

Summer at the Cornish Cafe

'Warm, funny and
feel-good'

Katie Fforde



PHILLIPA ASHLEY

Phillipa Ashley

**Summer at the Cornish Cafe: The
perfect summer romance for 2018**

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One summer can change everything . . . Recommended for readers who loved Summer at Shell Cottage, The Cornish House, Tremarnock and Poldark. "Warm and funny and feel-good. The best sort of holiday read." Katie Fforde "Filled with warm and likeable characters. Great fun!" Jill Mansell Demi doesn't expect her summer in Cornwall to hold anything out of the ordinary. As a waitress, working all hours to make ends meet, washing dishes and serving ice creams seems to be as exciting as the holiday season is about to get. That's until she meets Cal Penwith. An outsider, like herself, Cal is persuaded to let Demi help him renovate his holiday resort, Kilhallon Park. Set above an idyllic Cornish cove, the once popular destination for tourists has now gone to rack and ruin. During the course of the Cornish summer, Demi makes new friends – and foes – as she helps the dashing and often infuriating Cal in his quest. Working side by side, the pair grow close, but Cal has complications in his past which make Demi wonder if he could ever truly be interested in her. Demi realises that she has finally found a place she can call home. But as the summer draws to a close, and Demi's own reputation as an up and coming café owner starts to spread, she is faced with a tough decision . . . A gorgeous story exploring new beginnings, new love and new opportunities, set against the stunning background of the Cornish coast. Phillipa Ashley has written a feisty, compelling heroine who leaps off the page and encourages you to live your summer to the full. Recommended for readers who loved Summer at Shell Cottage, The Cornish House, Tremarnock and Poldark.

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For Rowena Kincaid,

One of a kind

Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.

Harriet Beecher Stowe

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PROLOGUE

'Good morning, good people of Kernow! This is your favourite local DJ, Greg Stennack, coming to you live and kicking from The Breakfast Show on Radio St Trenyan. So wakey wakey all you lazy folk still snoring under your duvets! The sun's shining, the surf's up and it's a fabulous start to the Easter weekend. Whether you're a local or a visitor to our bee-yoo-tiful corner of West Cornwall, remember to stay tuned to the county's brightest and best independent radio station for the coolest sounds, the hottest news and the tastiest commercials from our station sponsors: Hayleigh's Pasty Shack. Now, let's kick off the show with 'Happy' by Pharrell. Take it away, Pha—'

After emerging from a nightmare in which a giant pasty was attacking me, I find the 'off' button on the radio alarm and cut Greg off in his prime. It's actually a shame to cut off Pharrell too, but I need to get up, have a shower and get ready for work. I can already hear my boss, Sheila, singing along to the radio in the kitchen of the cafe, two floors below my attic room, even though it's only six a.m.

Did I say *six*? With a groan, I pull the duvet over my head again but a wet nose nudges its way under the bottom edge and a warm tongue licks my big toe. It's not only Greg who wants me to wakey wakey.

'OK, boy. I hadn't forgotten about you,' I mumble through the cover.

My dog, Mitch, clearly doesn't believe me and I let out an 'oof' as four paws land on the middle of my stomach.

I throw off the duvet to find a hairy muzzle in my face and a waft of early-morning doggy breath in my nostrils.

'Eww, Mitch. What did you eat last night? OK. OK. I am getting up!'

After gently pushing Mitch off me, I drag myself out of bed, and cross to the skylight in the roof of the attic. Standing on tiptoes, I tug back the blue gingham curtain, push the skylight open a crack and peep outside. My eyes blink at the dazzling brightness. Although it's still early, the sky above the little seaside village of St Trenyan is already postcard blue and I can almost taste the salt on the air. A tractor chugs up and down the beach opposite the cafe where I started work a few weeks ago, raking the sand ready for the deckchairs to be laid out.

The masts of boats bob up and down in the harbour at the far side of the beach. A few people are already up, jogging along the flat sand or flinging balls into the sea for their dogs. As the breeze carries the rattle of the tractor and snatches of distant barks through the window, Mitch yips excitedly. I take a deep gulp of the air and close the window. It's Easter: the turn of the tide, a fresh day and the start of a new summer.

I wonder what this one will bring.

CHAPTER ONE

You can always spot the customers who are going to be trouble, no matter how hard you try to please them, but as I grab my notebook ready to take his order, I know that the man at table sixteen won't be one of them.

Crammed in a corner under the kitchen extractor fan, that table has a wonky leg and most people only take it as a last resort, but I saw the guy head straight for it, even though there were other seats with better views at the time.

Sheila's Beach Hut has the best spot of any cafe in St Trenyan, but he might as well be back in some trendy London espresso bar. He pores over an article in *The Times*, oblivious to the clotted-cream sand or the turquoise sea with its frilly wavelets or the holidaymakers, of all shapes, ages and sizes, sunbathing and playing cricket on the beach in front of the cafe. The water's too cold even for a paddle this early in the year, but there are some hardy surfers at the far end of the beach, catching the bigger breakers. The Surf School has pushed out its racks of wetsuits and yellow foam boards, and set up its sign, promising to teach anyone to ride a wave in a two-hour lesson. Like, yeah. I've lived in Cornwall all my life and I've never managed it so far.

I flip over my notebook, pen poised. 'Can I take your order, sir?'

'Hmm ...'

'May I get you something, sir?'

'Double espresso,' he mutters, without even glancing up from the article in the newspaper. It's in the features section and there's a picture of a glamorous blonde standing behind a camera on a film set. Perhaps he's not so highbrow after all?

'Anything else with that? Toastie? Cake? We also have some homemade blueberry muffins.'

'Just the coffee,' he growls and suddenly flips over the page to the book review section.

OK. Fine if you don't want one of the *delicious* muffins that I baked this morning, I think. 'Coming up, sir.'

'There's no need to call me sir,' he says, then adds a gruff, 'Thanks.'

I could tell him that he's nothing special and that I say the same to all the male customers, from twenty-five to ninety-five and anyway, I've seen his type before. Though I can't see his face properly, his arms and hands are deeply tanned, even after the winter. His khaki sweatshirt hangs off his lean body and his black beanie hat is pulled over his ears, though the sun is beating down. Typical surfing wannabe, probably on a gap yah from his job in the City. Probably flew straight to Cornwall from Bondi Beach or a French alpine resort. Probably has his skis and surf board in the boot of his 4x4 on the drive of his parents' holiday home in Rock. Not that I'm judgemental, much.

Feeling as hot as the pasties in my white shirt and black trousers, I weave my way onto the terrace. Every table, inside and out, is now taken, and people are even perched on the wall overlooking St Trenyan beach. As well as its fantastic views and Sheila's famous pasties, the Beach Hut has an easygoing atmosphere that makes it a popular spot for surfers, families and dog owners alike.

'Hey, you there!'

A customer barks at me from table twelve. She can only be in her twenties but has the air of an older, more harassed woman. Judging by the likeness, she's obviously with her father and a younger sister who looks as if she's in her late teens – a few years younger than me. Unlike beanie man, the older daughter definitely wants to be noticed. With her fitted black business suit, high heels and heavy make-up, she stands out like a sore thumb from the tourists. None of her party seem happy to be at the cafe, however. The father has a permanent scowl and the teenage daughter is a goth, so maybe she'd look miserable anyway.

The woman in the suit glances at her diamante watch and purses her lips.

‘Excuse me. Did you hear? We’ve been waiting for *hours*. When are you going to actually take *our* order?’

Actually, she’s only been here five minutes but I give her my shiniest smile. The customer is always right and I can’t afford to upset any of them because Mitch and I need this job more than you would ever believe.

‘I’m sorry about that, madam.’

‘You obviously haven’t planned your staffing levels accordingly.’

I could tell her the staff consists of me, Sheila, her niece (who turns up as long as there’s no decent surf) and Henry (who called in sick with an infected nipple ring this morning) but I don’t think it would help.

‘Apologies. I’ll pass on your feedback to the manager. Now, may I take your order, please, so we can get you served as soon as possible?’

‘We haven’t decided yet, have we?’ She throws out the challenge to her family. Her goth sister keeps her eyes fixed on her phone while their middle-aged father frowns at the menu and lets out a bored sigh. Fixing on a smile, I answer a long list of queries about the menu and wait for them to make up their minds.

Twenty minutes later, having delivered the beanie man’s espresso, served several other tables and taken a load of orders, Sheila shouts to me over the top of the serving counter in the kitchen. Her face is red as she slides steaming pasties and a slice of quiche onto three plates. ‘There you go. One steak, a cheese and bacon and a spinach and ricotta quiche for table twelve. You said they’re awkward customers, so I’ve given them extra garnish.’

‘Thanks, Sheila. I’m on it now.’

‘And can you clear some tables before you come back, please? It’s mayhem out there but we need to get as many customers as we can over the holiday weekend. I can’t believe the weather we’re having this early in the year. This is the warmest Easter I’ve ever known. If this is global warming, bring it on.’

‘No problem, boss.’

Sheila doesn’t stand for any nonsense but she’s very fair and while the money is only minimum wage, it comes with something far more important to me. She lets me and my beloved dog, Mitch, sleep in the tiny loft conversion above the cafe free of charge. Despite the long hours and the difficult customers, I’m beyond grateful to have a job and a warm place to stay after months of uncertainty, sleeping on couches, in hostels and occasionally even roughing it in the caves along the bay. I don’t mind admitting that it’s been a tough time but Sheila’s kindness had proved there were people willing to help in the world.

Blowing a strand of hair that’s escaped from its scrunchie out of my eyes, I dump my tray of dirty crockery beside the dishwasher. Sheila carefully heaps fresh salad and homemade coleslaw next to the pasty and the quiche. The spicy aromas waft under my nostrils and make my stomach rumble almost as loudly as the extractor fan, but there’s no time for us to eat yet.

‘Demi, wait!’ Sheila calls as I’m half in and half out of the door to the cafe.

‘What?’

‘Can you possibly do something about Mitch’s barking? I don’t mind him staying in the flat while you’re at work but some of the customers have been asking if he’s OK.’

My heart sinks but I nod. ‘I’ll try to get him to settle down in my break. I’m sorry but it’s new for him here and he misses me.’

‘I know but do your best,’ says Sheila with a brief smile. Then she’s gone, already preparing the next order.

From the flat above, Mitch whines again. I really hope I can settle him down but he gets so excited, with so many interesting canine smells and noises drifting up from the cafe. We already went

for a jog together on the beach before dawn and I'll take him for another walk when I eventually get my break.

Back on table twelve, the younger daughter of the family brightens a little as I smile at her and hand over the spinach quiche but her sister and father are stony faced as I serve them.

'Here's your lunch, madam, sir. I'm very sorry for the delay.'

'About time, too. I could have made the pasties myself.' Her tone is icy. Her eyebrows are also weird, so weird that it's hard not to stare.

Gritting my teeth, I offer them cutlery wrapped in serviettes. 'Once again, I apologise for the wait, madam, and I'll certainly pass on your feedback to the owner.'

'Make sure you do and you can also inform her we're not paying for my meal.'

'You tell her, Mawgan,' says the father to his older daughter, while the young goth sister glances down at the ground, embarrassed. I feel sorry for her.

'I'll have to ask the owner about your bill.' I feel faintly sick. I can't just give away Sheila's food. She's only the tenant at the cafe and her profit margins are wafer thin as it is.

'I don't care ... and what's this? Coleslaw? I specifically asked for *no* coleslaw.' Mawgan wrinkles her nose at the pasties.

'I'll have it removed immediately and bring a fresh plate, madam.'

Mawgan snatches the plate back. 'If you do that I'll be waiting until Christmas.'

'Whatever you wish, madam.'

Gritting my teeth, I take the tray, desperate to move on to new customers but dreading what Sheila will say about their refusal to pay the bill. It was my fault that the coleslaw ended up on the plate; I must have taken down the order wrong in the rush.

'Would you like anything else?' I ask in desperation. 'Condiments? A jug of water?'

'Some mayonnaise,' Mawgan grunts, leaving me wondering what the objection was to coleslaw anyway.

Wondering how I'll break the news to Sheila about the discount, I head for the condiments alcove at the side of the kitchen, and scoop some mayo from the catering jar in the fridge into an individual pot. Maybe Mawgan will change her mind when she tastes the homemade pasties that Sheila and I slaved over this morning? While I carefully place the pot on a tray, I can hear the odd yip from above but I have to harden my heart.

I reckon no one will hear Mitch anyway above the squawking of seagulls and head back outside. A large group of them has already gathered on the beach wall opposite the cafe, eyeing the lunchtime chips and pasties with their beady eyes and sharp beaks. They're a menace all over St Trenyan, but the tourists will keep feeding them. The gulls must think Sheila's is a drive thru.

Make that a *dive* thru. I'm almost at Mawgan's table with the bowl of mayo, when I spot three of the big birds circling low over a young family at the edge of the terrace. The mother is trying to manoeuvre a buggy with a baby down the steps to the beach while a little girl clambers down beside her. She can't be more than four and she has a bright pink ice-cream cone clutched in one hand. Her tongue sticks out in concentration as she negotiates the stone steps onto the sand. I'm in two minds whether to leave the mayo and give the mother a hand when there's a deafening screech.

Wings beating like pterodactyls, two large gulls launch a double-pronged attack on the little girl. The birds are probably only after the food, but they could do some serious damage by accident.

'Look out!'

Too late. The mother looks up from the bottom of the steps, there's a flapping of wings and screeching like nails over a blackboard. The toddler lets out a wail as the gulls attack her ice cream. Dashing forward to try and chase them off, my shin connects with someone's beach bag, I stagger forward and the pot of mayo flies through the air. It lands, smack onto the back of Mawgan's jacket, just as if I'd aimed right for it.

Ignoring Mawgan's shriek and my throbbing foot, I run over to the mum. The toddler stares at her empty hand which thankfully is still in one piece. Pink gloop trickles down her chubby arm, while the seagulls tear the cone to pieces on the sand.

'Are you all OK? Is the little one hurt?' I ask.

Her mum crouches down and hugs her. 'She's fine. You scared them off just in time. I was so busy with the buggy I hadn't realised what was happening.'

'I'm glad she's OK.'

'Thanks to you. Nasty things. Don't cry, Tasha! I'll get you another ice cream, darling.'

'You! Waitress! Have you seen my suit?'

'Sorry,' I mouth to the mum. 'Have to go.'

On the terrace, Mawgan holds up her jacket, her mouth set in a fuchsia line. It's spattered with mayo, just like a seagull pooped on it.

'I'm *so* sorry, madam, you can see it was an accident.'

She thrusts her jacket under my nose. Mayonnaise dribbles down it. Her gaze scythes through me. 'Maybe it was, but my suit's still ruined.'

'I – I'll pay for it to be cleaned,' I say, though every word kills me to say it and it will take most of my savings.

'*Cleaned?* It's ruined. This suit cost over three hundred pounds. I expect you to pay for a new one. You or your boss.'

The words leave my lips before I can stop them. 'Three hundred quid? You're kidding?'

She gasps. 'What did you say?'

The hipster lowers his *Times* and stares at us. His dark eyes glint in the sunlight. He frowns, seems about to speak but then raises the newspaper again. A woman nearby giggles nervously and faces look up from their lattes and pasties at the unexpected free entertainment.

'I ... didn't mean to be rude, madam.'

'Oh, really?' She lowers her voice so that only I and her family can hear her. 'You do know I can make sure you get the sack and never get another job in this town? I don't let anyone speak to me like that.'

I hesitate, anger bubbling up in me like the fizz in a bottle of pop. Then my cork blows. Just as quietly I say: 'Neither do I. *Madam.*'

I'm on the point of fetching Sheila when loud barks ring out from the side alley of the cafe. They sound exactly like Mitch's barks but he's supposed to be safe inside the flat. He *can't* have escaped, but seconds later a hairy ball of energy hurtles from the rear of the cafe and onto the terrace. Two Pugs and a Cockerpoo start yapping and before I can blink, Mitch leaps at me, barking joyfully. Mawgan's eyes flick from Mitch to the back door of the cafe and back at me.

'I take it that's your dog?' There's ice in her voice.

'Yes.'

'And it lives here?'

'Um. Not as such. He's just staying in the attic temporarily while I'm at work but he wasn't supposed to get out.'

'So, you live here too?'

My stomach swirls with unease but I don't want to let Mawgan see that she's rattled me and I'm getting annoyed now. The customer may be always right but she also has no right to interrogate me about my private life. 'Yes, but I really don't see what it has to do with you.'

She smirks. 'Rather a lot, actually. I own this building. Your boss is my tenant so she shouldn't be subletting the place, for a start, and there are no pets allowed, especially not a great big dirty thing like that one.'

'Mitch isn't dirty!'

Mitch glances up innocently then resumes his pursuit of a seagull. Squawks fill the air. My heart sinks to my boots. If I've got Sheila into bother I'll never forgive myself. Even as I think the words, I know I must already have got Sheila into deep trouble. Mawgan raises herself up. 'In fact, I'm going to see your boss right now.'

'Mawgan ...' the goth sister murmurs.

'Keep out of this, Andi!'

Andi caves in like a sunken sponge cake but their father beams proudly and folds his arms.

'OK,' I say. 'You do that, but no one treats me like this and if I'm going to lose my job, I may as well go out with a bang.' I reach for the nearest cold drink, which just happens to be an abandoned raspberry frappuccino and throw it over Mawgan's skirt.

Her jaw drops and then she shrieks. 'You little cow! You did that on purpose.'

'My daughter could sue you for assault,' says her father as Mitch skitters back to lick up the bright pink slush from the terrace. I glance over at the hipster but can't see him any more and despite my bravado, I'm shaking inside.

I rip off my apron. 'Be my guest. My legal team will be in touch.'

I glance around me defiantly and everyone turns their faces away. No one backs up Mawgan but somehow, I don't think this is going to help Sheila's Trip Advisor rating either. Oh shit, what the hell have I just done?

Pink slush drips from Mawgan's skirt onto her shiny stilettos and her voice is barely more than a hiss. 'You'll live to regret this.'

Trembling inwardly, I shrug. 'Actually, *madam*, I think I'll look back on it as one of my finest moments.'

CHAPTER TWO

I thought about the waitress all the way out of St Trenyan, knowing I probably should have said something – that I could have stuck up for her – although I'm not sure what good it would have done or if she'd have thanked me for it. My shining armour turned rusty a long time ago and I've stopped trying to solve everyone's woes. No good comes of crashing in on other people's lives, no matter how well intentioned.

Besides, she didn't seem to need my help. In fact, I really admired the way she stood up to the Cades ... unlike me. The real truth is I wasn't ready to face *them* or, at least, risk being plunged headlong into a confrontation with them.

They're a local family of businesspeople who are well known in St Trenyan and the surrounding area. Mawgan was at my school, albeit she was a couple of years below me. She'd joined the Cade family empire before I went away and it seems as if she's relishing her role at the helm. Her father, Clive Cade, is obviously proud of her although his younger daughter, Andi, doesn't look cut out to be a business mogul. You never know with people, however. Before I left St Trenyan for the Middle East, I wouldn't have thought Mawgan would become as spiteful and petty as she was towards the waitress.

Ignoring my aching knee, not to mention my nagging conscience, I stride out along the path which lurches its way over every tiny cove and sliver of beach. I've already had to change my route a few times where parts of the cliff have dropped into the sea. Judging by the rock falls on the beach, there must have been some almighty storms while I've been away.

At the top of one of the cliffs, I duck inside an old whitewashed huer's hut for a break from the sun. Tankers and a cruise ship are tiny specks on the horizon as they head out into the Atlantic and I can taste salt on my lips again so I know I'm almost home. I shrug the pack off my back and stretch my spine.

The desert boots I had to borrow are caked in Cornish mud now, although I still feel self-conscious in the combats and khaki T-shirt. On the upside, the beanie hat and beard meant that I wasn't recognised in St Trenyan. If I'd stepped into the row with the infamous Cades, they definitely would have.

Squashing down another pang of guilt, I shoulder my bag again. The path hugs the edge of the cliff, the worst of the climbs are over and I can see the black and white lighthouse on the headland in the far distance. The afternoon sun is mellowing, yet the sweat trickles down my spine. A few yards further on, I reach the milestone, which is just a lump of grey granite spattered with orange lichen. The words weathered away long before I was born but I know what it used to say, all the same.

One way lies Kilhallon Park, my home: the other leads to Bosinney House, my uncle's house – and possibly to Isla Channing. The report in *The Times* said she was scouting out the locations for a new drama series and that she'd won an award for her last production. I always knew in my heart that she'd make it big, that she was too good to stay in one small place; with the likes of me. Perhaps that's why I left in the first place, perhaps not – I've had too much time to reflect over the past few months.

On the other side of the valley, a group of ruined engine houses cling to the cliffs and on the moor the tower of the church looms above the trees. Some of them are almost bent double trying to escape the gales from the Atlantic.

For a second, I hesitate in the middle of the narrow path, wondering if I ought to go home to Kilhallon Park or to Bosinney House. Uncle Rory will know if Isla's back. Luke might even be around too as it's Good Friday. He's an old buddy of mine and he works as an advisor for my uncle's finance company, or rather he did when I last heard from him which was months ago now.

A young guy and his girlfriend shake their heads at me, eager to get past on the coast path which has become very narrow here due to a fresh growth of gorse.

'Thinking of moving, mate, or will you be here all day?' the guy says with a grunt.

‘Sorry.’ I press against the scratchy gorse and they squeeze past me, muttering something about ‘losers’.

A moment later, I’ve decided – and turning away from home, I head for Bosinney.

Oblivious to the trouble he’s caused at the cafe, Mitch trots after me along the cobbles of Fore Street. The houses and shops of St Trenyan tumble down the steep cobbled streets to the sea, their roofs and windows shimmering in the afternoon sun. A few marshmallow clouds float across the sapphire blue sky and whitecaps sparkle on the sea. Tourists ‘oh’ and ‘ah’ at the shops full of Easter eggs and gifts, hand-crafted chocolate and trendy china, and posh tea towels that cost as much as a morning’s wages. The tang of fish and chips and rich scent of coffee follow me along the street but I need to save every penny now, even more than before.

I was crimson with shame and fighting back tears as Sheila paid me the rest of the week’s wages which I know was more than I deserved. She was almost crying too which made me feel even worse, but she said there was no way she could keep me on. It turns out Mawgan Cade and her family *do* own the Beach Hut: they bought it when the previous owner, an old lady who’d lived in St Trenyan for eighty years, had to sell up and go into a nursing home. Mawgan hiked the rent up, which is why Sheila’s margins are now so thin.

‘Someone should do something about people like that!’ I said to Sheila, after Mawgan had left.

‘No one dares stand up to the Cades. They have their fingers in too many pies.’

Sheila offered to make excuses for me but I stopped her. In the end I knew the best thing for everyone was for me to leave the cafe as soon as possible before she was forced to sack me. But leaving my job also meant leaving the temporary shelter I’d found too.

‘Come on, boy,’ I say as Mitch sniffs around the bins by the harbourmaster’s office. I find a vacant bench with room for me and my worldly goods. The tourists tend to avoid the working end of the harbour: it’s too far from the souvenir shops and car parks and always smells of fish, but I need time to think. My stomach growls while Mitch curls up at my feet, full of pasty and sighing contentedly. At least he’s happy and, whatever happens, I’ll make sure he’s looked after. I’d let him go to a good home, rather than see him want for anything.

Rubbing my wet face with the back of my hand, I squeeze back the tears and think of happier times, hoping an idea will come. When I was a little girl, Mum used to take us for tea with my Nana Jones every Sunday afternoon. A proper Cornish tea with a brown pot under a woolly tea cosy, flowery china loaded with goodies you don’t see any more, figgy ‘obbin, spicy parkin, fairings, and ‘fly pastry’ with currants. She even made a stargazy pie once but I burst into tears when I saw the little fish peeping out of the crust so she never made it again.

Talking of fish, a few yards away from me, a boat has just landed its catch. The gulls circle overhead, fighting and screaming over scraps. The tang of fresh fish fills the air.

‘Maybe they’d take me on as crew?’ I tell Mitch, who drops his muzzle onto his paws. He looks as confident about the plan as I feel.

‘Well, if we’re not going to sea, we need to find a new job and somewhere to stay. Come on,’ I say as much for my benefit as his. Mitch’s ears perk up ready for a new adventure which cheers me up a little too. ‘We’ve done it before and we can do it again,’ I say with a new determination. ‘We’ll just have to make the best of things.’

CHAPTER THREE

By the time I reach Bosinney House, my knee aches like crazy and a young woman I don't recognise bars the doorway. The frilly white apron round her waist looks odd with the spray-on jeans and pink T-shirt.

'Can I help you, sir?' she asks, reminding me of the waitress, apart from the accent, which is definitely not Cornish but from a lot further east. Krakow? Bucharest? For some reason, she also looks scared of me. Maybe I should have had a shave.

Feeling guilty, I summon up a smile for her. 'Hi. Is Uncle Rory at home?'

'Uncle Rory? I do not know who you mean ...' She eyes me suspiciously and I don't blame her. What with the attitude, the borrowed combats and the beard, she must think I've come to tie up and terrorise the household.

'I mean my uncle, Mr Rory Penwith.'

She bites her lip nervously before replying. 'Mr Penwith is here but he has guests with him.'

I should have realised that from the row of vehicles parked outside: a Range Rover, an Audi, and a couple of Mercs. Then, it dawns on me that today must be his birthday.

'I can see that but I think he'll find room for one more. Tell him it's his nephew, Cal Penwith.'

She looks me up and down. 'You are family?'

'It may be hard to believe but I am. Can I come in? I won't steal the silver.'

She tightens her grip on the door frame. 'They are in the big glass room, having drinks.'

'The orangery?'

Finally, she nods and stands aside to let me in. 'Yes. I will take you.'

'There's no need. I know my way.'

Leaving my pack on the floorboards, I march past her, across the great hall and down the corridor that leads to the orangery, with the girl's heels click-clacking behind me. The great hall smells faintly of ashes and wood smoke as it does for three seasons of the year. That's the only part of Bosinney House that hasn't changed: the rest has been built on over the years. It's many times bigger than the house on Kilhallon Park and a hundred times grander. Uncle Rory inherited it from my granddad, who left Kilhallon Park to his younger son, my father. Dad never quite got over being treated as second best but I love Kilhallon, even in the state I left it when I went abroad. I'd never swap it for all Bosinney's grandeur.

The girl catches up with me. 'I will tell them you are here.'

I stop and turn. '*Don't* do that.'

Seeing the genuine fear in her eyes, I feel ashamed and soften my tone. 'I'd like to surprise them. *Please?*'

With another nod she scuttles off, muttering. 'I'll be in kitchen. I'll fetch more champagne.'

Champagne, eh? Uncle Rory's idea of extravagance used to be opening an extra bottle of Rattler ... maybe they do know I'm coming after all.

The sound of laughter and the pop of corks drift along the corridor. Are they expecting me? It's not possible or I'd have known about it by now and besides a handful of people, no one knows I'm back in Cornwall.

There's applause, a few gentle cheers. I didn't know Rory made a big thing of his birthdays, but maybe this is a landmark one or perhaps he's made his first million from his financial advisor business. It was doing well when I left, despite the recession.

It occurs to me that I should, perhaps, have warned them first, not just turn up like this ... but the truth is that a small part of me was afraid – *is* afraid – that no one would actually *want* me back.

The voices become more distinct, glasses chink and I hear a deep laugh – Uncle Rory – and a giggle – my cousin Robyn and my ears strain for the one voice I really want to hear. I walk towards

the orangery and pause at the door, observing, assessing ... the scene plays out like a surreal movie. These people I once cared for and loved are like actors in a play.

There must be around a dozen people in here, most of whom I recognise. Uncle Rory is downing a whisky – as I thought he would be; my old mate Luke is laughing nervously at something Isla's mother is telling him. Robyn is handing round a tray of canapés, her face flushed. This is obviously a celebration.

There's also someone else, whose honeyed hair brushes her bare shoulders, whose dress shimmers in the early evening sunlight and clings to her bottom. Whose slender legs are accentuated in silver heels higher than any I've ever seen her in before.

My body tautens like a wire. She hasn't seen me yet, no one has seen me yet ...

'Jesus Christ Almighty!'

Uncle Rory's face is purple. He's lost a bit more hair since I last saw him. Luke's mouth is open like a goldfish gasping for air. Isla's mum looks shocked to see me. Robyn freezes, still holding the tray of canapés.

And Isla, she stares at me and her champagne glass trembles in her hand.

'Cal? Is it really you?'

'Isla ...' Her name squeezes out from my throat, almost inaudible. I never thought it would be like this. Every ounce of strength has gone.

'Cal? Bloody hell, I thought you were a ghost!' Luke suddenly rushes over and gathers me up in a man hug, slapping me on the back so hard I wince.

'Are you OK, man?'

'I'm fine. Looking good, Luke.' And he does. Bigger, beefier, the extra weight suits him and he looks happy. It's great to see him; I never expected to feel so emotional so I must be going soft. Luke gives me a man hug again, but this time I suppress the wince.

He stares at me. 'Man, you look thin ... I can't believe this ... I just ... I don't know what to say.'

He lets me go and rubs his hand over his face, shaking his head in shock. I don't blame him. I've changed a lot while I've been away.

'Cal! Cal!' My cousin Robyn launches herself at me, tears streaming down her face, along with the kohl around her eyes. Robyn's every bit as good a mate as any of the lads – more even. 'Where have you been? Why didn't you tell us you were coming?' Her fingers dig into my forearm but I don't mind. It's wonderful to see her again.

'I don't know. Admin problems? Leaves on the line? Happy birthday, by the way.'

Uncle Rory downs the rest of his whisky and dumps the glass on a table. 'It's not a matter for levity, boy. We haven't heard from you for months. For all we knew, you might have been dead.'

'As you can see, I'm not.'

'Don't joke! You know damn well what I mean. We thought you'd decided to stay in the Middle East for good.'

'I almost did,' I say, with half an eye on Isla, watching me from a few feet away, still dumbstruck and even more beautiful than she looked in that newspaper article. She's let her blonde hair grow and it's been cut in a style that manages to be both classy and damn sexy.

'How long have you known you were coming home?' Rory asks.

'A few days.'

His face is almost purple. 'Then why didn't you call us? We've hardly heard from you in the past two years.'

Isla has abandoned her glass and is hugging herself as if she's freezing cold. Under the light tan, which I presume she picked up on her last shoot in Cannes, she's pale as the moon on the sea.

'I'm sorry,' I say more to Isla than my uncle. 'I've been ... tied up and I couldn't get away from work that easily.' I swallow hard. 'It's been ... complicated.'

‘Too tied up or complicated to phone us or email?’ Luke asks, an edge creeping into his voice. I can’t blame him.

‘Why didn’t you phone or text, if only to say you were on your way home?’ Isla’s voice cuts through the air, more London than in my imagination, yet still with the Cornish lilt. Everyone else may as well be on Mars.

‘It’s complicated,’ I repeat, knowing I can never un-complicate it or tell anyone the real truth. ‘I’ve only been in the UK for a few hours and I did call *you*.’ With a smile, I switch the focus back to Isla. ‘I tried to call you on the train here but your phone was dead.’

She smiles back, apologetically. ‘Oh ... I’m sorry. I’ve changed my phone and my number while you’ve been away. I had to; a fan got hold of it and started stalking me.’

‘A *fan*?’

‘Isla’s a celebrity now.’ Her mother glares at me like Medusa, obviously hoping to turn me to stone while her dad takes refuge in his champagne glass. He always was a man of few words and he’s lost for them now. ‘She’s an award-winning TV and film producer, you know,’ Mrs Channing adds.

‘I know that. I read about the last one in the newspaper. Congratulations.’

‘So you had time to read the papers?’ Isla remarks. She wrinkles her nose like she used to when she was trying not to cry. Like she did when I left her at the station the night I left Cornwall.

‘Actually I did email you on my way down on the train,’ I go on, refusing to let Isla off the hook.

‘Oh, Cal. I haven’t even looked at my emails since yesterday. We’ve all been completely tied up here all day, organising the party ... and Luke forbade me to do any work this weekend, didn’t you?’

‘*Forbade* you?’

‘I forbade myself.’

She puts her glass down on the table but it’s my hands shaking now as I walk towards her. A huge wave of memories thunders towards me and I pull her into my arms. I’m swept away by the sight and smell and feel of her. She is fragile, delicate, a porcelain figure, always way out of my league. Instinct stirs responses I can’t stop and don’t want to, even in the middle of company. I press her against me and her hands seek my spine through my shirt as if she wants to double check I’m real, not a phantom. I inhale her perfume. It’s a new one, sharper and more sophisticated than the scents she used to wear, or is that my imagination?

‘You don’t know how much I’ve wanted this.’ I breathe the words into her hair, which smells even better than I remember it.

‘Cal ...’

Her whisper pushes me away, then I realise that her hands are also pushing me away from her too. No. I won’t let her go yet. I could lift her off her feet if I wanted to, and carry her out of here in a second but she is controlling this moment; this moment I’ve hungered and thirsted for so long. There’s deep pain in her eyes and the realisation smacks me in the chest. ‘Isla?’

‘I’m sorry but things have *changed*.’ Her voice cracks with emotion and it’s all I can do to hold it together.

Changed? Yeah, I guess. You look even hotter than ever, if that’s possible. You smell wonderful too. I want to say the words out loud but something stops me. Instead I lift my hand to her cheek and feel the soft skin under my fingertips.

She smiles and then flinches away from my hand. ‘*Please*. Not here. Not *now*.’

Everyone is looking at us; we’re the dancers in the middle of a circle that no one dares to join.

‘Aren’t you going to congratulate the happy couple?’ Mrs Channing, Isla’s mother, speaks.

‘What happy couple? I thought this was a birthday party? Is there something I’m missing here?’ I make my tone light but my stomach churns with foreboding.

‘It is a birthday party but we’ve just heard some more good news. Isla and Luke have announced they’re getting engaged. Isn’t that wonderful news?’ her mother trills.

‘Engaged?’ Shock constricts my throat muscles. ‘You mean engaged to be married?’

Isla laughs lightly. 'Well, there isn't going to be a wedding yet. Not for a while.'

'But probably this year. Definitely early next year,' Luke cuts in, with an expression on his face I don't recognise.

'We haven't set a date yet, these things take a lot of organising and I'm so busy with work.' Isla glances at Luke for confirmation.

Robyn links her arm with mine. 'They told us just before you came in, Cal. Isn't it an amazing day? Dad's birthday, the engagement and you coming home ...'

Robyn beams. I don't think she or anyone realises how much I felt for Isla. Before I went away, we didn't really have a formal relationship. It was definitely on-off and no one considered it serious. Isla obviously didn't. But the past few months have made me realise that I *did*. I've been in denial about how much I felt for her and I'd resolved to tell her when I came home, *if* I came home.

My uncle pats Luke on the back. He seems as proud as if Luke were his own flesh and blood, not the son of his former business partner. Rory always had a soft spot for Luke but now there's clearly a bond between them that wasn't there when I went away. It's as if Luke *is* Rory's son now.

'Aren't you thrilled for them?' Mrs Channing's voice cuts through me and she gives me a calculating glance.

'Oh yes. Thrilled.' I echo her because I can't formulate my own thoughts any more. I can't even think straight.

'Cal, darling, I'll fetch you a whisky.' Robyn scuttles off.

I glance to Isla, clutching her glass so tightly it could shatter any second but Luke's arm is around my back.

He clears his throat nervously. He knows I fancied Isla, and that we dated for a while before I left but not how much I really felt for her. 'Hey, mate, it's great to have you home. Joking apart, I was worried that you might have decided to stay out there.'

'I thought the same myself, a few times.' My smile hides an instinct to lash out like a wounded animal. Anyone will tell you my social veneer was never thick, but now it's paper thin and rubbed to nothing in places. My time in the Middle East has shown me the worst of human nature, including my own. It was a mistake to turn up like this, an even bigger one to come home and expect to find everything as I left it.

'Cal?' Isla's voice is soft, reminding me that these are the people I love and miss, whose company I longed for, but now I'm here, now I know how much things have changed, I'd rather face the warzone I came from.

Ignoring Isla temporarily, I search Luke's face, interrogate him. 'How long have you two been together?'

'A good few months now.' His tone is overly casual, his smile over bright. 'Come through to the sitting room. Have a drink. We'll talk.'

'No. No, I ... thanks for the offer, mate, but I need to get home to Kilhallon Park.'

'Wait, Cal! Surely you're going to tell us where you've been and what you've been doing lately?'

The answer to Isla's question is so complicated, and yet so simple, that my brain literally hurts. The blood pulses in my temple, a tight band seems to crush my skull.

'Not now, I'm tired ... and I don't want to spoil your party with my boring stories. Plus, I really should go and see how Polly is. I left a message on her phone but I haven't heard back from her yet. I hope she's been OK while I've been out of contact.'

Luke flashes me a sympathetic smile. 'Polly's fine but you obviously wouldn't expect her to cope with managing the whole place on her own, with no money coming in since just before you left, after your father passed away. Rory and I did what we could to keep things from falling into complete rack and ruin but we didn't want to take over.'

I smile at Luke and his arm tightens around Isla's waist. The sight of him with her is like a jagged knife sawing through my guts.

'I can see that. Congratulations,' I say and walk out.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Demi!’

I wake to find someone shaking me, gently but firmly. Mitch barks but in a way that says ‘friend’ not ‘foe’. Warm fingers grip my shoulder.

Sheila’s plump face comes into focus. ‘You’re bloody freezing, love! What are you doing here?’

‘Umm ...’ I cringe inwardly, embarrassed at being found sleeping in the doorway of a chip shop.

‘I’d been hoping to see you again but not like this. I wouldn’t have known you were here but one of the fishermen mentioned he’d seen a girl and her dog sleeping rough when he brought some prawns round first thing. You silly girl, how long have you been sleeping out here for? I thought you told me you could stay at your friend’s parents’ while they were on holiday?’

‘Oh, I’ve only been here since last night. My mate’s mum and dad came home early so I had to leave.’

‘Then you should have come to me. You can stay in the loft room again until you’re sorted and I don’t care what Mawgan Cade says. She can throw us all out, if she wants,’ Sheila declares with a defiant look.

‘That’s lovely of you but there’s no way I’m going to make any more trouble for you.’

‘Well, I don’t care. Someone should do something about the Cades. I’m going to find a new cafe, away from them, the money-grabbing buggers ...’ Her tone softens. ‘Oh my lovely, I’m so sorry you’ve ended up here. Can’t the council find you somewhere to stay?’

‘It takes time and there are families who need homes a lot more than me. Besides, there aren’t many places that would take Mitch. I haven’t made things easy for myself.’

‘You’ve had a rough start to life, that’s for sure. What about jobs?’

‘I tried the Job Centre and applied for a couple of catering jobs but it’s early days yet.’

Slowly, the feeling returns to my limbs. The early morning sea mist has seeped through my clothes and I’m sure someone used the doorway as a toilet during the night. I hope that’s not why my sleeping bag is so damp.

‘Well, you bloody well can’t stay here. I daren’t have you back to work at the cafe but I’ve heard about something on the grapevine that might suit you. It comes with accommodation.’

I stand up, wincing at the pins and needles in my feet. ‘Really?’

‘Don’t get too excited. It might not come to anything and it was only a word from a friend. She works at a caravan site.’

‘A caravan site? Er ... that sounds interesting, but if there’s work going?’

She grimaces. ‘It’s in the back of beyond, which is why I shouldn’t get too excited, but you never know. Come to the cafe for a bit of breakfast before we open. I don’t care if Mawgan Cade sees you. I’ll throw something over her myself if she says anything.’

At the mention of breakfast, Mitch jumps to his paws. I gather up my sleeping bag and my rucksack and follow Sheila. I lied to her. There is no friend or parents’ house. There never was. I’ve been sleeping rough for the past three days since the run-in with Mawgan. Since I left home after a falling out with my dad and his new partner, and had to leave my previous job, I’ve never been in one place long enough – not even a shop doorway – to make long-term friends, and definitely not ones with room to put me and Mitch up. As for the housing office, I want to try and find my own live-in job first. There are hundreds of people who need council accommodation a lot more than I do.

Sheila slaps a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me and refills my mug of coffee. ‘Here you are. Get that down you.’

Mitch has already demolished a bowl of Chum and is snoring in a patch of early morning sun.

The smell of crispy bacon fills my nostrils. ‘You’ve got to open in an hour. I should go when I’ve had this.’

‘Not until I know you won’t be on the streets.’

‘Have you got the number of this friend with the caravan site?’

She scribbles on an order slip. ‘Here it is. It’s called Kilhallon Holiday Park.’

‘Never heard of it? Where is it?’

Sheila grins as I lick a trail of egg yolk from the corner of my mouth.

‘Around five miles out of town on the coast road. Like I said, I’m not sure the job will suit you but any port in a storm, as they say, and I’ve heard they’re looking for a live-in worker.’

‘What about Mitch?’

‘It’s in the country, so they might be more accommodating of him. Polly’s lived there for years and I expect she’ll tell you more. All I know so far is that the owner of the place has decided to re-launch the park and needs someone to help out fast so I guess that means they want someone cheap too. So don’t let them exploit you.’ Sheila wipes her hands on some kitchen paper.

‘I won’t. Can I use your laptop and do a bit of research on it? Then I can call this Polly woman when they open. If the job’s not advertised yet, I want to get in there first before anyone else.’

‘Course you can but don’t get your hopes up. Kilhallon Park may not be what it was.’ She smiles.

‘They haven’t seen me yet, have they? I could be exactly what they need.’

She shakes her head and laughs. ‘Good luck. You and Mitch ... and by the way, don’t take this the wrong way, but do you want to have a shower and freshen up, first?’

With my damp hair wrapped in one of Sheila’s fluffy towels, I put down the phone. Mr Penwith must be really keen for staff because Polly Tregothnan said he’d meet me this afternoon in St Trenyan. She asked for some details so I gave my address as the Beach Hut and said that Sheila had to let me go for ‘financial reasons’ but was happy to give me a reference.

Not that Polly listened much, she was too busy barking at me and telling me ‘not to be late as Mr Penwith was a busy man’ and ‘had I written down the name of the chain coffee bar he’d meet me at because young people these days never listened to anything in her experience.’ She claimed to be his PA but she sounded more like his mother, to be honest.

Sheila says Polly can be a ‘bit of a Tartar’, whatever the hell that is, but also reckons Polly has a ‘heart of gold’ which probably means she’s even scarier than she sounded on the phone. I also decided not to mention Mitch at this stage of our conversation.

After I left the cafe, with an extra bacon butty wrapped in foil and some pouches of food for Mitch, I hung around town looking for waitressing job ads in the cafe windows but in all honesty I liked the sound of working at a holiday park far more. There ought to be more opportunities, despite what Sheila said about not getting my hopes up.

The meeting is scheduled for twelve-thirty so by twelve-fifteen, I’ve already bagged a table outside a big name coffee bar, and I’m pretending to read the newspaper. However, I don’t think I’ve taken in a single word my stomach is churning so much. Half-past twelve comes and goes, and my hands are smudged with the newsprint. It’s now almost quarter to one and I push the paper away, nerves taking over my brain completely. I glance up the street for the umpteenth time, my heart banging away every time any lone bloke approaches the cafe. I don’t even know how old Mr Penwith is. He could be anything from thirty to seventy.

The woman who’s clearing the tables comes over to me. ‘Are you going to buy anything?’

‘Yeah but I’m just waiting for a ... colleague.’

She raises an eyebrow.

‘He should be here soon,’ I say firmly.

‘Course he will be.’ She shrugs and goes to clear the neighbouring tables.

It’s ten to one now, and there’s still no sign of Mr Penwith. Has he changed his mind? Has he already got someone else? Has word of the frappuccino incident already spread beyond St Trenyan? Do Mawgan Cade’s tentacles reach as far as Kilhallon park?

I laugh out loud, but it’s only nerves and my heart sinks again.

‘He isn’t coming,’ I say to Mitch, who dozes in a pool of sunlight.

Wait. A man has caught my eye. He’s hanging about outside the Shell Shop on the opposite side of the street but he’s watching the cafe and frowning. He wears jeans and a white shirt and a jacket: smart casual. He’s not seventy, that’s for sure. He checks his watch, seems to make a decision and weaves between the queuing cars to my side of the street.

Slowing his pace, he walks up to the outside tables and glances around him. Oh my God, surely *he* can’t be Mr Penwith?

Yet by the way he scans the customers, it has to be.

I jump up. ‘Mr Penwith?’

He looks at me, his tanned forehead creases and his eyes flicker to Mitch. ‘Don’t I know you?’ he says.

‘Oh God, yes ... and I’ve seen you. You were at the cafe when I ... That was a one-off, of course. I don’t usually chuck stuff over customers ... I mean, that’s not how I usually behave when I’m working ...’

His expression doesn’t change which is not a great sign. ‘So you’re Ms Jones?’

I squirm with embarrassment. ‘Yes.’

‘Hmm. I see. You’re not what I was expecting.’

‘What were you expecting?’

‘Someone ...’ His voice trails off.

‘Older?’ My heart sinks.

He nods. ‘I guess so. More experienced.’

‘I told your PA I had extensive catering experience. She mentioned you wanted someone who could turn their hand to a multitude of tasks.’

‘My PA?’ He frowns. I don’t think he’s over thirty but he already has fine lines in his face.

‘Mrs Tregothnan?’

‘Ah, you must mean Polly. I was thinking of someone with admin skills and previous experience of running a business like a holiday park.’

‘I’ve had plenty of experience of dealing with tourists and the public and I can definitely multitask.’ He raises his eyebrows, probably recalling my ability to chase off seagulls, throw a frappuccino over a customer and get the sack, all within five minutes, but I press on. ‘Look, Mr Penwith, You’ve come into town and we’ve both made time from our schedules so you may as well interview me now.’

‘My schedule?’ He smiles and immediately I revise my original opinion of him as being a surf hipster. He doesn’t look how he sounds. His face is tanned, his hair is dark brown with a hint of natural highlights from the sun. It’s also wild without the beanie to tame it and suddenly I realise that he reminds me a little bit of a hot vampire from a TV show that I used to watch when I lived at home. That seems a very long time ago now.

‘Shall we have a coffee and discuss the role in more detail?’ I ask, more in hope than expectation, while trying to banish the words Hot Vampire from my mind in case they slip out by accident.

He sighs and his mouth curves into that smile-that-isn’t-really-a-smile thing again. ‘As we’ve both cleared a spot in our busy *schedules*, I suppose it won’t do any harm.’

He drops a set of car keys on the table. The key fob is a bit of polished wood tied to them with an old piece of string. ‘So, Ms Demi Jones,’ he says, turning the words over like they’re treasure. My name sounds almost sexy in his accent. ‘What’s that short for?’

‘Demelza,’ I mutter, cringing at having to reveal it. ‘It was my nan’s name and I loved my nan but I’ve always hated it myself. No one else at school was called anything so weird,’ I say, trying to get a grip. How did I not notice how gorgeous he was at the cafe? ‘Just Demi will do.’

He smiles. 'Fine. I'm Cal. Short for Calvin, also an old family name that I could have done without.' He holds out his hand. I take it, feeling self-conscious even though the contact is firm but brief. His skin is warm but his palms are rough like he's been working a lot with them recently.

His bushy eyebrows knit together. 'What's the matter?'

Feeling my face heat up, I glance away. 'Nothing.'

I shrug because there's no way I'm going to tell my potential new employer that he looks like a hot vampire, even if he *does*. He runs his hand through his thick hair. 'Want a coffee and we can talk?' he offers, still sounding unsure if it's a good idea to interview me.

'Yes. I'll get them.' I dig in my purse and hold out one of the precious notes.

'Don't worry, I'll get these,' he says and disappears into the dark of the cafe. My stomach gurgles and Mitch's wet nose pokes at the threadbare patch on the knee of my jeans.

He sets down coffees and cake on the table and I try not to devour them like a ravenous beast. After we've finished, he examines me like I'm some weird creature he discovered in the jungle. I swallow the last of my cake as he sips his espresso. The silence is killing me.

'Sheila's Beach Hut wasn't my first job, you know. I've a lot more experience than that.'

'Really? Where?'

'I worked in a cafe in Truro for a couple of years. I started off by clearing the tables and washing-up then they trained me as cook.'

'I bet you were a good cook.'

'Not bad. What makes you say that?'

He smiles. 'You obviously like cake.'

'Thanks! I didn't only make cakes. I made wicked pasties, lovely quiches and pies and I already had some training and my hygiene certificate which is why Sheila took me on. She was going to send me to catering college to do some more courses.'

He checks his watch. I feel as if I'm about to lose something important.

'Are you in a hurry?'

'A bit. I need to go to the bank to sort out my account.'

'Does it have lots of money in it?' I meant this comment as a joke but I blush the moment the words are out of my mouth. Cal laughs, but not like what I said was funny. 'I doubt it, unless someone dumped a load of extra cash in it that I don't know about while I was away.'

A penny drops in my mind. 'Away? Was that while you were in the army?'

'No, I wasn't in the army. Why would you think that?'

'When I saw you at the cafe you were in combat gear with one of those big bags soldiers carry.'

He smiles. 'Anyone can get that stuff at an army surplus store. I used to work for a medical aid charity.'

'I don't need aid,' I say quickly.

He smiles. 'I'm sure you don't. On the contrary, the way you handled Mawgan Cade, I doubt you need any help at all.'

'You know her?'

'Yes.' He reaches for his car keys from the table. 'Look, thanks for meeting me but I'm not sure you're quite what I'm looking for.'

I panic. 'Wait! You don't really know what you're looking for, do you?'

He stares at me, as if I just said the cleverest thing in the world. 'Maybe not but I do need someone who can do *everything*. It's a – um – fledgling business and it's going to take a lot of energy and enthusiasm to get it off the ground. There's a lot to learn. For both of us,' he adds.

'Then I'd be perfect. I want to develop my career in leisure and tourism too.' I fold my arms in what I hope is a confident gesture.

He hesitates. 'Even if you *did* work for me, I can't afford to pay you much.'

I sense he's weakening so I move in for the kill. 'We can negotiate on the terms. I've never been afraid of hard work.'

'I'm sure you haven't.'

'And I won't throw stuff over the customers. It was only Mawgan who got my back up.'

He smiles, properly this time, and my stomach does a funny little flip but it's only the excitement and adrenaline of being so very close to getting this job and a new home.

'Believe me, you can throw a whole bucket of anything over Mawgan. However, on a serious note, in addition to dealing with customers, there'd be a lot of fetching and carrying and cooking and cleaning and boring admin. We all have to muck in at Kilhallon.'

'I can do all that.'

'What about building work?' He eyes my skinny arms as if they're twigs. 'Any experience in gardening? Plastering? Roofing? Carpentry?'

'I can learn,' I say defiantly.

He stares at me, biting his lip briefly. He is wavering. 'Yes, I'm sure you could but you won't have to, that was a joke.'

I try to laugh but I'm too wound up, waiting for a definite offer.

'I'm afraid the accommodation is a bit poky. It's only a little cottage.'

'A *cottage*?' I try not to get too excited.

'A *tiny* cottage that needs refurbishing. I'm sure you'd want something bigger and smarter,' he adds.

'No way. I mean ... I'm sure I could manage if I *had* to and I could refurbish it myself. Look, everyone deserves a second chance, don't they? And let's face it, you look like someone who needs the help fast; or why would you have come straight down here today to interview me? Give me a trial period – we can both see how we like each other and if you change your mind or I do, there are no hard feelings. Go on, take the risk, live dangerously.'

He leans back in his chair, his eyes wide. Even before I finish speaking, I realise I've probably gone too far, ruined my chances again with my big mouth and my attitude.

'I must be mad,' he mutters.

Well, I think that's an offer. I try not to punch the air in triumph.

'I can't offer you much money – not much more than the living wage – until I get the place back on its feet, which could be a while, if any time,' he says, jangling his keys.

I point to Mitch who pricks up his ears at the mention of his name. 'What about Mitch? He'd need accommodating too,' I say, fizzing with triumph, knowing I have the upper hand now.

'Right. Well, of course, I suppose Mitch can come too. I need a dog that can pull his weight.'

'He doesn't work.'

'OK, then I need a dog who can look appealing and pathetic.'

'You won't regret this,' I say, wanting to run round the cafe terrace shouting 'yessss!'. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. 'No ... but you might.'

CHAPTER FIVE

'This is your car?'

Demi wrinkles her nose as I kick the brick from under the front wheel of the Land Rover. I don't trust the hand brake on the sloping car park perched above St Trenyan harbour, until I can get the car serviced.

'Yeah. Why?'

'You should lock it. There are thieves around.'

'One, the door lock's busted and two, do you really think anyone would want to steal this?'

She takes a longer look at the rusting paintwork, the dented side panel and bumper hanging off and curls her lip. *'For scrap, maybe.'*

I'd like to smile at Demi – she has a habit of making me want to smile – but my facial muscles seem to have seized up after my trip to the bank. Demi took Mitch for a run on the beach while I saw the manager. The probate from my father's estate was sorted out before I left, and I've transferred most of his legacy from my savings to a business account. There wasn't a huge amount but I own Kilhallon Park and with careful management and some extra investment, I should be able to make the changes I need to re-develop the site. I open the rear door. *'Mitch can travel in style.'*

'In you go,' she says, as Mitch hangs back. *'Come on, get in, you daft dog.'*

'Maybe he's worried about getting into a strange man's car,' I say.

'He's probably got more sense than I have.'

Demi hesitates too, her arms folded, her chestnut hair flying in the wind, like the flames of a bonfire.

'I'm not desperate, you know.'

'I know you're not desperate.' Actually, I think she may be more desperate than she'd ever let on but I can't take advantage of that: she deserves better, and I don't want to exploit her. There's enough of that going on round here from what I can see.

She laughs at me. *'It's too late to back out now, Cal Penwith.'*

'Don't you believe it. Now, get in. We've got a lot to do,' I say, more gruffly than I mean to.

The Land Rover groans up the steep hill from the harbour and onto the moor road. The tax has run out, though Polly told me I can do it online now, and its last MOT was before I went off on my last aid project. I'll sort it all out soon, for now I have more pressing concerns. I glance at Demi but she's staring out of the window.

'How long had you been sleeping rough before you started working for Sheila?'

She turns sharply. *'How do you know I was sleeping rough?'*

'I can tell someone who has had a tough time. I worked for a charity, remember?'

She shrugs. *'I do but I told you, I'm not a charity project.'*

'I know that.'

A glance tells me she's staring out of the window again but then she finally answers. *'I slept rough for a couple of months.'*

'In St Trenyan?'

'Truro too. Penzance for a week or two but here mostly.'

Maybe I shouldn't have pushed her but I'd like to know more about the new employee who's going to be sharing my home. *'Any particular reason?'*

She waits before replying. *'I fancied a change, I suppose.'*

I leave it, figuring she'll tell me more when she's ready. I'm hardly in a sharing mood myself and more importantly, Kilhallon is around the next corner. The road dips, curves sharply and the Land Rover shudders its way around the bend, then I press the gas pedal to the floor to make it up the other side of the hill. I turn the wheel sharply and we rattle over a cattle grid through two stone

pillars that frame a narrow gap in the wall. The sign lies on the ground by the pillars but half the letters have weathered away so it now reads Kil l Park.

‘Oh my God,’ Demi mutters.

‘What’s up?’

‘Sheila said this was the back of beyond and now I know what she means.’

‘That’s how I like it.’

‘You must do ... I mean, it’s, er, very peaceful and wild out here.’

While steering the Land Rover between the larger potholes, I try to keep a straight face while taking a sneaky glance at her. She holds her rucksack tightly in her lap while Mitch starts snuffling and whimpering in the back. When I put out the feelers for a new assistant, I never bargained on someone like Demi, let alone a great shaggy hound. I’ve no idea what variety he is.

She lets out a squeal as the Land Rover bounces over a particularly deep rut and into a pool of water. ‘There’s no need to look so terrified,’ I say.

‘I wasn’t until you said that.’

‘Thanks.’ I turn the engine back on and coax the Land Rover out of the puddle. ‘Soon be there.’

She wrinkles her nose. It’s a very pretty nose, I have to admit, even though it’s turned up at the moment. Freckles dot her face; she’s so vulnerable and yet fierce too. An image flashes into my mind out of nowhere of a painting my mother hung at Kilhallon of a beautiful girl floating in a river, surrounded by willow trees.

I stop the car in the middle of the yard that was once our car park. Demi stares at the dandelions and grass sprouting between the gravel.

‘Is that it?’

‘Yup.’ I jump down onto the yard, wondering if she’s ever going to get out of the car. Finally I open the door and she slides down reluctantly from the passenger seat, her rucksack in her arms. She looks around her, at the old office block on one side of the yard, and the peeling wooden veranda that served as our reception and the moss-coated 1970s touring caravan blocking the entrance to the barn.

‘You said it was a holiday park ...’ she says, her eyes widening as she takes it all in.

‘It was. It is. There’s a lot more to the place than this.’

She glances at me, agonised.

Still clutching her rucksack, she wanders up to the barn, eyes wide at the decaying, tumbledown wreck that confronts her. I wouldn’t blame her if she turned right round and ran back to St Trenyan.

‘I can see we have a lot of work to do,’ she says.

‘You did say you weren’t afraid of it.’

As she walks towards the reception, Mitch scoots past her to a pile of rusting signage that once read ‘Welcome to Kilhallon Park. Your holiday starts here.’

Then he cocks his leg and proudly pisses all over the signs.

I don’t blame Demi for being less than impressed by Kilhallon but when someone who’s been sleeping in a shop doorway is shocked by the state your place is in, well, there’s something seriously wrong. I was a bit taken aback myself when I walked home from Bosinney after crashing Uncle Rory’s birthday party. Though I have to say that the state of my house was somewhat dwarfed by the state of my mind on finding out that I’d lost my girl to my best mate, and it was all my own fault.

Now I’m seeing the place through fresh eyes – Demi’s – and the scale of the task that lies ahead of me comes painfully into focus. Resurrecting Kilhallon is going to be a huge challenge. Why would anyone want to come here on holiday when it’s in this state? After my meeting at the bank I’ve also decided I’ll need to drum up some extra money to refurbish the place in the way I want to.

I know Polly thinks I’ve gone mad but I need to focus on something or I really will go nuts. I can’t do anything about Isla for now but that doesn’t mean I’ve given up on her. She’s not married yet; there’s still time for her to change her mind, although I’m sure Luke would have something to say if

he knew how I felt. I keep trying – and failing – to feel guilty about my resentment of him. I ought to wish him well, but the pain is still too raw and I can't see our relationship healing any time soon.

But first, Demi.

'There's Polly,' I say as our housekeeper bustles out of the front door. She looks younger since she dyed her hair an ash blonde while I've been away. The neat bob has taken years off her, not that I'd dare risk such a personal remark to her. However, judging by the glare on her face, she doesn't look ready to roll out the red carpet for our new employee. But Mitch seems to have taken to Polly and races forward and leaps up at her.

'Get that dog off me!' Polly's from hardy Cornish farming stock. She's a formidable woman, even though she's now in her mid-fifties. She pushes Mitch away, not roughly but firmly enough to startle him.

Demi dashes forward and grabs Mitch's lead. 'Don't worry. He won't hurt you.'

'I don't care. I don't like dogs and neither does Cal. You never mentioned an animal on the phone.'

'I've decided to make an exception for this one, and he can act as a guard dog,' I say as Mitch cowers under one of Polly's withering looks. 'This is Demi, she's going to be working for us.'

Polly plants her hands on her hips, sizing up our new employee. 'I know her name. You don't look like you sounded on the phone.'

'How did I sound?' Demi replies, so smoothly I can *feel* the danger.

'Polly, *if* you don't mind,' I cut in before there's a wrestling match right here in the farmyard, 'I'd like Demi added to the payroll, and a contract and all the proper paperwork done as soon as possible.'

Polly narrows her eyes at me. 'There's no need to be so high handed.'

'I'm sorry. Before you do that, can you find some clean bed linen and towels for Stables Cottage? I'll help Demi get it into some sort of habitable state.'

'Of course, *boss*. I'll get onto it right away.'

Polly flounces off, muttering to herself. I grit my teeth. Polly's been used to running the place without me while I was away and I'm out of practice with the social niceties these days. I know things have been tough on her but it's time we both got used to having other people around again.

Demi pulls a face behind her back. 'Polly doesn't look very happy to see me.'

'She'll get over it. Come on, I'll show you around the place.'

Cal leads me towards a wood and glass porch that looks modern, if you count the 1970s as modern, and is tacked onto the front of the old stone farmhouse itself.

'This is – was – the reception area. Sorry. This sticks in the damp,' he says, giving the peeling door into the reception a heavy shove.

There's still a counter in there and the type of dial phone you'd find in a retro shop, with dusty ring binders piled all around it and a faint whiff of damp and food. The metal racks by the window still have leaflets and brochures on them, faded to monochrome by the sun. I'm sure one of them says *Escape to Kilhallon Park, 1985* on it. Escape to Kilhallon? They'd be trying to escape *from* it these days.

There's a button on the desk with a sticker next to it, on which I can just make out 'Please ring for attention'.

'This way,' says Cal, pushing open a white-painted door that reads *Private* on a once-gold plastic plaque. We fight our way past old fleeces and wax jackets and Cal curses. 'Who left that bloody boot scraper there?' he grumbles. 'Be careful.'

Sidestepping over the scraper, I glimpse a chink of light as Cal pushes open a heavy oak door.

When I was little, my mum read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to me. As the coats part, and my eyes adjust, I feel I just stepped into another version of Narnia. Except this Narnia smells of curry and is like a *skip* – and that's from someone who's actually rummaged in a few.

'This is the sitting room. Obviously.'

He stands awkwardly but I'm fascinated. The windows are tiny with bottle-shaped panes, like an old harbour-side pub, but they'd probably let in more light if someone had cleaned them. Dead ashes powder the air when Cal shuts the door to reception behind him.

He tosses his phone on a huge carved dresser. 'You'll have to take us as you find us, as my dad used to say.'

'My mum said it too but she always tidied up anyway.' I cast my eyes around the sitting room while Mitch twitches at my feet, itching to give the place a proper sniff.

'Does your mother know where you are now?' Cal asks me.

'I doubt it. She's dead.'

'I'm sorry.' He pulls a face as if I've upset him, not the other way round.

'It's OK. She died eight years ago.'

He winces. 'Really? You must have been young to lose your mum.'

'Thirteen.'

'When did you leave home?' he asks.

'A couple of years ago.' I shrug as if it doesn't matter but actually I can remember it to the day and hour. I was eighteen, it was raining and *EastEnders* was on.

'Do you have any other family?'

Cal's voice interrupts my memories and I'm grateful for it. No one wants to be reminded of bad times, especially when there's guilt attached. 'A brother but I haven't seen him for years and I don't want to see my dad again.'

'Life throws some crap at us, doesn't it? I know what it's like to lose your parents when you're young,' he says.

'Do you?'

'Yes. My mum passed away when I was a teenager and I lost Dad just before I went away on my last overseas project.'

'God. I'm sorry. Really.'

'It happens, doesn't it?' he says. 'Make yourself comfortable if you can find a spare patch of sofa.'

I perch on the edge of an old settee between a pile of old garden magazines and for a while Cal remains standing in front of the hearth. He doesn't seem to know what to say to me; perhaps he's wondering what to do with me now I'm here. I'm beginning to wonder what I'm doing here myself. Mitch finally settles at my feet: he'd make himself at home anywhere. Unable to look Cal in the eye either, I focus on the room again. There's a big oak settle by the fire like you get in old pubs, paintings of horses and dogs, seascapes, boats and fishermen and dead rabbits and pheasants.

'Sorry. I'll have to have a word with Polly,' Cal mutters, gesturing at the state of the room. 'She's not used to having to share the house again but she's been here as long as I can remember. She worked for my father until her husband died and she's become part of the family.'

'When did the site last open?'

'About twelve years ago. There used to be dozens of people working here in its heyday.'

'Dozens of people?'

Cal hangs his jacket on the back of a dining chair. 'Hard to believe, but yes. We had a small dairy farm, and some arable land as well as the holiday park, but that was gradually sold off. It may not look much now, but thirty-odd years ago there were holiday cottages and a camping and caravan site here. There was even a swimming pool and a clubhouse and the place was packed, apparently, but the good times were over before I was born.'

'It's a shame a lovely old place like this is in this state,' I say then bite my lip, worried about offending him. I shift my bottom on the old settee to try and find a more comfortable position. I swear I can feel a spring sticking in me.

‘It just gradually went downhill as people decided to holiday abroad. Then my father lost interest completely after Mum died. We haven’t had guests since I went to uni and a place like this goes shabby fast, if it’s not looked after. Other people have made a success of their parks and if I’d wanted to keep the business going, I shouldn’t have gone off to save the world.’

‘What did you do? Was it Africa or Syria? That must have been scary.’

‘Like I said, I was an aid worker for a charity in the Middle East until I ended up needing aid myself. And that’s all you need to know. Although I’m sure Polly will take great delight in filling you in on what she thinks she knows.’ His voice tails off. ‘Meanwhile, we have work to do. First, I’ll show you the kitchen. I’m afraid we all have to muck in with the chores here but you’re a professional so I’m sure you won’t mind.’

So he doesn’t want to tell me exactly where he has been. Fine. There are things I don’t want him to know about me. ‘Oh, did Polly make the curry? I can smell it.’

‘You’re joking. It was a takeout. Polly’s never been a keen cook.’

‘I’ve always loved cooking. I can make a mean biryani and Thai curry, and a vegetable chilli with homemade guacamole. And a lovely fish pie – I used to go down to the harbour and buy the fish straight from the trawlers and I make fantastic pasties, steak, veggie – you should try my bacon and cheese ones. They’re brilliant.’

He smiles and I realise I’ve been bigging myself up massively. ‘It sounds like we might get on, after all. Shall I show you around the park so you can get your bearings and see what you’ve taken on?’

Excitement ripples through me. Sensing my mood change, Mitch sits up. ‘Bring it on,’ I say.

We walk through the farmhouse kitchen and a back porch, also packed with coats and boots, to a large cobbled yard at the rear of the house. A row of cottages faces the house, and they seem to be in better condition than the tumbledown barns and cow sheds at the front, which isn’t saying much. Still, the building across the yard is standing, at least, and has curtains hanging at the windows.

‘That’s where you’ll be staying,’ Cal says, pointing to the end cottage with the curtains.

‘Were those the holiday cottages?’

‘No, they were for staff. The guest cottages are larger and in another part of the park but they need total refurbishment. People want holiday homes that are even better than their own houses these days.’

‘I guess they do if they’re paying a lot of money.’

‘Yes, but I hope Kilhallon Park will have something to suit everyone’s budgets. Come on, I’ll show you the guest cottages and the buildings from the campsite that I plan to replace.’

With Mitch in seventh heaven at being out in the country, I walk with Cal through the rear yard and through a wooden farm gate along a short lane that’s in slightly better condition than the one from the main road. Even so, I have to dodge a few ruts with dried mud in them. The lane is edged by Cornish hedges but the field on the coastal side falls away gently, giving us a wonderful view over the Atlantic Ocean. The sun glints on the sea as Cal strides off in the direction of a row of much bigger cottages a few hundred yards down the lane.

‘The first thing we’ll need to do is have this lane surfaced so that the builders can get access to the guest cottages,’ he says, splashing through a large puddle in his wellies.

A few moments later, we stop outside the guest cottages. They are in a row of four, with stone walls and slated roofs covered in moss. I think they were once whitewashed but the walls are grey and moss-stained now. The tiny front gardens – more sitting-out areas really – of each cottage are a tangle of weeds.

Cal clicks his teeth and lets out a breath. ‘As you’ll see, the shells are sound but they need rewiring, and modern heating and plumbing, not to mention a decorative makeover. We’re going to need to repair the slate roofs too. There’s a lot to do but it’ll be worth it. These old miners’ cottages deserve some TLC.’

‘They could be really pretty. Lots of kerb-appeal,’ I say, channelling the TV property programmes Sheila used to record and watch back-to-back.

‘That’s what the guests are looking for. Something with character and a great view.’

‘All the ingredients are here. You just need to turn them into a great dish.’

Cal laughs. ‘With a lot of elbow grease, I’m sure we can.’

Mitch roots among the dandelions in the garden areas while I wander up to the front door of one cottage. A chipped slate plaque hangs lopsidedly from a nail. I push it horizontal and read the name.

‘*Penvenen*? What does that mean?’

Cal gives a wry smile. ‘My granny loved the Winston Graham novels and they were big when the TV series was on in the 1970s when the cottages were originally converted to holiday homes. It was her idea to name them after characters in the Poldark novels. So that’s why we have Penvenen, Warleggan, Enys – and Poldark, of course.’

‘I’m sorry, I haven’t read those books.’

‘Nor me, and the TV series was on long before I was born, but Polly says it’s popular again now so we should leave them as they are.’

‘It’s a nice thing to keep the names if they were your granny’s idea. The tourists love that sort of thing. They were always asking how old Sheila’s Beach Hut was. Sheila used to tell them it was a smuggler’s haunt and then they’d order more drinks just to stay longer.’

Cal bursts out laughing. ‘Sheila’s was never a smuggler’s haunt! Even the oldest part of the building can’t be more than a hundred years old.’

‘It worked, though. I think you should definitely keep the names.’

He gives me a sharp look then breaks into a smile. I must admit, he’s cheered up while he’s been showing me the place so I must have done something right. ‘I think you’re going to be very useful around here, Ms Jones. Come on, let’s go and take a look at the camping area.’

As we walk around the rest of the park, an hour whizzes by but I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. Cal took me into the two fields that once housed the static caravans and the camping site. The vans have long gone; he told me that his father ran out of money for replacing the fleet so they were all sold off to people doing self-builds. The camping site and caravans were served by an ‘amenity block’ with loos, showers and washing-up area. That’s in a right old state, almost derelict. There were birds nesting in the showers.

‘And,’ he says, nodding at a large grassy depression surrounded by broken tiles, ‘that was a swimming pool.’

‘I can just about tell ...’ I try to be diplomatic. Although the site is large, he wasn’t kidding when he said there was work to do. ‘What’s that?’

I point at a crumbling stone building silhouetted against the late afternoon sun, at the far edge of the camping field.

‘Just an old farm building we used to use for storage of the grass-mowing machines and equipment for the caravans in the winter. I haven’t been in there for years so it’s probably still got loads of random stuff in it.’

‘It’s a shame to leave it in that state.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. It’ll have to be tidied up, at least until we know what to do with it. I haven’t got round to making plans for everything yet. That’s why you’re here. If you have any ideas, just shoot away. Now, shall I show you where you’ll be staying?’

‘Great.’ With a whistle to Mitch, I follow Cal back across the field towards the reception area and staff cottages, but I can’t resist a glance behind at the crumbling, unloved storage building. I wonder ...

An idea has formed in my mind but I’ve only just met Cal and I’m definitely not ready to shoot just yet.

‘Here you go.’ A few minutes later, he twists the handle on the door of the end staff cottage. ‘I wouldn’t call this premium accommodation but this is the best of them. I told you it wasn’t much and it’s a bit damp because no one’s been living here for a few years but it should do, if you’re prepared to put in a bit of elbow grease. I’m sure Polly will bring over some cleaning stuff and bed linen, or I will when I get a chance.’

The door opens straight into a little sitting room with a two-seater sofa, covered in a crazy flowery pattern. There’s an empty fireplace and a few pictures on the walls, mostly of vases of roses and trees. The carpet has orange and blue swirls and the curtains are a sort of pink, with abstract tulips. At least, I think they were tulips once and are now splodges. In one corner a narrow open-backed staircase leads upstairs.

‘Sorry, I don’t think it’s been renovated since before I was born.’

‘It’s ... um ... very *flowery*.’

‘It’s either this or the box room in the attic of the farmhouse and I’m sure you’d much rather have your own front door.’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’

He doesn’t laugh. ‘So you’ll be OK in here?’

‘Yeah ...’ Tears clog my throat at the thought of actually having four walls and a roof over mine and Mitch’s heads, then I woman up. I am working for the guy, after all. I deserve a proper roof over my head. ‘It’s fine. Thank you.’

‘You don’t sound too sure?’

I throw him a smile. ‘Honestly, it’s great. Can I see the rest of it?’

‘Sure.’

Mitch runs ahead into the kitchen, which is basic but has a cooker, fridge and sink. There are few dead flies on the windowsill and a whiff of damp, but it’s my own space and that’s what matters.

Cal opens the fridge door and sniffs. ‘I might have to get you another fridge.’

‘I can clean it. It’ll be OK.’

‘If you want to have go, fine, but I’ll get a new one if you need it. You have rights here, including a decent place to live.’

‘Will you just shut up?’ I say, wanting to laugh at his slapped-arse face. ‘And show me the rest of the place, *boss*.’

‘Please don’t call me that. Polly only does it to wind me up.’

‘OK, boss.’

I picture his scowl as he leads the way up the stairs while Mitch explores his new territory. It’s a sexy scowl, I bet, and his bum and thighs look great in the jeans. Then I rap myself on the knuckles for thinking such thoughts. This is work and he is my employer.

Cal opens a door to one side of the tiny landing. ‘Bathroom, obviously. Should be OK with a good scrub.’

I pop my head round the door and smile at the rose pink suite that reminds me of my granny’s. The bath has a shower over it that’s seen better days.

On the opposite side of the landing, sunlight casts a yellow window pattern on the floor. The open door leads into the bedroom, with more flowers on the wall, a wardrobe, a chest of drawers and a mattress on the floor. Through the window, across the fields, whitecaps dance on the inky blue sea. I pull back the net curtain and peer through a film of salt spray and grime. The first thing I’ll do is rip the nets down so I can enjoy the view every morning.

‘There’s a spare bed frame in the attic at the farmhouse. I’ll carry it over,’ Cal says. I’m not sure if he was smiling at me or not while I looked out of the window and I don’t care what he thinks.

‘I can do that.’

‘You’d be better off taking the Land Rover up to the petrol station shop to get some food in.’

I follow him downstairs. ‘Me? Drive that old thing?’

‘Yes, unless you want to walk five miles across the fields,’ he smiles, cunningly. ‘Or you can take my horse if you like. He’s a bit skittish but if you can ride, you’re welcome.’

‘No, thanks, I don’t like horses. They’re dangerous.’

‘That depends on the rider. The Land Rover it is. When you’ve settled in, come over to the house to collect the keys and some money. You do have a licence?’

‘Yes. My brother taught me before he left home to join the army.’

He seems surprised. ‘OK.’

The sofa boings as I test the springs. Cal glances at my rucksack and my dirty ripped jeans. Before I even realise, I’m pushing a tangled strand of hair out of eyes, and the pink rises to my cheeks.

‘I’ll ask Polly to find you some work clothes for now and you’d better go into town tomorrow and get a few new things.’

‘I can buy my own clothes.’

‘OK, fine, but if you want an advance on your pay cheque, just shout. Right, I’ll go and fetch this bed frame.’

Half an hour later, Cal struggles over the yard with part of the bed frame on his shoulders. For a lean guy, he’s very strong. I help him carry it upstairs and then he’s off again, dumping an old TV, the fat-backed kind, on the rickety bamboo table in the corner of the sitting room.

‘You can have this if you want,’ he says. ‘My father used to watch it in bed.’

‘Good. I can watch telly later. *Sherlock’s* on tonight.’

‘Is it? I haven’t had chance to watch much TV lately.’ He laughs in that ‘not remotely amused’ kind of way and I feel I’ve said something stupid but I’m not sure what.

Polly bustles in with a box of bleach and a scowl on her face. ‘I’ve got some cleaning stuff but I’ll have to bring the towels and linen later. You do know there’s no bed frame up there?’ she says to Cal. ‘The old one had woodworm so I chucked it on the bonfire.’

He glares at her. ‘Then it’s a good job I’ve already found a new one.’

Polly shudders when Mitch sniffs at her ankles. ‘You needn’t think I’ll be cleaning up any dog hairs either. Scraggy thing,’ she says.

‘I’m sure Mitch feels the same way about you.’

Polly scowls.

‘Sorry,’ I say, as Cal stifles a laugh. ‘I didn’t mean to be that rude.’

‘Demi’s perfectly capable of looking after the place herself,’ he says.

Polly flounces off; grumbling, but I don’t care how much she moans. I still can’t believe that Mitch and I have a new job and a place to live.

I’m still having to pinch myself later, when I sit round the farmhouse table with Cal and Polly, soaking up the remains of a chicken curry with a piece of naan. Getting to grips with the Aga was a bit of a nightmare, especially with Polly issuing dire warnings about it.

Judging by the empty plates, they seemed to enjoy the food.

Polly stabs a piece of chicken with her fork and Cal wipes his plate round with his last piece of naan.

‘Was it OK?’ I say.

Cal nods.

‘It wasn’t bad,’ Polly says and I wonder if I misheard her. Was that a *compliment*? ‘Shame you let it dry out a bit,’ she adds. ‘Agas aren’t like normal cookers.’

‘I’ll get the hang of it,’ I protest.

Cal stands up and picks up his plate. ‘Finished?’

Polly gasps. ‘You’re not clearing up!’

‘Why not?’

‘She can do that. That’s why you’ve hired her.’

‘*She* is not a bloody skivvy, Polly, and *she’s* been cleaning the cottage and working all day.’

Acting innocent, I swig my beer. Cal walks round to my side of the table and stacks my plate on his. He brushes against me and smells faintly of clean sweat and beer. He's been working all day too, helping me put the bed frame together and trying to fix the door of the barn.

'Thanks.' I ignore Polly's laser stare.

'Don't get used to it,' he says. 'I don't expect you to cook for me every night and you won't want to eat in here all the time.'

'I can cook tons of stuff and I don't mind eating here.'

'You'll want your own space,' says Cal, carrying the plates towards the hall.

'Yes, you will.' Polly casts a triumphant glance at me. I wonder what her problem is, apart from worrying about the extra work of looking after me. She needn't bother.

I finish my beer at the dining table and let Mitch lick my curryfied fingers while Polly goes back to her cottage to watch *Emmerdale*. In the kitchen, I find Cal cursing and fiddling with the settings on the dishwasher.

In frustration, he stands back. 'Jesus, you need a PhD to work it out.'

'Here. Let me have a go.'

A few presses later, I get it to start. 'We had two at the cafe,' I explain.

'Thanks. I'm going to work in the study for the rest of the evening but tomorrow I'll get your contract sorted out. Can I ask you to be patient with Polly? She's very protective of me. She is an old friend.'

'I understand. I'm the newbie. It's me that has to fit in.'

'Thanks.' He hesitates. 'Will you be OK in the cottage on your own tonight? Kilhallon is a bit out of the way. You might find it too quiet and isolated.'

'You mean, me being a city girl who can't live without a nightclub and a Starbucks within spitting distance? It'll be a change not to sleep in a shop doorway, and besides, I have Mitch for company. We'll sleep like logs.'

'Well, you know where I am if you want me or Polly. I'd better get you a phone sorted too.'

While the dishwasher burbles and Cal throws the empty beer bottles in the recycling crate, I hover by the sink.

'Cal ... thanks for the job and the cottage. I mean it.' Damn the quiver in my voice.

'You might not thank me when we get the business up and running. There's going to be a lot to do. Goodnight.'

I hate to admit it, but Cal was right. I *couldn't* sleep, not even with a brand new bed and a thick down duvet and my own bedroom with pink curtains. Not even when I got up and made a cup of tea in my own kitchen and sat and drank it while I watched the midnight news on my new old TV. The wind rustled the curtains most of the night and I thought I could hear the waves crashing against the cliffs across the fields.

I don't believe in ghosts but all sorts of weird and freaky thoughts kept filling my head. I couldn't go back to bed so in the end I had to unroll my sleeping bag on the carpet and sleep in front of the hearth, with Mitch on my feet. I dreamt I was at home with my mum before everything started to unravel. I thought I'd be happy when I got a job and my own place: if someone would only give me a chance. But no matter what we have, we always want a little bit more.

I woke up early, wondering where I was at first. Mitch was already pawing at the cottage door to be let out so I put on his lead and took him out for a walk. No one else was around so I walked down the valley towards Kilhallon Cove and watched Mitch play 'tag' with the waves. On the other side of the cliffs, there was an old engine house. It's a ruin now, the roof has long collapsed but half the chimney stack still stands.

I walked back to the cottage, fed Mitch and made myself some toast in my kitchen. The cottage still needs work but I'd better go over to the farmhouse and find out what Cal wants me to do. Last night, he said he wanted me to discuss my contract and terms and conditions and I want to get off on

the right foot with him. After settling Mitch in the kitchen with a dog chew, I have a bath – oh, the luxury – put on my freshly washed jeans and top and set off.

Polly meets me halfway across the farmyard. ‘You’re out of bed then?’ She raises her eyebrows as if she’s surprised.

‘I’ve been up for hours,’ I say, determined not to rise to the bait.

‘Hmmp.’

‘Is Cal around?’

‘Yes, but you’d better keep out of his way.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll find out. He’s in his office, last I saw of him. If you dare.’

This is not encouraging news on my first morning but I’m not going to be put off by her.

Greasy breakfast plates are piled on the worktops in the kitchen, and someone’s left the bacon and milk out in the sun. One of the plates has half a sausage left on it and despite the toast I ate earlier, I can’t see good food go to waste so I eat it, enjoying the luxury of not having to share it with Mitch. Sidestepping a piece of tomato squashed on the tiles, I walk down the gloomy hallway and knock on the study door. There’s no answer but I can hear someone tapping away on a laptop.

‘Cal. Are you in there?’

There’s a pause then he grunts. ‘Go away, whoever you are.’

‘It’s Demi.’

‘Go away.’

‘OK.’ I turn away, thinking I may as well clear up the kitchen; that’s what he hired me for. Just as I reach the door, there’s a shout behind me.

‘Come back.’

Cal pokes his head out of the study door.

‘It’ll wait until later,’ I say.

‘No. We’ll get it over with now.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m not at my best,’ he growls.

To be honest, I haven’t noticed loads of difference but I keep that to myself.

‘Sit down,’ he says gruffly, sweeping papers off an old wheeled chair in front of his desk.

I sit; suddenly worried that he might have changed his mind about having me at Kilhallon.

‘I have to finish this email first,’ he mutters, eyes fixed on the screen again. He hasn’t had a shave, again, and he has dark circles under his eyes. He looks awful but drop dead gorgeous all the same.

He glances up briefly, obviously having caught me perving over him. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing.’ Heat rises to my cheeks again. ‘I really can come back later. Polly said you were busy.’

‘She’s right but I’ll be even busier later. Wait a minute and I’ll be done.’

Frowning at the screen, he taps away with two fingers while I try to focus on the study and not on him. It’s like a junk shop – antique shop, if I’m being generous – and bigger than I expected, despite being crammed with stuff just like the sitting room. Two of the walls are lined with bookcases from floor to ceiling; proper old-fashioned leather-bound books as well as paperbacks. The desk must be centuries old and among all the letters and paperwork, Cal’s laptop whirrs softly. If it was me, I’d put the light on because even though it’s a bright April morning, not much sunshine penetrates the dimness.

‘OK. I’m done. Let’s talk about your role here.’

My role? I try to stay serious, while longing to dance around the study, shouting ‘yes!’, listening to Cal outlining what he wants me to do: generally helping around the place and supporting him to get the holiday park back on its feet. He also asks me if I want to go to college in September to do some tourism and catering courses.

‘We need stationery from the office supplies store and I’d like you to get some costs for refitting the reception. You’d better get some new clothes too.’

I glance down at my only pair of jeans and T-shirt, wondering why he’s brought up the subject again. ‘I don’t need a handout.’

‘Fine. In that case, will you accept an advance on your salary? You can pay me back if you like but you may as well get some work clothes and safety boots on the business. The agricultural store on the road to St Ives should have what you need.’

‘Thanks,’ I say, wishing I hadn’t been quite so dismissive.

He pulls out his wallet. ‘Here’s my card so you can get some cash, though we’ve still got an account at the agricultural and office stores.’

‘I could run off with this,’ I joke.

‘Not without Mitch. He’s my hostage.’

I snort. ‘He’d never stay with you.’

‘Want to bet?’ He grins in such a sexy way, I get the funny fizzing feeling low in my stomach. I half-wish he was fat and old and picked his teeth or something, rather than this hot. It would make life so much easier.

The door opens and Polly stands in the doorway blocking out the light. ‘Cal? I thought you’d like to know you’ve had a letter.’

‘Leave it on the desk, please.’

Ignoring him, Polly holds an envelope under his nose. It’s the kind you see in costume dramas, with elaborate, old-fashioned handwriting on the front.

‘I thought I should bring this one over personally.’ She waggles the envelope, a sly gleam in her eye.

Cal looks at it but doesn’t take it. ‘I said, leave it on the desk. *Please.*’ The please is added with sarcasm, almost menace.

Polly lays it on top of a pile of other papers but makes no attempt to leave.

‘You can go now.’ Cal’s voice is quieter, and his finger taps the table. ‘And you.’

It’s a second before I realise he means me.

‘See you later,’ says Polly, smirking.

I push myself up from the chair. ‘So, do you want any lunch?’

‘Just leave me.’ His head snaps up. God, he looks angry – but that’s nothing to the pain I see in his eyes. I don’t say any more, just do as he asks. He was moody before I walked in here. I don’t know what’s in that letter, but it looks as if it’s almost destroyed him before he’s even opened it.

CHAPTER SIX

I knew it had to happen. I knew it was coming but that doesn't lessen the pain or make it any easier to take. I brush my fingers over the embossed script, and the handwritten insertion of my name. It sounds so formal and so final. Did Isla write it herself – or her mother? I can't believe it was Luke's idea but maybe I don't know him any more.

WE'RE ENGAGED!

Isla and Luke

invite

Mr Calvin Penwith

to celebrate their engagement with them

On Saturday June 25th

from 7 p.m.

At Bosinney House, St Trenyan

RSVP to Isla Channing

The date is more than two months away, which makes me feel that Mrs Channing has had a hand in the invites. She obviously wants to send a signal out to the world that Isla and Luke are officially together. She never liked me and perhaps I don't blame her if she thought I was making Isla unhappy by trekking off abroad all the time.

Perhaps Luke wants to send me a signal and formalise the engagement. Last night, all I could think about was Luke lying in bed with Isla and contrasting it with the times I lay with her in the barn here at Kilhallon, and in the warm dunes and the cool cave on the beach.

I'd been with her on that last night before I went to the Tinner's Arms for a farewell drink with my mates. Luke had warned me that evening to tell Isla how I felt but I'd held back. I thought she already did know without me saying it and as for marrying her, I thought we were too young, that we had years to do all that stuff when I'd got back from the Middle East. I could never have married her *then*, I told myself, until I'd at least tried to help the people I saw on the news and the internet. How could I sit here at Kilhallon, in my comfortable home, doing nothing, when I had the skills to help those people? What kind of a man would I be? What kind of a husband and father ...

Two years is a long time to wait; when you've hardly heard a word and when you think all hope is lost. But the irony is that it was the thought of Isla that kept me going through the long, dark days and months. A few times, I'd have topped myself if it hadn't been for her, when things got too terrible to bear.

I can't tell her the truth, of course, the reason why I was away so long and why I couldn't contact her for the past few months. When I first went on my trips abroad I used to send her 'vintage' postcards – my retro joke – but on my last assignment, there were no cards to buy or even shops still standing in most places. It was a miracle if I could get a decent signal or Wi-Fi or even access to a computer and, if I'm honest, I'd been so wrapped up with my work I sometimes didn't have a moment to even think about home. When you're dealing with people in a life or death situation, your priorities tend to change but I should have made more effort. Perhaps I can't blame Isla for thinking I wasn't interested any more. Then, when I finally wanted to speak to her, and had time on my hands at last, it was impossible.

I slam the lid of the laptop shut and throw the invitation on the floor.

Is it really too late? Maybe I should ride over to Bosinney now and speak to Isla on her own? If I see her face to face, I can let her know how I feel and change her mind. The study door slams behind me as I hurry out to the yard.

'Cal, can you come and look at this tractor?' The mechanic from the garage calls over to me.

'Not now, mate.'

‘But it needs a new clutch. It can’t wait any longer.’

‘Not now!’

‘OK but it’s your funeral.’ He folds his arms. ‘And without a working tractor, you won’t be able to do a lot of the work you’ve planned here.’

‘OK. Good point.’ After I’ve heard Baz tell me how much work the tractor needs and how much it will cost, I seek solace in the stables with the one creature that doesn’t seem to have changed, and who is waiting patiently for me. At least Polly made sure my horse, Dexter, was taken care of while I was away, even if the park fell down around her ears.

Dexter snickers softly and stamps impatiently as I tack him up. I mount him and catch sight of Demi with a clipboard, in front of the admin block. I asked her to do some research on other resorts and give her opinion on what facilities she thought we needed and how the park should look. She’s no expert but that’s what I wanted: a fresh pair of eyes to view this place as if she might love to come on holiday here herself.

Have I done the right thing in bringing her here? She’s a bright girl and she’ll probably be out of here in a year, maybe less. She’ll want more than I can offer her.

Demi glances up from her clipboard and waves at me. She looks really happy and I’m glad but I don’t wave back. I act like I haven’t been watching her, and I don’t really know why. Perhaps I still haven’t got used to people reading my emotions. I’ve had to suppress them for so long, just to survive.

With a kick on Dexter’s flanks, I urge him to a gallop along the coastal path. If I ride until the land ends, maybe I can ride Isla out of my system.

At the milestone, I spot a dark hunter galloping over the moor towards me. I’d know Robyn’s horse anywhere, and the rider’s style. I urge Dexter on and our horses both meet by a ruined engine house.

Both of us are breathless and laughing. ‘Hi, Robyn,’ I say when I’ve got my breath back. ‘I could tell it was you from miles away.’

She pushes a lock of purple black hair back under her helmet. Her face is pink with the sea air and the effort. ‘Have I improved?’ she asks.

‘You’ve got worse, if anything.’

She leans over her horse and hits my arm. ‘That’s harsh and anyway I can tell you’re way out of practice ... ouch, sorry, great big foot in even bigger mouth.’

‘There’s no need to tiptoe around it.’

‘I know but it must have been tough helping people out there and then you come back and found out about Luke and Isla. They’d only just told us.’

So Robyn notices more than she lets on. ‘It’s fine. Well, not fine ...’ It’s hopeless lying to my cousin; she knows me too well. ‘Maybe it wasn’t the best idea to turn up like that though I did try to warn Isla. I’m sorry I shocked you and Uncle Rory though by crashing his birthday do.’ I pat Dexter’s silky mane, avoiding Robyn’s eyes. ‘How was Isla after I’d left the party?’

‘What do you think? Relieved you’re home safe. She was out of her mind with worry when we hadn’t heard from you for a while.’

‘Yeah. It looked like it. I had her engagement party invitation this morning.’

‘Oh Cal. Don’t be like that. Isla was gutted, she couldn’t eat or sleep properly for the weeks after you left, and when you never replied to our latest emails ...’

A lump sticks in my throat. Does hearing that Isla suffered make me feel better or worse? Is it real love, wanting her to have suffered?

‘She seems to have got over it.’

‘She even emailed the charity but they said you were working in a remote location and couldn’t be contacted. Luke was worried as well.’

‘I’ll bet he was.’

‘This must be so hard for you.’ Choosing to ignore my sarcasm, which is probably a good thing for both of us, Robyn stops the horse, reaches over and touches me. Her fingers linger on my forearm, soothing, gentle. Once this act of kindness would have touched me deeply but that was before I learned that the only way to survive is to kill every feeling and become stone. I can’t answer her, and she takes her hand away from mine.

‘Are you sure you’re OK? You look so thin. Did something terrible happen to you out there?’

I pause, weighing up how much I can tell her and how much of that can be the truth. ‘I’m fine. I was just wrapped up in helping people.’

‘Oh Cal, I can’t even imagine how awful it was.’

‘Then don’t. Thousands of people have died or lost their families and homes in the wars. I’m here in one piece and I have all this.’ I scrape up a smile and wave in the direction of the tumbledown cottages. ‘Now, for God’s sake, tell me how *you* are and what you’ve been doing. I’ve a lot of catching up to do.’

While we walked the horses along the cliffs, she fills me in on her latest escapades. It’s comforting listening to her chatter about her jewellery design course and the fact she’s working part time in the Tinner’s to annoy Uncle Rory and earn some money of her own. She’s twenty-two now, and she ought to have her independence but she’s drifted from one thing to another since she left uni and I think it suits my uncle to keep her at home. She deserves a break: stability, love, excitement and happiness – whatever it is she’s looking for.

We urge the horses over the stream and onto the sand of Kilhallon Cove. At high tide, the beach is a sliver of pebbles but at low tide, like now, it’s a long strip of flat sand. The tang of seaweed and salt hangs in the air, reminding me of the times I rode here and made love to Isla.

Clouds gather over the sea but the weather front is on its way north of us. It’s going to be a bright day and the longer hours of sunlight have brought out the primroses in the hedgerows around the park. I’d forgotten how seductive this place could be, even in the state it is now. ‘It’s gorgeous here, isn’t it?’ Robyn says.

‘Yes. I was going to ride over to Bosinney.’

‘To see me?’ Robyn says, mischievously.

‘Of course, and my uncle.’

‘He and Luke are back in the office in Truro today. Were you coming to see Isla too? She’s visiting Bosinney; she’s thinking of using it in her new series.’

‘Is she?’

Robyn isn’t stupid; the opposite, in fact, and I feel ashamed.

‘Dad can do with the money even though he doesn’t want the disruption. Isla’s asked her director of photography to come down and take a look. She’s meant to be on holiday but I think she’ll spend most of the time scouting locations.’

‘I read about her success in the paper on my way here.’ I don’t add that I’ve since wasted way too much time googling Isla on the new laptop.

‘She’s amazing. Did you know one of her productions was nominated for a BAFTA? She’s a joint director of her own production company now.’

‘I bet her mother and Luke love that.’

‘Isla’s mother can’t talk of anything else but Luke’s more interested in making money these days since he became a director of Dad’s company. They’re playing the stock market, and making some high-risk investments – you see, they offer business and financial planning to the clients now, as well as doing the books.’

‘Luke didn’t used to be so money-oriented. Are things OK with the business?’

Robyn pulls a face. ‘I don’t know but I worry about them both. Luke’s young and I suppose he can take a few hits but Dad isn’t getting any younger. He had treatment for an ulcer last year and stress isn’t good for him, even though he’s on the mend. I’m not sure he really knows what Luke gets

up to, but they've become like father and son since Luke's dad died last year. I think my dad feels he owes it to Luke's father's memory to support him.'

'I'm sorry Uncle Rory's been ill. Do you mind Luke getting so close to him?'

Robyn reins in the horse and shrugs. 'It wouldn't make any difference if I did. I've grown up with Luke, just like you have, and I suppose he was already like a brother to me, just like you are, Cal.'

Her comment makes me feel emotional. Did I say I had no capacity for feeling left? I must be going soft again. 'How does Isla feel about all this?' I ask.

'I'm not sure how much time she has to get involved. Her work normally takes her away from Luke and Cornwall a lot.'

'Funny. She used to hate it when I went away.'

'I guess she had to get used to it when she started running her own company and you were off the scene.' Robyn sighs and stares out to sea. 'That was harsh. I'm so sorry, Cal. I wish I could turn back the clock.'

'Not harsh. True and no one can turn back time.'

We ride up the path and walk the horses past an old engine house back towards Kilhallon. Crows caw and wheel around the broken chimney stack. There's probably a bird of prey around somewhere, judging by the noise they're making.

'Polly told me you've taken on some new staff,' she says as we guide our horses through the derelict cottages towards the amenity complex.

'News travels fast.'

'Is that the new girl I saw walking her dog into the complex when I rode past yesterday morning? Skinny with long chestnut hair?'

'Probably.'

'She looks about sixteen.'

'She's twenty-one, almost the same age as you.'

'Polly says she was homeless.'

'How does she know that?'

'I don't know. Village grapevine?'

I soften my tone but St Trenyan gossip never changes. God knows what they've made up about me, though it can't be any more outlandish than the truth I suppose.

'Not exactly. Demi was working at Sheila's Beach Hut but was looking for a fresh start with accommodation. She's had catering and um ... other hospitality experience. She needed a break and I needed staff. End of.'

We ride along the edge of the cliff now and a gull swoops low, startling Robyn's horse but she soon regains control and carries on as if nothing had happened. She's far more confident than before I went away, with the horse at least. I'm not sure she's happy, though, and I don't quite know why.

'We were a bit surprised that you'd moved that quickly. Are you really planning to re-open the park again soon?'

'It's either that or let the whole place rot, and we could do with some jobs round here from what I saw in St Trenyan. It could just be me, but it looks more run-down than before I went away. I can't sit on my arse letting the park go downhill even further when I could do some good with it.'

'I'm not criticising, Cal. I'm right behind you and if there's anything I can do to help, just ask.'

'Thanks.'

'I didn't only come over to share the gossip. I also wanted to ask you to a party.'

I burst out laughing. 'I'm not in much of a party mood.'

'I know that but this is important. It's a charity ball at the Dolphin Country Club in aid of a homeless charity.'

I laugh at the irony. 'Thanks, but I'm too busy trying to get the business back on its feet. You know what they say: charity begins at home.'

‘You don’t believe that!’

I urge the horse to a trot and the ocean grows closer, the waves like the hooves of a thousand horses galloping to meet us.

‘I haven’t said when this ball is yet,’ Robyn shouts to me.

‘Whenever it is, I’m too busy.’

She catches up with me easily. ‘This event will be good for your business. My friend says all the local “great and good” will be there.’

‘There you are then: I don’t count as either.’

‘Argh, Cal, you drive me nuts. Say you’ll come? You can take me with you, as there’s no one else worth going with.’

My jaw aches from trying not to smile. ‘Won’t that be like going with your brother?’

She wrinkles her nose. ‘No, this would be more like going with my gay best friend.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Go on, you know you’re tempted. You love to shock people.’

I laugh, wondering if she has any idea what I might have done while I’ve been ‘away’.

‘I haven’t upset you, have I? Dad says I never think before I speak and I talk too much ... Luke definitely thinks so. He told me.’

‘Then they’re both talking out of their arses and Luke should shut up.’

‘Maybe they’re right.’ She laughs but I feel angry with my uncle and Luke.

‘Be yourself, and screw anyone who doesn’t like it.’

‘That’s not always so simple. I haven’t got a proper job apart from working in the Tinner’s and I can’t afford my own place yet.’

I think of the cottages on the estate and the fact I let Demi have one, but I can’t afford to give away any more of them and besides, I can’t interfere in Robyn’s life; she needs to stand up to my uncle and make her own way.

‘So, you’ll come to this charity do? You’d be doing me a massive favour.’

Her voice is light but holds an edge of desperation. I get the feeling there’s something she’s not telling me.

‘I’ll think about it.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Cal said there was work to do here, he wasn't joking. Over the past few weeks, he's been to Truro and St Trenyan, meeting with his old contacts to try to raise extra investment in the new resort. Polly has been moaning even more than usual about the 'bloody strangers' poking around in the derelict farm buildings and cottages and tramping in and out of the farmhouse in muddy boots.

I think it's exciting, and at least Cal seems wrapped up in the business, rather than getting slowly pissed in his study all evening. I was researching more competitor parks, but Polly asked me to take the empty beer and whisky bottles to the recycling bins in the morning. I don't want to judge people but I don't think the booze helps his mood much.

Talking of which, I finally found out why he acted like the world has ended when he received The Letter. Polly told me that it was an invitation to his ex's engagement party. Turns out this Isla and Cal were crazy about each other but when he came back to Cornwall, he found out she'd got engaged to his mate. Polly says Isla thought Cal wasn't interested any more because he'd stopped all contact with her. Polly thinks Isla should have waited until Cal came home and I agree with her on this one, not that it matters to me. There's no way I am going to rely on some bloke for my future, however much I owe him and however hot he is.

'Demi?'

Cal meets me by the waste bins. There are dark circles under his eyes, and I think he was working on a business plan until the small hours.

'I need to go to Truro to see the architect and try to shave some costs from the plans. Can you spare the time to visit the builders' merchant and get some costs and ideas for the bathrooms and kitchens in the cottages? We need to make a start.'

This sounds like an interesting job so I jump at the chance. 'Yes, if you want me to.'

'Good. Be ready in ten minutes.'

Cal dropped me off at the builders' merchants and I checked out the bathrooms and kitchens, and arranged for the designers to come and see the old cottages. He didn't ask me to do that so I hope it's OK. The staff told me it can take weeks to get the fixtures and fittings and we need to compare the estimates. My visit took over an hour so I walked over to Lemon Quay to meet him, wondering if I had time to grab a takeout coffee while I was there.

The city is busier than last time I was here because there's a food fair taking place, with stalls and vans selling everything from local chocolates and sea salt to fresh fish and even Cornish tea. The rich scents and spicy aromas compete for my attention as I browse the stores, trying to resist buying things that aren't strictly necessary. Sheila tried to use local suppliers but I had no idea you could get all of this stuff right on the doorstep.

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