothes shopping over the last few decades than any business motivation.

She pulled her attention back to the Fish Festival. ‘Again?’

Ditsy nodded. ‘Getting harder to pull it off every year, it seems.’

‘Well, they’re really in for it this year, then.’ Ditsy raised an eyebrow, and Mia explained, ‘With Mayor Fielding stepping down and all. It won’t be her problem by the autumn, so why should she care?’

‘You’re far too cynical, my dear.’ Ditsy reached over and patted her hand. ‘Now, time to get to work.’

They settled into their usual routine – Ditsy made the first cups of tea while Mia checked the till, set up the float from the safe in the back room, and straightened up the stock. When they were ready, she flipped the Closed sign over to Open, and they both sat down to wait for an influx of customers at nine o’clock.

Three hours, four customers – two tins of baked beans, a packet of chocolate hobnobs, and five hundred grams of plain flour – and eight cups of tea later, Ditsy asked, ‘Now, what are you going to do with your free afternoon?’

‘I can stay, if you like,’ Mia offered. Ditsy did look tired after her morning’s exertions.

‘Not at all. Not a word of it,’ Ditsy said. ‘It’s your afternoon off. And it might be your last chance before the summer rush starts. So, tell me, what have you got planned?’

The summer rush, Mia feared, grew less rush-like by the year. Last summer had been more of an amble. She sighed. ‘Nothing much. Although I did have some ideas about a large bar of chocolate and an Agatha Christie.’

Ditsy looked scandalised. ‘An attractive young thing like yourself, with no plans for an afternoon off? Nobody whisking you off for a romantic walk on the beach? Or champagne cocktails at the Grand? What will become of you?’

‘I’m meeting Charlie for a tasting and the cinema tonight, if that’s any better.’ Mia tried to imagine her morning walk with Charlie as romantic, but couldn’t. Especially since they’d mostly talked about how he wanted to leave her and Aberarian behind.

‘Charlie doesn’t count.’ Ditsy’s expression turned suspicious. ‘Unless there’s something you haven’t been telling me. You haven’t finally persuaded that handsome young man to break his vow of celibacy?’

The excitement in Ditsy's eyes at the prospect was profoundly disturbing. 'He's a chef, not a priest, Ditsy. And it's not a vow, as such. It's understandable he's reluctant to get into another relationship after Becky.' She gave Ditsy a meaningful look, and the older woman looked suitably sheepish as she remembered exactly whose niece it was who had brought Charlie to town to start a new life then left him there alone with a restaurant, a fallen-down cottage and a broken heart. Not to mention the ways she'd made Mia's life hell when they were teenagers.

'Besides, Charlie and I are just friends.' Mia quashed the small part of her that sometimes – very occasionally, mind – wondered what would happen if that wasn't the case. No point dwelling on impossible things.

'Which is my point!' Ditsy said, raising a finger in triumph. 'When are you going to find someone who isn't just a friend?'

'In Aberarian? Probably never.' Mia sighed. She loved her hometown and had fought hard to stay there despite the decline in business, the gossips and the jellyfish. But it wasn't exactly bursting at the seams with eligible bachelors. Which was another thing. She didn't want Charlie – or anyone else for that matter – to fall into a relationship with her through lack of alternative options. She was worth a little more than that, thank you.

Ditsy looked sympathetic. 'Well, who knows? Maybe the summer crowd will have some lookers this year.'

'All married with small children on a family holiday at the seaside. Just what I'm searching for.' She wasn't even really searching. Life was pretty good just how it was. She had her flat above the shop, her friends... and a letter from her father in her bag. Mia's mood took a downward slump.

Rolling her eyes, Ditsy shuffled into the back room and Mia heard the click of the kettle switch again. 'Well with that kind of attitude there's no hope for you. Just let me make another cup of tea to keep me going and I'll let you run free to do your laundry or whatever.'

Mia let herself smile, since Ditsy couldn't see her. 'Own up, Ditsy, you just want to live vicariously through me.'

'Of course!' Ditsy stuck her head through the doorway. 'I thought that much was obvious. It's ten years since my Henry died. I've got to get my kicks somewhere, you know.'

'Ditsy, I really don't want to know about your... ' Mia trailed off as she realised Ditsy was paying her no attention whatsoever. The grin on the older woman's face had spread even wider, and she pointed a sharp, bony finger towards the window.

'Now,' Ditsy said, her eyes bright. 'What about him, then?'

It would have been less embarrassing, Mia thought, if the – admittedly very attractive – man on the other side of the glass hadn't chosen that exact moment to look up and smile at them. Unfortunately, Mia's world didn't seem to believe in less embarrassing.

She groaned, sinking down onto her stool, bowing to the inevitable. The guy pushed open the door, ringing the antiquated shop bell above it. Mia tried for a polite customer service smile, but Ditsy had everything under control anyway.

'Good afternoon,' Ditsy said, her own smile manically bright. 'And how can I help you this fine day, Mr...'

'Anthony Fisher. Call me Tony,' he said, unfazed by Ditsy's really rather frightening grin. Mia was almost impressed. 'And I'm looking for a guidebook to the town, if you have such a thing.'

'We most certainly do,' Ditsy said. Mia started to get up to collect the Aberarian guide from the G shelf, and the corresponding map from shelf M, but Ditsy flung out an arm to keep her in her seat. 'But actually, you're in luck. For one day only, I can offer you something much better.' Mia tried to break free, but the old woman's arm was strong.

'Really?' Tony leaned his forearm on the counter and raised an eyebrow at Ditsy. 'Lunch with you?'

Ditsy shook her head. 'Even better. Your very own tour guide, free of charge.'

Mia had a horrible feeling she knew exactly where this was going. But Ditsy was freakishly strong for a seventy-six-year-old, and Mia could see no clear way of escaping that didn't involve pushing her employer to the ground. It was tempting, she admitted, but possibly not the best of career moves.

'It just so happens today is Mia's afternoon off, and she is sadly lacking in plans.' Ditsy grinned at her own cleverness. 'She'd just love to show you around town, get you familiar with us, help you get a real feel for the place.' Mia wasn't sure how it was possible to make a tour sound quite so suggestive.

'A real tour guide would be very helpful,' Tony said, grinning this time. He really did have a very attractive smile. 'I'm here for some business, you see, and if it goes well, I'm hoping to be spending quite some time in Aberarian.'

'With your family?' Mia asked, keen to nip this one in the bud before Ditsy got any more excited.

'Oh, I'm not married,' Tony told her. 'Haven't found a woman willing to take me on, yet!'

At that, Ditsy pushed Mia off her stool, slung her handbag and jacket into her stomach, and shoved her towards the door. 'Well, then. You two have fun!'

As the shop door shut the musty smell of the A to Z shop behind them, Tony burst into laughter. Mia, trying very hard to stay cross with Ditsy, managed to keep a straight face for all of ten seconds before joining him.

'We start our tour,' she told him when she was finally calm enough to speak, 'with the irrepressible Ditsy Levine, proprietor of the strangest shop on the North Wales coast and perpetual matchmaker.'

'I like her,' Tony said, in between chuckles. 'After all, her matchmaking got me a guided tour of Aberarian.'

'That it did,' Mia agreed, gazing around the small town square and down the main street and wondering how long she could spin it out for. Since Ditsy had gone through so much trouble to set her up, she supposed she should make the most of it. 'So, what do you want to see?'

'Everything,' Tony said, tucking her hand through his arm like they'd known each other for years instead of minutes. 'We've got plenty of time.'

Mia swallowed, wondering exactly what Ditsy had let her in for. 'Let's start with the beach.'

* * * *

'Are these all the bookings there are for the weekend?' Charlie Frost stared at the almost blank page in front of him, knowing before she even answered that Magda was going to say yes.

'So far,' Magda said, because she was tactful and, Charlie knew, because last time she'd gently suggested perhaps they should look at closing the kitchen for a couple of days midweek, he'd bitten her head off. She learned fast, it seemed.

He sighed. 'It's all we're going to get, and you know it. What about the...?' He waved his hands in what he hoped was an illustrative manner. 'Thing with the dairy delivery. Did you get it fixed?'

'All sorted. And there'll be some walk-ins,' Magda said, her Polish accent managing to sound hopeful even as she peered over his shoulder and winced. Charlie wondered again how a twenty-two-year-old girl who'd come to Britain to experience the bright lights of London had ended up practically running his restaurant in Aberarian, and decided he was just grateful she had.

'Not enough.' Charlie slammed the book shut. 'I'll have to go see Joe. Cut the order.' He could phone, of course, or even email, but that would mean staying in the almost empty restaurant, watching his dreams continue to circle the drain.

'Or we could open for breakfasts...' Magda started, then trailed off when he glared at her. 'I can look after things here.'

The early lunch crowd – all of two tables – had almost finished anyway. And as yet there was no sign of a later lunch crowd. Charlie supposed they might get a couple of stragglers, if they were very lucky, but otherwise he was shutting up shop at three and then he was free. Magda had the reins for the night, and Kevin had control of the kitchen. Charlie had plans – a tasting with Mia, meaning

he'd be on the customers' side of the restaurant that evening. Then a midnight showing of *It Happened One Night* at the Coliseum. There were worse ways to spend a Saturday night.

'Thanks.' He stored the book on the shelf under the front desk. 'It won't take me long.'

The fresh air as he walked along the front to Joe's shop was a pleasant relief from the vanilla potpourri Magda had installed on the reception desk at the StarFish. Her theory was – people came to eat the fish, not smell it. Charlie felt people should really expect a little fish stink from a seafood restaurant.

Past the sea wall, the yellowy-grey sand stretched out to the currently distant sea, revealing shells and stranded jellyfish along the shoreline. The tide had turned, though. Only a matter of time before the detritus of the ocean washed away again. He smiled, remembering the blissful look on Mia's face as she'd dug her bare toes into the sand that morning. He didn't often manage to join Mia on her morning walks, but it was always worth it when he did. She never looked as happy as when she was walking along Aberarian beach in the early morning light.

Sometimes, just sometimes, he let himself imagine that he could make her look like that. But not too often. Mia would always snap him out of it with a comment about what a good friend he was, or how he'd be back in London where he belonged, any day now.

With one last glance at the sea, he cast Mia out of his mind and jogged up the stairs towards Joe's.

Joe's fishmonger and butcher shop was empty except for Joe himself, stacking cockle shells on the fish counter and staring balefully across at the abandoned butcher's counter, his apron spotless.

'Slow day?' Charlie asked from the door, amused as always that Aberarian, realising it wasn't big enough to support both a butcher and a fishmonger, had managed to combine the two so effectively.

'Saturday.' Joe's voice was glum. 'Used to be one of our busiest, when Dad ran the place. Everyone came in for a bit of something special for Sunday tea from the other side. Now they just go to the Tesco in Coed-y-Capel.'

'Not everyone,' Charlie said.

Joe's face brightened. 'That's right. So, got a nice big order for me this week, have you?'

Charlie winced. 'Actually...'

'Might have guessed.' Joe knocked over his cockle shell tower with two fingers. 'Come on then. Give it to me.'

Sliding the amended order sheet across the counter, Charlie watched Joe's eyebrows grow closer to his receding hairline as he read. 'Business not much better for you either, then.'

'It'll pick up in the summer,' Charlie said with a confidence he didn't really feel. He wasn't sure StarFish would make it to another winter if it didn't.

'It's already June.'

'When the school holidays start,' Charlie clarified. That gave them another month to hope.

Joe tossed the order form into an empty filing tray. 'You know what we need? A night off. A night of the blissful forgetfulness only supplied by drinking too many pints of ale at the Crooked Fox. Tonight. You in?'

'Can't,' Charlie said with a shake of the head. 'Mia's coming over for a tasting session for the new menu. Then we're heading over to the Coliseum.'

This prompted an impressive eyebrow waggle from Joe. 'A date? A real one? A really real date?'

'No. A standing arrangement where Mia tells me which of my dishes suck and what has too much chilli for the locals, then we go to the cinema to see something in black and white, pretty much every Saturday. You know this.' Everyone knew this. Everyone knew that he and Mia were just friends. Mia made very sure of that.

'Yeah, yeah. I know this.' Joe leaned farther across the counter. 'What I don't know and what, to be honest, is the only interesting thing to speculate about here, is when you're going to finally just snog the hell out of her.'

‘Joe...’

‘Hell, bring her to the pub tonight. Couple of rum and Cokes and she’ll be begging you to kiss her.’

‘It’s not like that,’ Charlie said. ‘We’re friends.’

‘Only because you think she’s too screwed up for love. What with her dad, then Dan, and whatever the guy in London was called driving her crazy.’ Joe rolled his eyes as he said it. ‘And because you’re too hung up on Becky the Bitch.’

‘She’s not crazy. She’s just...’ Charlie searched for the right words to describe Mia. Beautiful, sensitive, insecure, utterly uninterested in him... ‘Wary. Wouldn’t you be?’

‘If it were me, I’d have emigrated to Australia. Only place people might not still be talking about what George Page did. Not to mention the whole Dan debacle.’

‘Besides, I don’t want another relationship. They only end badly.’ He’d much rather have Mia as his friend than as someone he’d once loved and now couldn’t bear to look at because she’d ripped his heart out and fed it to the fishes.

‘That we agree on, my friend,’ Joe said, nodding sagely. ‘Next week for the pub, then?’

‘It’s a date,’ Charlie promised with a grin.

Amazingly, Charlie thought while walking home along the front, he did feel better. Enough that he could go back into his kitchen and not want to attack the freezer with a chef’s knife. Maybe it would be okay. There’d be walk-ins on Saturday night. And it wasn’t even July yet. Things would pick up when the sun arrived, when the holidays started.

He just had to be patient, that was all.

Reaching the corner of Water Street, where the town met the coastline, he saw the StarFish sign hanging a few feet away. The scent of the sea and the sound of distant waves rolled up from the beach, and he remembered exactly why this had been the perfect place for his dream restaurant, with his dream girl. The place to raise a family and grow old.

Well. He still had the restaurant, anyway.

And maybe Mia was right. Maybe he would make it back to London one day. Even if he wasn’t entirely sure that was a good thing. Aberarian, as Mia often told him, had many charms.

He paused at StarFish’s door as he saw Mia farther up the street, and it took him a full thirty seconds to realise that not only was she not alone, he also didn’t know the man she was with. Or why she was holding his arm. Or what he’d said to make her laugh so openly, her face shining and bright with the sort of relaxed joy Charlie had never yet managed to get her to show.

Charlie blinked. Mia hadn’t noticed him at all, and was already leading her friend farther along Main Street, towards the tiny rundown cinema. She’d tell him all about it later, he was sure. There was probably a perfectly innocent explanation.

Except it didn’t need to be innocent, did it? Because he had absolutely no claim on her anyway.

Depressed once again, Charlie pushed open the door and retreated into the dream restaurant that had become a nightmare.

[Chapter Two](#)

Becky waited until she saw Tony and Mia take the turning down Water Street, towards the Esplanade, before she ducked out of the newsagent’s doorway and over to the A to Z shop next door.

It had been a good idea, having Tony lure Mia away first; this was a family matter, after all. And Mia, for all they’d been friends as kids, before the thing with her dad, was never going to be family. She’d wondered how he’d managed it, but not for very long. Tony always seemed to manage to get what he wanted one way or another, often leaving the other party thinking it had been their idea in the first place. It was one of the reasons Champion Casinos were such a success.

The other reason, of course, was that Becky got what she wanted pretty much all the time, too. When they worked together, they were unstoppable.

The thought made Becky smile. Aberarian was going to roll over and beg for them to save it.

It was a good feeling, knowing she was just one deal away from ruling her old hometown. She hadn't been ready last time she'd come back. They hadn't taken her seriously. But this time, they weren't going to have a choice.

Becky had always known that she would come back to Aberarian one day. It had a strange pull on a person, this place. Even as a teenager, when she'd longed to escape to university, to London, to real life, she'd always known she'd return. When it was time. When she was ready to settle down, start a family, grow up – there had never been any doubt in her mind that Aberarian was where she would do it.

Three years ago, she'd thought it was time. She'd seen her future stretching out before her, Charlie at her side. But when Tony had contacted her with a new business idea, a chance for her to really make her mark... how could she say no? She was still young, she still had time. This was her chance to truly shine, before she settled down.

So she'd taken it. Who wouldn't?

Well, apart from Charlie, of course. Guilt throbbed in her middle as she remembered his sleeping face, the morning she left. He'd loved her, enough to move to Aberarian for her. And, more importantly, he'd stayed. He was still waiting for her.

And she was ready at last.

Becky smiled, watching the A to Z shop sign creak in the wind. It might not be easy, but this was her chance to make everything right. She'd have her business, and she could win Charlie back, no problem. She could have the future she'd always dreamt of. She could run things in Aberarian, Tony would leave town and Charlie would never need to even know about her fling with her boss. And Tony.... he was a businessman. He'd understand the importance of shaping circumstances to get what you wanted.

She was his protégée, after all. He'd probably be proud of her, once he got over the part about not being able to sleep with her any more.

But first, she had a plan to put into action. Starting with Aunt Ditsy.

Becky paused at the window of the A to Z shop before going in. No customers, of course. She hadn't seen a single tourist all the way in from the station. That's why Aberarian needed her.

Ditsy sat behind the counter, pouring over something – either the accounts or the crossword, probably. You could never tell with Aunt Ditsy. Becky paused, hand on the door, remembering better times for the shop, when Uncle Henry was still alive and sneaking sweets to his favourite niece. When she was still the town's sweetheart and her biggest responsibility was remembering to keep the jars of lemon drops on the L shelf filled.

With a deep breath, Becky pushed the door open, bracing herself for surprise and hugs and amazement. What she got instead, when Ditsy looked up from her papers, was a look of utter shock.

'Hello, Aunt Ditsy,' she said with a calculatedly nervous smile.

'I thought...' Ditsy still hadn't moved from behind the counter. Becky felt a twinge of concern. Not the best start. 'When you didn't come home for your Aunt Hannah's funeral, I thought we'd never see you in Aberarian again.'

Ah. Right. 'I felt just terrible about that, Auntie. I just... It was too soon for me, so soon after everything.' Ditsy nodded, the movement jerky, and Becky decided the best thing was probably just to steam ahead and hope Ditsy would forget, eventually, some of Becky's failing as a niece. 'But I'm back now. Things have been going really well for me in Manchester. And now I've got the opportunity to share some of my success...'

But before Becky could get into the revelation that had prompted her return, the shop door opened again, its brass bell jingling as Mrs Heather Jenkins entered and bustled straight up to the counter without acknowledging Becky's presence at all. That wouldn't last long. She was going to show them she mattered in this town.

‘Now, Ditsy, what’s all this about a letter from Mia’s father?’ Mrs Jenkins hadn’t become any less blunt over the years either, it seemed.

Ditsy gave a frustrated sigh. ‘Heather, since I don’t want to spend all afternoon repeating myself, and now Mia’s out of the way I’m sure you’re not going to be the last to ask, could you just get Jacques to amend his story when he’s telling people? He just needs to tell them I have no idea who the letter was from, what it said, or even if Mia’s got any plans to open the damn thing. She certainly hadn’t when she left here.’

Heather Jenkins gave an almost-snort of polite disbelief. ‘And I’m sure if she had you’d have told me all about it.’

‘Then why did you bother to ask?’ Ditsy said with raised eyebrows. Check and mate. Aunt Ditsy had obviously been practicing that comeback.

But even as Mrs Jenkins left, grumbling under her breath, Becky could see the vicar, Dafydd Davies, striding purposefully towards the shop. Ditsy dashed out from behind the counter with surprising speed and flipped the sign on the door over to Closed, smiling with false apology at Reverend Davies while he fumed outside the window.

‘Never known a man of God to gossip so much,’ Ditsy muttered, watching him turn and leave.

Becky decided to seize the opportunity. ‘Since you’re closed early for the day,’ she said, her mind already playing out the next part of her plan, ‘Why don’t we go and get lunch at StarFish? I’ve got a... business proposition I’d like to discuss with you.’

Ditsy snorted, but reached for her coat. ‘You just want to see Charlie again.’

Becky smiled. The plan was coming together just fine. Tony would be so proud.

* * * *

Mia led Tony along Main Street, towards the Esplanade, and stared at the town she’d lived in all her life with new eyes. It looked shabbier than she remembered, more rundown. And when had so many shops closed? One at a time, she supposed, and it was always sad when they did, but then two weeks later she’d forget about them. She always saw Aberarian as a picture in her head, a magical place that drew you back in, however far you strayed. Until she had to find a way to make the town interesting to an outsider, and realised the whole place looked abandoned.

Maybe she should tell him the tragic life of Mia Page, so he’d run screaming for the hills now, saving her the bother of scaring him off slowly, over time.

Instead, she guided him down Water Street, past the bright blue and gold sign of StarFish, and drew his attention to the beautiful holiday homes on the other side of the street, rather than the charity shop and the bucket and spade stall. She glanced into StarFish’s window, but it didn’t look like Charlie was there anyway, so there was no point stopping.

On the corner of the Esplanade, she directed him to the window of Treasures, Kim Williams’s tourist trap, selling overpriced slate objects and Celtic-designed jewellery made overseas. That was what people wanted from a seaside town these days, wasn’t it?

Although, if she was honest, Tony didn’t seem particularly interested in the town anyway.

‘So, you work in the A to Z shop?’ Tony asked, turning away from Kim’s overly sentimental window display to point at a plaque beside it declaring the smuggler A to Z Jones had once stayed there. ‘Named for the man himself, I assume?’

Mia shrugged. ‘Probably. Story goes he could get you anything from A to Z. A bit like an illegal Harrods. But it’s mainly because everything in the shop is arranged alphabetically.’

‘Really?’ Tony paused in the middle of the pavement. ‘How the hell does that work?’

‘Badly, most of the time,’ Mia admitted.

‘Huh.’ Tony smiled. ‘Well, you did say she was crazy.’

Mia didn’t reply, just took his arm and carried on in the direction of the beach. Maybe the sea views would win Tony over.

But somehow, with Tony beside her, even the beach had lost some of its appeal.

‘Are those... jellyfish?’ He stared, horrified, at the shoreline.

Mia winced. ‘Yeah. They... We tend to get a lot of them, this time of year. They wash up with the tide and wash out again later. Usually.’ Tony still looked horrified. ‘You’re not really seeing it at its best.’

‘What if you step on them?’

‘They sting,’ she replied. Perhaps it was time to take Tony away from the jellyfish.

‘Well, you wanted the coast,’ Mia said, leading him up to the Esplanade. Aberarian wasn’t the most exciting place on the planet, but it was her home and she loved it. And for some reason, it was important to her that Tony should like it too. ‘This is it.’

Tony turned to her and smiled again, and Mia felt some of her worries fade away. ‘It most certainly is.’

Not feeling she was making any progress, Mia started along the Esplanade, saying, ‘Well, there’s more to see, still.’

They passed the Grand Hotel, a hulking old-fashioned building that dominated the Esplanade and still served high tea for its guests every afternoon. Then up King Street, past the bakery and more holiday flats, describing everything they passed. ‘And this is Joe’s, and...’

But Tony was transfixed by Joe’s. ‘What is it?’

Mia glanced up at the sign. Seemed self-explanatory to her. ‘Well, this half’s a butcher’s shop and the other is a fishmonger’s. It’s just Joe runs them both. Saving people time when they’re shopping.’

‘Sort of a primitive supermarket, then?’ Tony asked, grinning.

‘Not exactly.’ She shrugged. ‘Aberarian’s not big enough to support both separate shops. So Joe’s father amalgamated them.’ She didn’t mention that at the rate the local housing was becoming holiday homes, occupied for just a few months a year, soon the town wouldn’t even be able to support Joe’s.

Tony shook his head. ‘Baffling. Only in Wales. What’s next?’

Something in Mia’s middle clenched at his tone, but she couldn’t think why. After all, it wasn’t anything Joe himself hadn’t said from time to time.

She looked around her, wondering what on earth to show him next, and spotted, past the A to Z shop, the old Coliseum cinema. Perfect. Surely Tony would appreciate the site of a proper old movie theatre, not one of those modern superplexes that charged more for popcorn than a ticket.

But Tony, apparently, was more of a modern cinema man than an appreciator of the classics.

‘But that came out months ago!’ He pointed at the poster jammed crookedly into the rusting frame on the front of the building. ‘And what’s a wet weather matinee?’

Mia shrugged. ‘Makes it cheaper if we wait a bit for the films. Helps Walt keep the place going, and it doesn’t make a lot of difference, really. And the wet weather matinees are just for the school holidays. Walt opens up earlier in the day when it’s raining. Gives the kids something to do.’ She smiled at the thought of the last one she’d attended, with Charlie the summer before. ‘It’s fun. He puts on some classic kids’ movies and hands out big bowls of popcorn, included in the ticket price.’

Still staring at the faded and peeling yellow paint on the brickwork, Tony didn’t look convinced. Mia didn’t bother telling him about Walt’s Festive Film Festival, running from October to December, showing all his favourite Christmas movies. ‘Come on,’ she said instead. ‘Come in and meet Walt. He’s brilliant. You’ll see.’ Upsetting Walt might have been her number one regret about breaking things off with Dan, except her almost father-in-law had made it very clear that he still counted her as part of the family, even if she wasn’t going to marry his son.

Inside the Coliseum, the lights were dimmed and the popcorn machine turned off. ‘Walt?’ Mia called out, watching Tony taking a tour of the small lobby, fingering the grubby red and white ropes set up to keep non-existent queues in order.

Walt Hamilton stuck his head out from behind the box office door, and Mia could see Tony taking in his balding head, and butter-stained red and white shirt. 'Mia? There's no film this afternoon. Not until...' His voice trailed off as he eyed up Tony. 'What are you doing here?'

'Walt, this is Tony.' Mia took Tony's hand again and led him to the box office. 'He's in town on business, and I'm giving him a bit of a tour.'

'Right.' Walt stuck out a hand. 'Well, hello, then.'

Tony took the proffered hand, and Mia saw Walt wince at the force of his handshake. 'Interesting place you've got here,' Tony said, running a hand down the dusty frame of a black and white forties starlet's photo.

Walt shrugged. 'I like it.'

Obviously Walt wasn't going to help her sell the Coliseum as a reason to love Aberarian. 'We all love it,' she said with more enthusiasm. 'Always packed out on a Saturday night, and the kids think it's the best thing in town!'

Tony's face was full of disbelief, and Walt cringed at the lie, so Mia decided it might be time to call it quits and move onto the pub instead. Surely Tony would have to like the pub.

'What are you doing here?' Susan Hamilton's voice behind her made Mia more determined to make a run for it. Dan's mother's reaction to their break up had been far less understanding. In fact, Mia was pretty sure that Susan blamed her completely for her beloved son marrying a holidaying student and moving three hundred miles away to start a family with her. 'Walt?'

'Just leaving, Susan,' Mia assured her and, grabbing hold of Tony's sleeve, dragged him to the door. 'Bye, Walt.'

Outside, she dropped Tony's arm and made her way down the cinema steps towards Main Street, and the pub.

'So, what's next on this magical mystery tour?' Tony asked.

'The Crooked Fox,' Mia said. 'You'll like that at least, I bet.'

Tony took her arm again, and they started in the direction of the lower end of town. 'Crooked Fox?'

She smiled. 'You think only the cities have pubs? What do you think we do out here, all winter?'

Tony laughed, a bright, honest, surprised chuckle, and squeezed her arm as she led him to the pub.

'But enough about the town,' he said, once they were settled at a rickety corner table by the old fireplace. Tony put down his pint and focused solely on Mia; it was quite disconcerting, she found. 'Tell me about you. All I know so far is that you like a rundown cinema.'

Mia shrugged. 'Walt has always been very kind to me. He gave me a job there when I was in sixth form.' Back when the cinema actually made some money, every now and then, she didn't add. That was how she'd got close to Dan, who'd always been far too cool to give her the time of day at school, before then. It had been the best job in the world, and Walt had almost cried when he'd had to let her go. 'I figure catching a movie a couple of times a week is a small way to make it up to him.'

'Have you always lived here?' Tony asked.

Mia nodded. 'Always. Well, except for when I was at uni in Manchester. My father was a teacher at the secondary school for most of my childhood, actually. Then, well, he left when I was sixteen. I got my A Levels and ran off to university two years later. But after I graduated... I wanted to come home.' Mia remembered how she had missed the sound of the sea at night, the salt in the air, so much it felt like a physical ache. Not that she regretted it; if she'd never left, she would never have known how much Aberarian meant to her.

'Really? I'd have thought...' Tony said, a tinge of disbelief in his voice. Apparently realising he might have offended her, he covered by asking, 'What did you study?'

'History.' Mia took another gulp of wine. 'I've always been fascinated by how we got here. I mean, history can explain pretty much everything to ever happen in the world, if you look at it right.'

That's important.' Her own past might not be a fairy tale, but it did at least help her remember how she ended up here.

A slow smile spread across Tony's face. 'Personally, I've always preferred where we're going to where we've been. After all, there are still so many things to see and do. So many new people to meet.' His thumb ran over the back of her hand, and Mia swallowed. Hard.

As his hand left hers, she found herself babbling to catch up with the conversation. 'Charlie always says it's where we are now that matters most.'

Tony reclined in his chair. 'Charlie? Your boyfriend?'

Mia laughed and shook her head. 'Not at all. Just friends.'

'Glad to hear it.' He was leaning forward again, suddenly very close. 'Since it means I can ask you to lunch as a thank you for the tour.'

'Lunch?' Mia asked, surprised. Was this an actual date? Had one of Ditsy's plans actually worked? If so, it had to be a first. 'That would be...'

'Great. What about the fish place we passed on the way to the beach? Is it any good?'

* * * *

Charlie slipped back behind the counter at StarFish and checked the bookings log again. It was becoming a slightly worrying obsession. There was nothing new, though. 'Magda?'

Magda's head appeared from behind the kitchen door, followed by the rest of her. 'You bellowed?'

'Has Mia been in?' Maybe Magda had got a good look at whoever had been grabbing hold of Mia's hand. Perhaps she was being abducted. Perhaps she needed Charlie to save her. Perhaps...

'No.' Magda slid onto the nearest table, her neat black pencil skirt smooth over the rough and ready wooden surfaces Charlie had chosen. 'But I did see her walk past with the most delicious man.'

Which was, of course, just what Charlie had been hoping to hear. In no way whatsoever. 'Any idea who he was?' Because, really, when would Mia have found time to pick up a date? She hadn't mentioned it on their walk that morning. And she'd tell him, wouldn't she, if there was someone new in her life? That was what friends did. And Mia was very clear on the fact that they were friends. Even when Charlie wasn't so sure that was all they should be.

Magda shrugged. 'Not a clue. But she'll be here for the tasting later, won't she? You can ask her then.'

'Yeah.' Charlie returned to obsessing about the bookings log. It was marginally less frustrating than obsessing about his friendship with Mia. But only marginally.

'Ooh, look.' Magda dropped from the table and into her best professional stance. 'There might be some actual customers coming our way.'

It didn't seem very likely, but Charlie looked up anyway, and promptly forgot all about bookings and restaurants and Magda and Mia's mystery man. Because right there in his restaurant was a much, much bigger problem.

'Hi, Charlie,' Becky said, with just enough grace to look a little sheepish but apparently not enough to just stay the hell away from him after tearing his heart out and stomping on it twice already.

'Becky.' He glanced at her companion. 'And Ditsy.' Who really should have known better and managed to stop this before it reached his door. Ditsy gave him an apologetic smile.

Ditsy stepped into the ensuing silence, smile widening with what Charlie was pretty sure was fake brightness. 'We'd like a table for two, for lunch, if that's possible.'

Charlie shook his head and managed to find his voice. 'Magda will be taking care of you today – one of the window tables perhaps, Magda?'

With a nod, Magda instantly flowed into her best customer service spiel, guiding Ditsy to a window table and almost managing to get Becky to follow by sheer dint of her politeness.

But at the last moment, Becky gave a little shake of the head, as if she were coming out of a daze, and took the three small steps necessary to bring her in front of Charlie.

‘Hi,’ she said. Then, when he didn’t respond, she answered the question he hadn’t asked. ‘I just wanted to see you. I came... I’ve some business in town. But I couldn’t not come and see you.’

‘You left without seeing me,’ Charlie pointed out, before his brain could censor his mouth. ‘Just a note on the counter was all I got.’

Her face crumpled a fraction under her powder and lipstick. ‘I know. And that was... It was unforgivable. I know that.’

Over at the table, Magda was watching them with concern in her wide hazel eyes. Ditsy’s face, Charlie noticed, showed only fascination. Was she enjoying this train wreck of a reunion?

‘What does it matter now?’ Charlie lowered his gaze from hers and stepped away, heading for the kitchen and solitude. ‘Enjoy your lunch.’

‘Charlie!’ She grabbed hold of his hand before he could escape. ‘Can we talk? After? Please?’

He shook his hand free and carried on beating his retreat, murmuring, ‘Sure’ and ‘Whatever,’ as he went. It was enough, it seemed, because Becky gave him one of those wide, wide smiles he remembered most from her bedroom before she turned and glided over to the window table.

‘Well that was a mistake,’ Magda muttered under her breath as she passed him, fetching drinks for their surprise customers.

‘I know,’ Charlie groaned and stepped into the kitchen, letting the door swing shut behind him.

[Chapter Three](#)

It would be much easier, Charlie mused while reorganising the main fridge for the third time, if he could just fall in love with Magda. Assuming she fell in love with him too, of course. Charlie rested his head on the cool metal of the fridge and wondered why there had been no portents in the sky that morning about just how bad this day was going to be.

Becky.

The woman who was supposed to be the love of his life. The very reason he was battling to stay in business in Aberarian. The reason he owned a house that could have fallen down by now, it had been so long since he’d visited it.

And now she wanted to *talk*. Fantastic.

He’d thought they’d said everything they could possibly need to, the night before she left. They’d talked about the job offer from Tony, about how she didn’t feel the same ‘home’ feeling she’d expected when they moved to Aberarian. She’d told him that maybe it wasn’t time for her to be there yet, whatever that meant.

Charlie had known what she was really saying, though. It wasn’t Aberarian that couldn’t live up to her expectations – it was him. He’d asked her to stay, to give them a real chance at the future they’d dreamt of together.

And when he’d woken up the next morning, she was gone.

Really, what else was there to say?

‘Are they still out there?’ he asked when Magda returned to the kitchen, plates in hand. In forty-five minutes, Becky and Ditsy had only managed starters and two bread baskets. Charlie was starting to worry it would be dinnertime before they finished lunch.

‘Still deciding on main courses,’ Magda confirmed. ‘And waiting on more drinks. She also wanted me to ask you, and I quote, “Why you’re not using the darling water jugs and glasses we sourced from that charming glassblower down the coast.”’

Charlie shut his eyes and pretended he couldn’t hear Becky saying those words in his head. She’d want to make it clear to Magda exactly who she was, of course, without having to come out and say it. She’d assume, rightly, he wouldn’t have told the young Polish girl about his humiliating abandonment, so all she needed to do was make it obvious she had been there first, that she had history with him. Just enough to warn Magda off, in case she was getting any ideas.

Except the only ideas Magda would be getting were about her crazy boss hiding in the kitchen and when to call in the mental health professionals.

‘What are they talking about, anyway?’ Charlie asked. ‘What can possibly be taking this long?’ He couldn’t ignore the niggling part of his brain that kept asking, if Becky wanted to talk with him so much, why was she spending hours chatting with Ditsy instead? She’d never seemed to have much time for long conversations with her aunt before.

Maybe she’d changed. Maybe she wanted to come home now, and live the future she’d always dreamt of.

Charlie wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about that.

‘Well, you know I don’t like to eavesdrop on the customers,’ Magda lied, ‘but I did happen to overhear...’

Charlie decided this wasn’t the occasion for a lecture on professional ethics. He needed to know why Becky was back, before she blindsided him. ‘What?’

‘She’s here on business. Apparently her company has got some plan for something in Aberarian, and she’s heading up the project with her boss.’ Magda paused, seeming uncertain about whether to add the next bit. ‘From what she said to Ditsy, it sounds like she’s planning on hanging around.’

Charlie banged his head on the fridge door as he stood up. ‘Why on earth would she... Wait. So she’s not here to...’

‘To win you back? Not so far as I can tell,’ Magda said, smirking.

‘I was going to say, “make my life a misery,”’ Charlie lied. Work. She’d come back here for work. Of course she had.

‘Oh, well. I wouldn’t rule it out.’

Charlie checked his watch. Two o’clock. Still prime late-lunch time. No escape just yet.

‘I need to talk to Mia,’ he said. Mia would make sense of it all for him. She always did. Even if she and Becky didn’t have the best history, Mia would listen and talk it through and understand.

That, Charlie decided, was why he and Mia were so good as friends. She never drove him crazy the way girlfriends always had.

‘And I need to get their drinks.’ Magda moved towards the doors out to the bar. ‘Are you going to sneak out the back like a little girl, or are you going to face up to the woman like a man?’

Charlie thought about it. ‘What are my chances, do you think?’

‘She’ll hunt you down, my friend. I’ve seen that sort of look in a woman’s eyes before. You’d be better off getting it over and done with.’

‘You’re right,’ Charlie said with a sigh. Then he considered. ‘But I’ll just wait until they’ve finished their meals. And post-lunch liqueurs.’ Becky was always more pliant and considerate after alcohol.

‘Maybe wait until they’ve paid the bill too,’ Magda suggested, pushing open the doors. ‘Just in case.’

Charlie groaned and yanked the fridge open again.

* * * *

Once they’d finished their drinks, Tony dragged them out of the Crooked Fox and down Water Street, which meant it was only when she was standing outside StarFish that Mia had a moment to wonder what Charlie would make of her having a lunch date.

Which was ridiculous, of course, because what did Charlie care who she had lunch with? He probably wouldn’t even notice if Tony kissed her over the bread basket.

Not that she thought he was going to, or anything.

Tony was, at present, far more interested in the menu hanging beside the door. ‘Doesn’t look bad,’ he said, sounding surprised. ‘Come on, then.’

Once inside, any concern Mia might have felt about Charlie’s feelings melted away at the sight of Ditsy and Becky sitting together. And any thoughts she’d had about kissing Tony followed shortly afterward, when Tony headed directly to their table and said, ‘There you are, Bex. Mia, let me introduce you to my colleague, Becky Thrower.’

Becky Thrower. Back again like the proverbial bad penny. Or bad credit card, maybe, given the designer suit and glossy, perfectly styled hair. Mia bit the inside of her cheek, concentrating on the perfect cutting comebacks for whatever jibes Becky chose to throw in her direction this time. She wasn't a teenager any more. She could handle Becky.

But could Charlie?

She looked up to see him hovering in the open kitchen doors looking guilty, although Mia couldn't quite figure out why. Stupidity, perhaps, for letting Becky into StarFish in the first place. At the table – and Ditsy better not think she wasn't going to ask what the secret society social they'd got going on was all about – Ditsy was making expressive yet indecipherable eyebrow movements at Mia from behind Becky. Mia figured it was easier just to ask later, when there were less satanic goings-on to deal with.

'Oh, Mia and I are old friends,' Becky said with a tinkling laugh at the end.

If she included the first fourteen years of their lives in Aberarian, when they'd been inseparable best friends, perhaps. Personally, Mia tended to remember the following four years, after her father left, when Becky and her new friends had made life unbearable for her until she went to university.

Becky, however, obviously had a different recollection of events.

'It's so wonderful to see you again!' Becky scampered out from behind the table and gave Mia one of those hugs where she didn't need to touch her, and Mia refrained from slugging her because it wouldn't look good for Charlie's restaurant. 'You're just the person we need.'

'Need?' That sounded ominous. 'For what?'

Becky shooed her over to an empty seat at the table, and Mia eyed Ditsy for some clue to what was going on. Ditsy, in turn, made more expressive movements, this time including her hands, which still meant absolutely nothing to Mia.

'Tony and I have a business plan,' Becky said, settling back down in her seat. Tony pulled up an extra chair beside her. Mia wondered how a round table could have a head because, despite the seeming geometrical impossibility, Becky was most definitely sitting at it. 'The council have already agreed in principle, and we all think it could save Aberarian!'

'Have you, now.' Mia gave Charlie a significant look and he scurried off behind the bar to return with a very large glass of chilled white wine. Which enabled Mia to feel more kindly towards him when he pulled another seat up to the table. 'So, this plan. Ditsy and Charlie are both already on board with it, are they?'

'Becky and I were just discussing it now,' Ditsy broke in, before Becky replied. 'I still have some... questions.' *And for questions, read reservations*, Mia thought, Ditsy's previous attempts at communication becoming clearer. 'Basically, Becky and Tony want to turn Aberarian into a gambler's paradise.'

Becky looked hurt. 'Ditsy! You know that's not it at all.'

'Okay, you want to turn the Coliseum into a casino,' Ditsy amended.

Mia felt a chill start at her fingertips and begin working its way through her veins and into her heart. 'But the Coliseum is part of the town. Part of what makes us... Aberarian.' It was her home, she wanted to say. When everything was so awful after her dad left, Walt would let her sneak into the cinema and stay there all day if she wanted to. The Coliseum was part of *her*.

'The owner seems quite keen to sell,' Tony said. 'Apparently there's not much money in antique cinemas these days. And the council's desperate to get rid of the other empty buildings along that street. Should give us a nice slice of real estate.'

She'd shown him round, Mia realised, her anger rising. She'd actually shown Tony the bloody cinema and let him mock it.

'Sorry I couldn't tell you earlier,' he said with a smile. 'Only I promised Becky I'd let her do the talking on this one, to start with.'

‘Obviously we need to discuss it some more,’ Becky went on, ‘and there’s a meeting planned to fill the town in on what’s going on. But I’m sure you can see, Mia, how we could all benefit from attracting more tourists to Aberarian.’

The most damnable part of it was she was right, to a point. Aberarian needed more tourists to provide more business. But a casino... That would change Aberarian quite fundamentally. It wouldn’t be the town Mia loved any more.

‘I really do believe it will be good for the town,’ Becky said with irritating earnestness.

Personally, Mia believed the best thing for the town – and for her, and for Charlie – would be for Becky to leave forever. Why hadn’t Walt told her things were so bad?

‘You have to admit, Mia,’ Tony said, leaning across to touch her hand. This time, the rising of her heartbeat was because she was resisting the urge to punch him in his smiling face. ‘From what you showed me this morning, Aberarian does need help.’

‘I didn’t know you wanted me to give you a tour of things you could tear down,’ she said, pulling her hand away. She could see Becky giving Ditsy a knowing look across the table, and she wondered what part she’d played in their discussion even before she arrived at StarFish. ‘Why are we getting a sneak preview of the plans, anyway?’

Tony sat back. ‘Well, it’s always nice to have people on our side, going into town meetings.’

I will never be on your side. Any side with Becky on it was a bad thing to start with. And a side that wanted to tear down her cinema and turn her town into a mini Las Vegas? That was one she was going to have to fight. One way or another.

‘But I invited you to lunch,’ Tony said, his voice brighter and louder. ‘Charlie, do you have some sort of tasting platter? I’d hate to make myself a liar so early in our friendship.’

Charlie nodded and got to his feet, but when Mia looked up, his eyes were on her. She gave him a small smile, and he said, ‘I’m sure I can come up with something,’ and disappeared into the kitchen.

How was he coping with this? Mia wanted to follow him into the kitchen and ask. Find out if he was as horrified by all this as she was. Or if he was just so pleased to have Becky back he didn’t care what happened to the town... No. She wasn’t back for Charlie anyway, was she?

Mia’s stomach sank at the thought. As if the casino wasn’t bad enough on its own. What if Becky was here for Charlie? What would he do then? Move back to London with her once Aberarian was a thriving Welsh Atlantic City, and he could sell StarFish for a profit at last?

It didn’t bear thinking about. Only Becky Thrower could steal both Mia’s hometown and her best friend in one fell swoop.

‘So, Ditsy.’ Tony’s charming smile was in full evidence again. ‘You’ve lived here all your life, Becky tells me. Why don’t you tell me about how it used to be?’ Which was a sure fire way to set Ditsy talking for days.

Mia tuned out until the kitchen doors opened and Charlie came out, laden with several platters of food, which he proceeded to place in the centre of their table. Mia tried to catch his eye again, hoping now the others were distracted by food they might be able to slope off and discuss the situation in private – not just the Coliseum, but how he was coping with having his ex in town, and whether he’d put anything dangerous in her food.

But Becky had him cornered, making him describe each of the antipasti dishes he’d provided. Mia wondered if this was the food she was supposed to have been taste-testing later. Wondered if Charlie might now have better things to do with his Saturday night.

With the others gushing about the food, Ditsy leaned over to Mia and asked in a whisper, ‘Have you opened your damn letter yet? Only I had Heather Jenkins in the shop the moment you left, asking, and with Reverend Davies right behind her. And don’t think for a moment they’ll be the last.’

‘The letter from Mia’s father?’ Becky broke in, apparently paying more attention than they’d thought. Her voice oozed false sympathy. ‘I heard you talking about that. Poor you, Mia.’ She reached

out and put a hand across Mia's, and Mia almost expected the skin to sizzle. 'It must be so hard. I assume he's never been back to Aberarian since he left? I mean, how could he?'

Mia reached out to help herself to a chilli-stuffed olive. 'No,' she said, keeping a tight rein on her anger. 'He's not been home.'

Becky shook her head and turned to whisper to Tony in a perfectly audible manner. 'It was such a scandal. The whole town spoke of nothing else for months, did they, Ditsy?'

Ditsy winced and stuffed her mouth with bread. Even Tony was looking slightly awkward.

'Well, I'm sure Mia doesn't want to rehash old history,' he said in a cheerful tone. 'These herrings are really rather good,' he added, but Mia could tell Charlie wasn't listening. He was focused entirely on Becky.

'Oh, Mia doesn't mind, do you Mia?' Becky laughed. 'After all, it's been fourteen years now. And it's certainly not anything she hasn't heard before!'

'Becky.' Charlie's voice was sharp as he broke in. 'Stop it.'

Mia felt a warmth in her bones, watching Becky's face turn hard just for a moment. Then she smiled again, the same, sweet, false smile Mia still sometimes had nightmares about. 'Of course. Now, Charlie, why don't we let these people get on with their day while you show me around the kitchen? I have missed this place so.' She was already on her feet by the time she finished talking.

Charlie looked faintly horrified at the prospect, but he followed her all the same. Mia gave him a sympathetic look as he passed. It didn't seem to help much.

* * * *

Becky pushed her way through the kitchen doors, auburn hair floating behind her, and Charlie followed in a trail of her familiar perfume, wondering why, every time he thought his life was settled, Becky Thrower showed up and mixed him up again. He was up to three times now, and starting to have the most horrible feeling this might be the time to break him.

The first time, he'd been young and stupid, and she'd been young and beautiful. They'd moved in together within three months, even though Charlie still didn't know what she'd seen in him.

The second time, he'd thought it was over for good when she ran out after he proposed. She'd been staying with her mother for a fortnight when she'd shown up and declared they should get married, move to Aberarian and start a seafood restaurant together. And her enthusiasm, her energy, had bowled him over again.

And now, two years after she'd walked out on their dream life – leaving nothing but a note saying she just wasn't ready – she was back again, wearing a classic grey suit and bright red high heels, looking every inch the professional woman come to talk business. Or stomp on his heart. It was hard to tell with Becky.

'So,' he said, letting the door swing shut behind him. 'You remember the kitchen.'

Becky stood next the preparation space, much closer to the kitchen knives than he was really comfortable with, and leaned against his beautiful stainless steel counters. 'Okay, let's get straight to it. Where are the customers, Charlie?'

'It's halfway between lunch and dinner, Bex.' Charlie was instantly annoyed with himself for using the nickname, but more irritated by her questions. 'Not the most popular time for dining.' Of course, it hadn't been so late when she'd come in, but if Charlie was very lucky she wouldn't remember that.

'Perhaps. But your reservations book looks pretty empty too.'

'You shouldn't be looking at that.' *And why would you care?* he wanted to ask. But mostly, he wanted her to leave him alone to figure out if he was angrier she'd left or that she'd returned. And what it was she wanted from him now.

'Look.' Becky leaned towards him, one hand open and reaching for him. 'I'm honestly trying to help here. A casino would bring in a lot of business to this town. A lot of people looking for

somewhere to take their wives out for a celebratory dinner after they beat the house. More tourists, more holiday-makers...'

'Yeah. Give us more cottages turned into holiday homes left empty nine months of the year? How's that going to help those of us who want to live here, and maybe take in a movie now and then?'

Becky slid her hand along the worktop, as if she were marking it as hers. 'Well what do you suggest then? More locals who can't afford to eat here? Who'll go to the Tesco in Coed-y-Capel instead?'

Charlie yanked the fridge door open. He needed to cook something. 'I'm not saying we don't need tourists. I just think we need something for locals too. You can't run roughshod over the community and expect any grand plans to work. You need to work with them.'

'Of course we do,' Becky said, placing a soothing hand on his arm. 'Which is why I need your help. After all, you've rather become part of the community while I've been gone, haven't you?'

Charlie shrugged. 'Not really.' He went to the pub every now and again with Joe, and hung out with Mia, but beyond that? He wasn't even sure anyone else in town knew his full name. Aberarian was Becky's hometown. She was supposed to be the restaurant's link to the community. He was just the chef.

'So you'll help, won't you?' Becky said, ignoring him completely. 'That's wonderful. I know we need to talk about us too, and I want to, really. But let's save us for later.' She looked pointedly at the kitchen doors. Magda was hovering in the doorway, eavesdropping again. He wondered how long she'd been there. 'When we've a little more privacy.'

Magda, he noticed, was still looking far too amused for her own good.

'But Charlie,' Becky said, reaching the doorway, a note of warning in her voice. 'Don't forget. I'm still a stakeholder here. And we still need to talk about your plans to increase profits.'

Suddenly it was too cold to be standing by the open fridge. Charlie slammed the door shut with a satisfying crash and turned to Magda. 'They finished eating?' She nodded. 'Good. Let's get rid of them, then shut up shop until this evening. I really need a drink.'

* * * *

Mia dropped her pen to the table and let it clatter and roll from there to the floor. 'How did I not know things were this bad?'

Ditsy shrugged. 'Because I didn't tell you. It is still my shop, after all, for all that you do most of the actual work.'

'Yeah, well, from now on I'm being more involved in the financial side too.'

Ditsy slammed the accounting book shut and rubbed a hand across her forehead. 'I need a drink.'

'We're not surrendering to alcoholism just yet.' Mia turned the book round to face her and flipped it open again. The numbers didn't look any better the right way up. 'There must be something else we can do. Surely we don't have to go to Becky and Tony, cap in hand, just yet?'

Ditsy looked uncertain. 'I'm not saying I like the idea, but...'

'Ditsy!' Mia tilted her chair on two legs in disgust. 'You can't possibly...'

'I said I don't like the idea.' Ditsy spoke over Mia until she shut up. 'I don't. I don't like the idea of flashing lights and late-night brawls and stag parties coming in to gamble nonstop for the weekend. I don't like relying on the rich tourists who can afford to buy homes they hardly visit. I don't like the fact this town has more houses standing empty in the winter than occupied. And yes, I much preferred it when we could provide batteries and flour and buckets and spades for young families staying at the B&Bs or the caravan park or the cottages that rent all year round. But things are changing in Aberarian.'

'Well perhaps they shouldn't.' Mia knew she sounded sulky. She just didn't really care.

Ditsy sighed. 'We need to do what we can to keep the A to Z shop going. Otherwise there's just going to be another empty shop front on High Street, and how is that going to help anyone?'

‘I suppose.’ Mia turned back to the book, figuring if she stared at it long enough, it might change the numbers round just to keep things interesting.

Ditsy slammed the cover shut on Mia’s fingers, though, which put paid to that idea. ‘Look. Becky said they’ve already got Mayor Fielding to hold a town meeting the day after tomorrow. I guess they want to be able to tell their investors the town’s on side before they shell out for the cinema.’

‘So we’ve just got to come up with a way to convince the town it’s a bad idea.’ Mia thought for a moment, then sighed. ‘Except then Becky will tell them it’s going to make them rich, and they’ll flock to her again.’

‘What about Walt Hamilton?’ Ditsy asked. ‘Could we convince him not to sell?’

Mia shrugged. ‘We could try. But Walt loves his cinema. If he’s considering selling, it’s because he has to.’ The thought of it tugged at her heart. Poor Walt. Susan had poured all her love and attention into their only son and, pushed to the side-lines, Walt had taken over the Coliseum as his own place. It hadn’t been long before restoring and running the place had become more of a vocation than a hobby.

Dan had never really understood his father’s obsession with the place. However much the rest of the town thought he was the best thing since the vicar’s wife’s lemon cake, Mia should have known right then it would never work out between them.

‘I bet bloody Susan is just thrilled,’ Ditsy grumbled. ‘She always hated Walt spending all his time there.’ Then she brightened. ‘But the rest of the town, they won’t want to lose it. Maybe we could all club together, or something...’

Mia raised an eyebrow. ‘You really think anyone in this town would give money to help someone else?’ For starters, nobody had any, any more.

The look Ditsy gave her was almost disappointed. ‘At some point, dear, you’re going to have to start having a little faith. Some trust in other people.’

‘I have faith,’ Mia said, surprised. ‘I trust people.’

Ditsy looked disbelieving. ‘Really? Who?’

‘Well, you.’ Mia thought for a moment. ‘And Charlie, I suppose.’

‘Exactly!’ Shaking her head, Ditsy said, ‘You always complain the people in this town don’t trust you, that they won’t move past what your father did, or you dumping the town golden boy and breaking his heart. But the truth is, it’s you who won’t move on. You don’t trust *them*. You don’t want to have to rely on anyone, don’t want to let them let you down. Not even Charlie. And I understand why, Mia, really I do. But at some point...’

She trailed off and was silent for a long moment. Then she said, ‘Be honest. Which bothers you more – the fact that Becky’s here to try to change Aberarian or the possibility that she’s come back for Charlie?’

Mia shuddered. ‘They’re both pretty horrendous.’

‘Seriously, Mia.’ Ditsy gave her a stern look. ‘Which upsets you more?’

‘The first, of course.’ Mia ignored the small, squirming feeling in her stomach suggesting otherwise. ‘I mean, I think it would be a disaster if Charlie got together with her again, but it’s his life. His mistake to make.’

Ditsy looked at her for so long Mia was almost afraid she was going to reach in and pluck the truth from her head. Then, finally glancing away, she said, ‘Did I ever tell you why Henry and I called this place the A to Z shop? Why we set it up the way we did?’

Now Mia was intrigued and more than a little relieved at the change of subject. ‘No. Never.’ The A to Z shop had always been a fact of Aberarian life. Like jellyfish on the beach at low tide, and Ditsy’s floral dresses. ‘I just assumed it was after A to Z Jones.’

Before Mia could stop her, Ditsy had clambered up to stand on top of her stool and was reaching above her head to the shelf running along the length of the wall, just below the ceiling. ‘Ditsy! What are you... Let me do that...’

But by then Ditsy had climbed down again, clutching a dusty hardback book to her bony chest. ‘When we got married,’ she explained, settling onto her stool, ‘Henry’s great aunt gave us this book.’ She pushed it across the counter, enabling Mia to read the title – *An A to Z of Love*.

‘It was a bit of a joke, really,’ Ditsy went on, ‘or at least, we treated it as such. We used to read out entries to each other in bed at night, before we went to sleep. Even if we’d had the most awful day or if we were fighting, one of us would pick up the book, choose a letter and we’d soon be laughing again.’ Mia flicked through the pages, smiling at the decorated letters at the start of every chapter. ‘It’s not overstating things to say this book saved our marriage, more than once.

‘When we decided to open this place, Henry insisted it should be called the A to Z shop. He said the entirety of human existence and need could be fitted into an alphabet. He said people liked knowing where they stood and where things would have to be. The order of the alphabet was comforting.’

‘And he was right,’ Mia murmured. After all, the shop was still going, just, thirty years later. They had to be doing something right.

Ditsy nodded. ‘He was.’ Then, as Mia pushed the book back towards her, she shook her head, giving Mia another glimpse of her wicked smile. ‘You take it. An apology for sending you out with that horrible man. Besides, I think your need is greater.’

Chapter Four

Charlie stared at the collection of ingredients in front of him and tried to remember what he’d planned to do with them before Becky had shown up in town and turned his week upside down.

He wasn’t even sure if Mia would come back for the tasting after the lunch from hell. But on the off chance she did, he was going to have her favourite food ready for her. She deserved it after the afternoon she’d had.

Besides, tastings with Mia, late in the evening when the rest of StarFish was empty, then a midnight movie at the Coliseum, those were the best parts of his week. He wasn’t going to let Becky ruin it for him.

In fact, he wasn’t going to let Becky ruin *anything* for him. Despite all her talk about the casino, and business, he couldn’t shake the feeling that she had other motives for coming home to Aberarian. Which meant he had to be on his guard, just in case any of those motives involved his restaurant, or his best friend. Or himself.

‘I have a question,’ Magda said, leaning on the counter beside him, and Charlie wondered when she’d come in and how he hadn’t heard the doors.

‘Go on,’ he said, pretending to be preternaturally aware of his surroundings and not just startled.

‘Can you manage without me for the evening on Tuesday? I can get Jenny in to cover for me. She says she could use the work, to be honest.’ Magda’s friend Jenny had regularly saved Charlie from disaster when he needed an extra pair of serving hands at the last moment. If he had the money, he’d put her on salary.

‘Unless a bus of seafood convention delegates breaks down on the Esplanade, I think we’ll probably be okay with Jenny.’ Charlie gave up the pretence and pushed his chopping board away from him. ‘Why? Whatcha doing?’

‘I’ve got a date with Kevin.’ Magda started cleaning up around him in a way he assumed was instinctual. Charlie only knew that, if he couldn’t find something he was still using, it was probably in the dishwasher already. ‘I’ll be here for the lunches, anyway, so it’s only the evening.’

‘That’s fine,’ Charlie said, before thinking it through. ‘Hang on, won’t Kevin need to ask me for time off too?’ He wondered where he’d been when this dating thing happened. There were only three of them in the restaurant, most days. He’d have thought he’d have noticed.

‘No.’ Magda drew the word out, as if to remind him he was rather slow. ‘Because Kevin already has Tuesday off. It’s on the rota. You said it was pointless him coming in, because there were no bookings, and you could manage the kitchen yourself for any walk-ins.’

Joe stuck his head around the door. 'You two do realise that, if you're both in here, there's nobody up front?'

Charlie stepped away from the counter and let Magda in to finish wiping down the surface. 'That's right, Joe. But since there are now more people in this kitchen than make it into the restaurant most days, I'm not too concerned.'

'Things going well, huh?'

Charlie shrugged. 'Meh. So, what's up?'

'That's what I wanted to ask you.' Joe boosted himself up to sit on Charlie's expensive, sanitised surfaces, and just smiled at Magda's glare. 'All day I've had people in – buying next to nothing, I might add – asking if I've heard about Mia's dad and saying Becky's back in town. Now, obviously, I've been telling them that if the she-devil was in town, my good friend Charlie would have told me immediately. Same if there was any news on Mia's dad...'

'Yeah, um, mate...' Charlie trailed off with an apologetic wince.

Joe waved a hand. 'Joking, Charles. No, I just figured if I got the gossip, I might get a few more people in, and some of them might actually buy something in appreciation.'

'Okay, then you can confirm Becky is, indeed, in town.'

'Unfortunately,' Magda put in. Charlie gave her a look. 'What, would you have preferred "for her own nefarious means"?''

Charlie was beginning to regret filling Magda in on his history with Becky over a stiff drink after their lunch guests left.

Joe looked intrigued, but Charlie moved on. 'Mia...' He shrugged. 'Who knows. She got a letter from her dad this morning. Far as anyone knows, she hasn't opened it.'

'That's all *anyone* knows?' Joe sounded sceptical.

'Yup.' He glanced over at Magda. 'On that subject, anyway. Did you hear about Magda's date, though?'

Joe raised his eyebrows. 'A date?'

Magda turned her glare on Charlie, but he carried on anyway. 'With Kevin, on Tuesday night.' Magda rolled her eyes. 'She doesn't seem very excited about it, mind.'

'Kevin? Really?' Charlie assumed Joe was trying to give the impression that Magda was dating beneath her, but somehow managed to hit the "are you crazy?" note instead.

Magda settled against the counter, hands resting on the stainless steel behind her. 'I am going to tell you boys something about love,' she said, in the tone Charlie had come to recognise as her "trust me on this, I'm smarter than you" voice.

'With love,' Magda said, her voice settling into a rhythm that made her accent all the stronger, 'you do not settle. With love, you do not hide. With love, you must search everywhere, hunt and seek and keep your eyes open always. With love, you cannot make assumptions. You have to trust that the right person will find you, eventually, if you are willing to be found.'

'So dating Kevin,' Joe said, frowning. 'That's you not making assumptions, right?'

'It's me still searching,' Magda corrected.

But Charlie wasn't really listening. Instead, he was thinking about Becky. Maybe Magda was right. He shouldn't make assumptions. Maybe Becky's reasons for coming home were entirely business related. Or maybe she'd just finally decided it was time for her to come home. Either way, it didn't have to involve him, if he didn't want it to.

Maybe she'd even want to take over StarFish, let him head home to London.

Charlie frowned. Except the appeal of that idea was fading rapidly.

Joe didn't look convinced by Magda's argument. 'Tell you what, mate. While Cupid's young dream is off having romantic notions that night, how about you and me hit the pub after you close up?'

If he got any customers. Chances were, StarFish would be closed before ten. 'Sounds like a plan.'

‘Good,’ Joe said with a grin. ‘Then you can fill me in on the two women in your life, and whether they’ve had a cat fight over you yet. Wouldn’t want to miss that.’

‘Good night, Joe,’ Charlie said meaningfully. The last thing he needed was the whole of Aberarian taking bets on him and Becky getting back together. He knew for a fact Joe was already running a book on him and Mia. Who needed a bloody casino?

Joe jumped down from the counter and held open the doors to the restaurant. ‘Ah, the path of truth love and all that nonsense. I guess it can’t be hearts and flowers in Aberarian all the time.’

Charlie led Joe through the carefully laid wooden tables to the front desk. He really wasn’t in the mood to have this conversation again.

‘This is the point where you pretend not to know what he means,’ Magda prompted helpfully.

‘He knows,’ Joe said, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the reception desk. ‘I’ll just pretend he asked.’

‘Can I just pretend you answered?’ Charlie asked.

‘No.’ Joe grinned at Magda, then turned back to Charlie and went into his usual speech. ‘Why, I mean Becky and Mia of course! Personally my vote’s on Mia. Everybody knows it’s only a matter of time. You two were made for each other!’

‘I hate you,’ Charlie said, without any real feeling. His attention had already been drawn away to the beautiful auburn-haired woman on the other side of the street.

Magda saw Becky too, because she pointed and said, ‘I know somebody who doesn’t seem to know it yet.’

Charlie ignored her, and Joe’s resulting chuckle. Because watching Becky, he could see in her walk the way she moved with him, the way she loved. But it didn’t matter any more. He looked at her, and saw his past. When he looked at Mia... he hoped he saw his future.

Maybe Magda was right after all. Maybe he had to be open to love and let it find him again.

And if his head was telling him that was stupid, well, maybe it was time for him to listen to his heart for a change. If only he could persuade Mia to take the risk.

* * * *

The Grand Hotel was just how Becky had left it two years ago – old-fashioned, shabby, and smelling of over-brewed tea. *Not exactly the Savoy.*

Apart from anything else, she was still lugging her own bags across the lobby.

While Tony flirted with the world’s most unhelpful receptionist, Becky inspected the rack of local attractions leaflets, noting half of them were over a hundred miles away, and the others weren’t particularly attractive. A craft community in the old mill in Felinfach, a dance club for pensioners in some inn outside Coed-y-Capel. Nothing to exactly set the pulse racing. *God, this community really needs me.*

She looked up, waiting for Tony to finish chatting up the girl behind the desk, wishing she didn’t care so much that he felt it necessary to smile at anything in a skirt. She knew it was just the way he was – and if she called him on it, he’d just shrug and tell her he believed the world needed more friendliness. Or that a little charm reaped big rewards. Whatever today’s excuse, Becky was pretty sure he just liked the attention.

Not that it should make any difference to her. She’d known, from that first night when he gave her that questioning smile over what was supposed to be a business dinner, that Tony wasn’t the sort of guy you looked to for the long haul. He liked the chase, liked the fun, adored a challenge. But when it came to settling down and growing up, Tony would be on the fastest train out of town.

Just like she’d been, two years ago, when it came down to it.

No. Tony was many things; fun, handsome, charming, a genius in bed and at the office... but he couldn’t be her future. And she needed to make very sure she remembered that.

Up in her single-masquerading-as-a-double room, Becky settled on the lumpy mattress and dust-ridden coverlet and watched Tony pull out his mobile phone and check his messages. She knew

from past experience Tony would treat her room as his own. The man had no sense of personal boundaries.

Eventually, he hung up on his answering machine, and Becky sprawled back a little on the bed, resting on her elbows and crossing her legs, waiting for him to notice. Just because he wasn't long term material, didn't mean she had to give up the fringe benefits of her job just yet, right?

But instead of paying attention to her pose, he moved to the window and looked out over bloody Aberarian.

'You know, Bex, I've been thinking.' He drummed his fingers on the windowsill. 'Places like this are very insular. Very cliquy. You have to win over the influential people.'

'You think Ditsy was the wrong place to start?' Becky refrained from reminding him he'd been the one to say, 'Let's start with your aunt. Better the devil we know.'

Tony shrugged. 'I'm just not sure how much say she or Mia or Charlie, for that matter, have in what goes on here.'

Becky sat up. No point being seductive if he wasn't even looking. 'I think you're wrong about Charlie. Yes, the A to Z shop is an anachronism, but StarFish is a modern business. Just the sort of thing we want to encourage.' She ignored the small part of her that said she just wanted an excuse to spend more time at StarFish – with Charlie – under the guise of work. Of course, StarFish was her business, wasn't it? She could spend as much time there as she wanted...

'I suppose it might be worth hanging onto Charlie.' Tony turned back from the window, and Becky tried to regain her previous pose without looking too obvious. 'He needs us – or rather his restaurant does. I got the impression your aunt would rather let the shop decline into cobwebs. But Charlie... He's young. He's got to be ambitious.'

Not really, Becky wanted to say, but didn't. The limit of Charlie's ambition was probably the restaurant. He might be willing to fight for StarFish.

Might still be willing to fight for her, she hoped. Because she planned to fight for him.

'I want to do more here, Bex.' Tony came to sit beside her on the bed and stared at her with hard eyes, as if she were the one trying to stop him. 'I want more than convincing people it's not the end of the world if they have a casino on some side street. I want the heart and the soul of this town. I want this place to become a tourist Mecca, without the bleeding hearts and the environmentalists telling me I've ruined their town.' He put a hand across her knee. 'For once, I want these people to be grateful. I want them to bloody well *thank me* for saving their silly little town from extinction.'

He was so compelling when he was like this. He drew her in until she believed in his vision utterly. It was kind of scary.

Tony trailed his fingers across her thigh, and Becky swallowed. 'That's what I want too. How do you plan to do it?'

'We need the heart of the community. And thank God that's not the church any more – they're never in favour of progress.' His touch reached the bottom of her skirt and kept moving up. 'No, these days it's the shops and the restaurants. The consumerist centre. They're the people who'll win big under our plans. People like Charlie Frost and his restaurant. You think anybody here appreciates food like that?' Becky was finding it harder to think as Tony's hands roamed higher. Harder to remember why she'd wanted to come back to Aberarian, except to make his dreams come true.

'So, you do still want me to get Charlie on board?' Becky asked. Tony nodded and placed a kiss to her neck. 'Any instructions on how I go about that?' She gulped as Tony's fingers brushed her knickers. It was just as well she'd be breaking things off with him once she had Charlie back. Tony had far too much power over her like this. She wanted to make him *proud*, for heaven's sake.

'Whatever works,' Tony mumbled against her breast, and Becky thought she had some ideas. Really, Tony had taught her so much.

* * * *

Later that evening, Mia found herself pausing outside StarFish again, wondering if Charlie was even expecting her for the tasting, after the lunch from hell. Wondering if she should be there at all.

She peered through the window, trying to make out exactly who was inside. It was gone nine-thirty, already late enough usually to be confident the few local diners who might have stopped in had finished their meals and headed home. Mia could see one couple near the door putting on their coats. She smiled; any customers at all tended to put Charlie in a better mood. Still, given it was a Saturday night, she hoped he'd had more than one table filled.

Beyond the couple, she could see Magda at the till. The kitchen doors were closed, and the remaining restaurant looked empty. In other words, no Becky, unless she was haranguing Charlie in the kitchen. Deciding to take her chances, Mia held the door open for the exiting couple and made her way inside.

Magda smiled at her from behind the bar. 'Good,' she said, slamming the till drawer closed. 'He was worried you wouldn't come after this afternoon.'

'And miss out on the potential for breaded prawns?' Mia shrugged off her coat, draping it over the coat rack by the door. 'Not a chance.'

Shaking her head, Magda said, 'I don't know how you two can call it a tasting when Charlie just keeps making your favourite dishes. They're not even on the menu.'

'We have a deal,' Mia explained. 'For every new and suspicious dish he wants me to try, he has to make me one he knows I love.'

Magda didn't look convinced, so Mia decided to change the subject. 'Many people in tonight?' 'More than had booked, which is something.'

Mia nodded. They'd all pretty much take what they could get, the way business was at the moment.

The kitchen doors opened and Charlie appeared, a plate of tempura and breaded prawns with chilli sauce and garlic mayonnaise already in his hands.

'I thought I heard you,' he said with a smile. Obviously Becky's visit hadn't been too traumatic for him. He turned to Magda, adding, 'You can take off now, if you want. I can't imagine anyone else is going to come in tonight.'

Magda gave Charlie a grateful smile, and Mia realised she already had her coat and bag in her hand. No one knew better than Magda the likelihood of more customers.

When she was gone, Charlie led Mia over to their table at the rear of the restaurant, and Mia sank gratefully into her chair. She loved their table. It was close to the fire in winter, and far away from the windows and prying eyes all year round.

Charlie put the plate of prawns in the centre of the table, along with a couple of napkins, then disappeared over to the bar. When he returned, he brought with him a bottle of white wine and two very large glasses. Mia smiled in appreciation as he filled hers.

'Quite the day,' Mia said, lifting the glass to her lips.

Charlie slumped down in the chair beside her. 'I'm sorry.'

'For dating a crazy woman?' Mia picked up the plumpiest prawn on the plate. She deserved it.

'I didn't know she was coming back,' he said.

'Or else you would have warned me to run for the hills.' Mia bit off the tail of her prawn, dipped it in garlic mayonnaise, chewed and swallowed. 'Fair enough.'

'I just... ' Charlie shook his head and reached for his glass. 'I can't believe she's here.'

Which, Mia reflected, could be taken one of two ways. One, he was horrified at her arrival and even more disgusted by the way she'd spoken to his best friend, and was looking for ways to run her out of town. Two, he was just amazed at the second chance he'd been given at love.

Call her a coward, but Mia wasn't sure she wanted to know which it was.

Charlie shifted in his chair, turning his body to face her, wineglass dangling between his strong hands. Watching them in the candlelight, Mia could see hints of the scars and burns she supposed were inevitable in his profession.

‘But never mind about my absurd day,’ he said, and Mia shifted her attention from his hands to his chocolate brown eyes. ‘What about this letter from your dad?’

Mia looked away. She hadn’t forgotten about the letter – she could almost feel it pulsing away in the bottom of her bag. But she’d tried to push it aside, out of her mind. It was a lot easier to concentrate on the evil of Becky Thrower than the disappointment of her father.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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