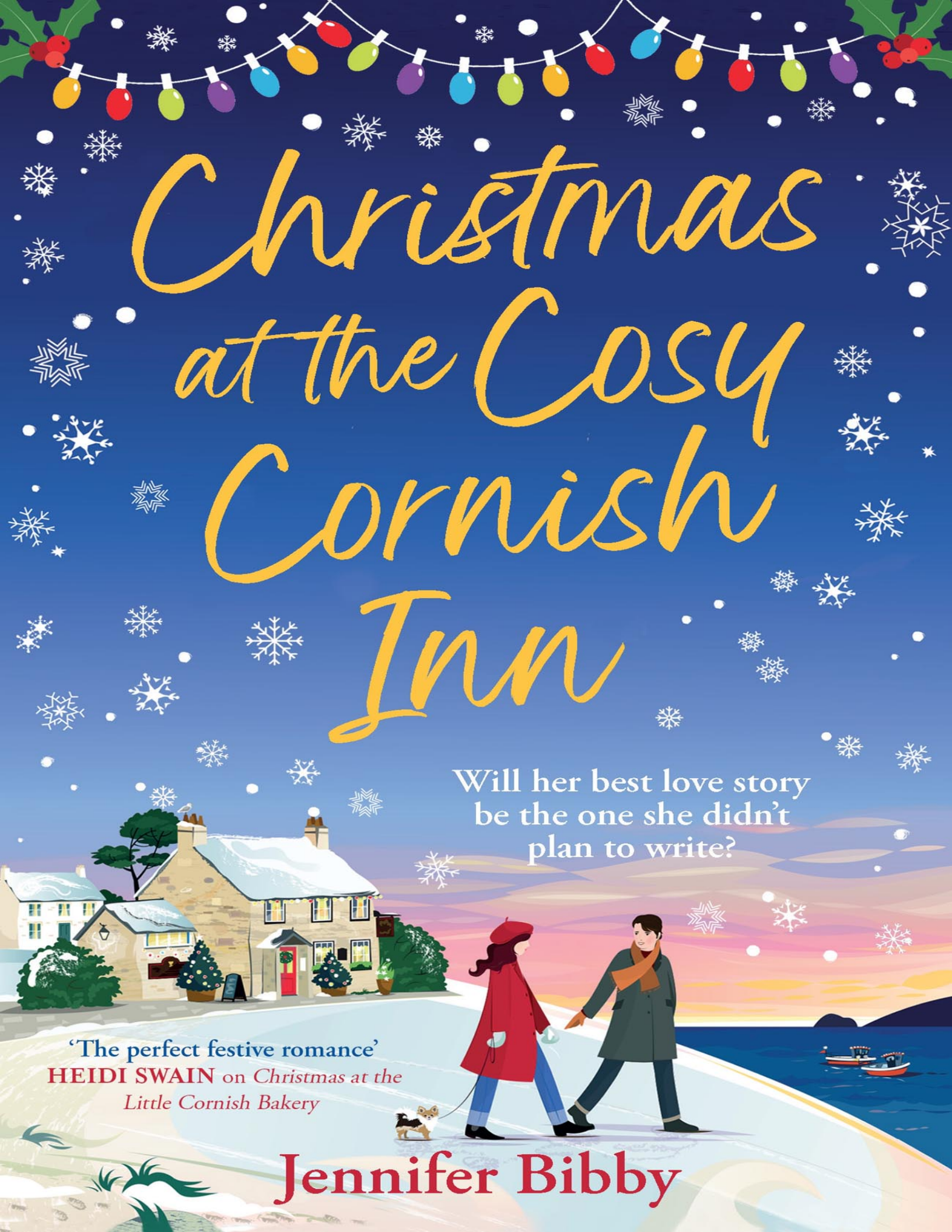




# Christmas at the Cosy Cornish Inn

Will her best love story  
be the one she didn't  
plan to write?

*'The perfect festive romance'*  
**HEIDI SWAIN** on *Christmas at the  
Little Cornish Bakery*

**Jennifer Bibby**



# Christmas at the Cosy Cornish Inn

Jennifer Bibby

ZAFFRE

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

*In loving memory of Frank Rowley, Grandad Owl. You gifted me a thesaurus and told me, 'choose the words carefully and the world will want to read what you have written.' I wish you could've read this, and all the others but thank you for reading all that you did and encouraging all my childhood stories.*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

# Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)  
[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)  
[Chapter Thirty](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-One](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)  
[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)  
[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)  
[About the Author](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[\*OceanofPDF.com\*](#)

## Prologue

Bella glanced from the laptop screen to the framed, signed photo of Ross Poldark, and back down again. The cursor blinked accusingly on the blank page, the same way it had done for the past three months. The same reminder that she was all out of ideas.

With a sigh, Bella drained her coffee and considered heading downstairs to make another. It'd be her third. Best not to. She was jittery enough. Instead, she got up and headed over to the window. Stretching her arms above her head, Bella took in the soft November day outside. Pale grey sky, a few leaves clinging onto branches for dear life, a reminder that the year was winding down. Cold dread ran down her spine at the thought of Christmas drawing closer. Once Bella's favourite time of year, but after last Christmas, she didn't know if she had the strength to face it, to fake being jolly.

Another glance at Poldark's smouldering gaze and then Bella sat down. He reminded her of another Cornish boy she'd lost her heart to more years ago than she should be dwelling on and dreaming about. Three hot summer days, nights filled with hopeful chatter, a sharing of dreams and a weaving of future plans. Plans that sadly came to nothing. Bella could still just about recall the curl of his dark hair, blue eyes that glittered. She'd been recreating that face over and over in her romance novels, until now, when it seemed she had run out of steam.

Opening the internet browser, she typed 'Cornwall' into the search engine and pored over beautiful shots of aquamarine seas, tiny harbours, sunsets over wild cliffs. The reality looked beyond anything Bella could imagine. What would it be like to live in a tiny fishing village? To be lulled to sleep by the waves? Secluded beaches, wild cliff faces all bound together

with an air of enchantment. With these images in mind, Bella hopped onto some holiday lettings sites. After all, it wouldn't hurt to have a look, would it? There was nothing stopping her from going away.

Bella clicked through stunning penthouse flats with harbour views, cosy nooks with roaring fires, cramped but charming fisherman's cottages. 'Imagine living there,' she said to Mimi, but her chihuahua merely opened one eye and snuffled back to sleep.

As Bella clicked through the places to rent, the prices reasonable for out of season, the idea of taking herself off to Cornwall started to grow on her. Why shouldn't she? Since her split from Max she had spent the past eleven months camping out in her sister's loft conversion. Although Nicki claimed she didn't mind, and her twin nieces Bea and Flo loved having her about, especially for story time, Bella couldn't help but think she was overstaying her welcome a bit.

She could treat it as a research trip. After all, her currently totally unwritten novel was set in Cornwall. Maybe heading west to the end of the country would inspire her, push her towards her January deadline, which loomed rather largely and terrifyingly on the horizon. At least going to Cornwall would feel proactive, or so she told herself as she clicked onto the profile of a blue fronted cottage in the village of Polcarrow.

*A charming two bedroom fisherman's cottage situated in the up-and-coming village of Polcarrow. The property boasts enviable sea views and is fully equipped to be the perfect home from home. With a cosy lounge and kitchen/diner, plus a small courtyard garden and two bedrooms, this is the perfect Cornish hideaway.*

Bella flicked through the photos, drawn to the gorgeous jewel-hued soft furnishings, the view of the sea from the bedroom window. The thought of hunkering down in the front room, lighting the logburner, and curling up with her notebook was everything she'd ever dreamed of. Could she do it? She'd been saving money since she'd moved out of the house she shared with Max. Money that was meant to be her own deposit. Money that was meant to kick-start the next chapter of her life.

But who was to say that chapter couldn't start in Cornwall?

## Chapter One

‘Turn right and carry on straight towards your destination,’ the satnav instructed.

Bella slowed down and indicated, wishing there was someone who could give such firm directions in all other areas of her life. With a sigh, she turned right onto a narrow road that was hazy with mist. Slowing her speed, Bella drove past a large house that sat sentinel on top of a hill. Carrying on, she took the road carefully as it wound its way through the rest of the village which revealed itself in snippets. A pink-painted door, a hanging basket full of late-blooming flowers, a bench in a front garden.

A sea mist had risen, filling up all the spaces in the village, muffling her entrance. Bella couldn’t help but feel that she was sneaking in. Which was fine. The lower she could lie, the better. Anyway, part of her was thrilled at the way the spectral mist spread its way over the village, shrouding it, softening it.

Beside her, Mimi let out an excited bark and started to scramble around in her car seat.

‘Hey, baby, it’s fine, we’re almost there, then we can both stretch our legs,’ Bella soothed. It had been an early start, leaving Hertfordshire in the early hours to make the long journey down to Cornwall. It had felt like sneaking out, which had felt as right as sneaking into Polcarrow did.

The church spire emerged from the mist like a beacon marking the way. Bella snuck a glance at the little arrow on her satnav, which was pointing her onwards as if encouraging her not to give up. Was she doing the right thing coming here? It was a bit late to allow her doubts to take over. She’d taken a short-term lease on a fisherman’s cottage with harbour views, sure it would be the perfect setting to finish, well, start her overdue novel.

Bella groaned. She didn't want to think about the emails from her agent, Bethan, and editor asking for updates. Didn't want to think of the abandoned drafts, the blank pages, the complete inability to write more than a few sentences. It was too awful to contemplate. If her trip to Cornwall didn't fire up her imagination, then she knew she'd have to confess to everyone that she couldn't do it anymore. The magic had gone.

Not wanting to dwell on that sadness, Bella turned onto the harbour road. She crept past a row of candy-coloured fisherman's cottages; the blue one due to be her home for the next month. A frisson of excitement buzzed through her veins to think she'd be living here, a million miles away from everyone who knew her. Daunting but exciting. For the next few weeks, she could be anyone, there wouldn't be a soul who knew her, no one to spread fake sympathy across their face and ask if she was OK, when really what they wanted was the gossip. Here, Bella could renew herself. Or so she hoped.

'You have reached your destination,' the satnav announced.

Bella pulled up across the street from a small row of shops. She extracted herself from the car and stretched out her body, groaning with happiness as the aches of being squeezed into the driver's seat for more hours than she wanted to contemplate, began to dissipate. Bella turned to take in the view. Not that there was currently much to see. The sea mist overflowed from the beach, spreading like a cloud across the pavements. Surreal, unlike anything Bella had ever seen before.

From the passenger seat, Mimi yelped.

'Don't fret, I've not forgotten you.' Bella reached across to unclip her beloved dog from her special seat before attaching a lead. Closing the car door, Bella put Mimi down. Instantly the little dog began trailing along the harbour walls, sniffing at everything and marking her territory. Bella smiled, wishing she had the same confidence as Mimi did, announcing her arrival for any other canines in the vicinity.

'Are you done?' Bella asked as Mimi came back to her side. The dog gave a little bark to indicate she was. 'Do you like it here?' Another bark. 'Well, that's good enough for me. Sorry we can't go on the beach yet, darling, I'm sure you'll love it.'

Mimi didn't look so sure.

‘Right, let’s see what the instructions are.’ Bella pulled her phone out of her pocket and swiped at the screen. Seeing there wasn’t much internet signal, she was glad that she’d taken a screenshot of the instructions. Limited signal was good. It meant less chance of anyone tracking her down. ‘OK, so it says to go into the café and ask for Lola and she’ll have the keys. Where’s the café?’

Bella scanned the harbour and through the mist she saw it, like a comforting beacon. Soft light in a window, a couple of chairs placed optimistically outside, a pale grey awning with *Lola’s* written across it in cursive. Her stomach rumbled. It had been a long time since the unsatisfying service station breakfast and she was suddenly desperate for a cup of tea.

Bella locked her car, picked Mimi up and tucked her under her arm. She looked at the dog, seeking reassurance, ‘Are you ready?’ Mimi stared back at her for a few moments making Bella wonder what her treasured companion was really thinking and knowing that she might be a bit silly for running all her decisions past a chihuahua. Mimi had been with her through everything, had never abandoned her. They were a team.

Mimi gave a little bark and began to wriggle, as if she couldn’t wait to get on with their next adventure. Bella dropped a kiss on the little dog’s head.

‘Right, let’s do this, let’s go find Lola.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Two

Bella pushed open the door and stepped into the café. Immediately she was engulfed by the comforting warm aroma of freshly baked cake. Even Mimi closed her eyes in bliss as they inhaled the scent. Sugar and coffee, chocolate and caramel. The café may have been small but it charmed Bella immediately. From the pale grey to the lemon yellow accents, it was the perfect vintage café. Bella was a sucker for a floral teapot and matching cup. Fairy lights and bunting were strung from the shelves and little checked cushions were placed on the chairs, inviting customers to take a break from their day. Homely and welcoming, everything about it made Bella smile with joy.

‘Good afternoon, can I help you?’ A woman with dark hair piled up in a messy bun greeted her with a friendly smile from behind the glass cake domes on the counter.

Bella indicated to Mimi. ‘Are dogs allowed?’

‘Of course they are! Isn’t she adorable!’ The girl came out from behind the counter to give Mimi a fuss. ‘Oh my gosh, look at her.’

Mimi lapped up the attention. Bella glanced around the café, there were no other customers. ‘You’re not about to close, are you?’

‘No, it’s the lull between lunch and the post-school rush, so sit anywhere. What can I get you?’ The woman stepped away from them and back behind the counter, giving her hands a wash as Bella took in the selection of cakes.

The counter was stocked with all manner of tempting treats. Bella’s eyes scanned them all, not knowing what to have, or where to start. Her stomach rumbled making her laugh. ‘I’d better choose quickly! But what?’

Carrot cake, oh my, that's my favourite, but those brownies, ah, scones! So much to choose from! What do you recommend?'

'One of each?' The woman grinned.

'Very tempting, but since I've just got here I should really toast my arrival in Cornwall with a cream tea, since it's tradition,' Bella said with a longing look at the carrot cake. Maybe she could take a slice away with her.

'Perfect choice.' The woman winked. 'Lola's scones are legendary,' she said as she placed one on a plate. 'Tea or coffee?'

'Tea please. I'm actually here to see Lola.' Bella pulled her phone out of her pocket, flicked the screen open and held the screenshot out.

'Ah! Yes! Lola said she was expecting you. She's had to pop out but asked me to give her a call when you arrived. Don't worry, she's not gone far. Take a seat and I'll bring everything over to you. I'm Freya, by the way.' She held out her hand.

'Bella,' she said as she shook Freya's hand, 'lovely to meet you. I'll just take that table by the window.'

'Good choice, it's our most popular.'

Bella settled herself in the window seat, which on a clear day would have the perfect sea view. However, she found the mist enchanting, it appealed to her romantic imagination. Sea mist hinted at shrouded secrets, of lovers meeting for clandestine trysts, of smugglers and heart-wrenching shipwrecks. Pulling a notebook from her bag she began to write down a few notes, her imagination pricking up in ways it hadn't back home. Would her fictional lovers meet under a sea mist or would it cruelly part them? She'd have to get out in it herself, feel the mist against her own skin, see how suffocating it was, allow it to seep into her subconscious.

'There you go.' Her train of thought was cut off by Freya placing a tray laden with a cream tea on the table. 'There's a couple of dog biscuits for ...'

'Mimi,' Bella supplied.

'An adorable name for an adorable dog,' Freya said. 'I'll bring her a bowl of water. Lola will be about ten minutes, I hope that's OK?'

'That's fine, I'm happy to wait,' Bella said.

It was true. So much had happened in the last week – finding the cottage to rent, packing up her stuff, convincing her sister Nicki that she really needed the break, and not to mention the mammoth drive to Cornwall – that

Bella was happy to pause and take stock of what she'd done. Her stomach still churned as she wondered if it had been the right thing to do, but the way Polcarrow was already igniting the embers of her imagination made her sure that it was. She was a long way from the full spark of inspiration but as she gazed at the sea mist, Bella was aware that this was the closest she had felt to wanting to pick up a pen in months.

Bella sliced into her scone, watching as it fell apart, the crumb soft and golden. She was in Cornwall, so what went first? She paused over the jam and cream, wracking her brain. Jam first. Phew, first hurdle cleared. After spreading on the glistening strawberry jam, followed by a generous dollop of clotted cream, Bella sat back and took a bite, sighing with pleasure at the taste. It really was the best scone she'd ever eaten.

She reached for her phone and took a quick picture to post on Instagram. Bella might have been struggling internally with writer's block, but she knew externally how important it was to keep giving her loyal readers little snippets of her life. The likes started to ping in as she slipped her phone into her pocket and turned her attention back to the tasty treat.

She polished off the first half in record-breaking time, famished from her journey, before pouring a cup of tea and sitting back, determined to savour the second half. Then again, she reminded herself, she would be living here for a while, therefore there was no reason for the next month not to be scones galore, was there?

Bella finished spreading the jam and cream onto the second half and was just about to take her first bite when the café door swung open and in stepped a very glamorous-looking woman with pillar-box red hair. Bella took in her blue vintage coat and hair pinned expertly back from her face. The woman turned to her with a warm smile.

'Ah, you must be Bella, I'm Lola.' The woman beamed as she held out her hand.

Transfixed, Bella shook it. 'Yes, I am, nice to meet you.'

Lola cast a glance at the tea and scone on the table. 'Perfect, I see Freya has been looking after you. So sorry I wasn't here when you arrived, but it turns out there's all sorts of demands on a vicar's wife. I'm still learning the ropes. How was your journey?' She signalled something to Freya, then shrugged off her coat and dumped her bag on the floor before sitting down.

‘Long,’ Bella said grimly as Mimi uncurled herself from where she’d been asleep under Bella’s chair.

‘Oh, who is this?’ Lola’s face lit up with delight.

‘Mimi, she loves being the centre of attention.’

‘And you don’t?’ Lola remarked as she picked up one of the treats and fed it to Mimi, who practically swallowed it down whole.

‘Face of a lady, manners of a pig.’ Bella smiled, disconcerted that Lola had twigged that Mimi was her way of keeping the attention off herself.

Lola thanked Freya for the cup of tea before turning her attention back to Bella, who shifted uncomfortably. There was something about Lola’s friendly gaze that seemed to strip back the layers, making Bella feel as if Lola could see right inside her. Determined not to crumble, or give anything away, she took another bite of the scone, wondering what assumptions Lola was making about her. Bella’s long hair was dyed a plummy red colour, and her black clothes, an alternative almost gothic style she’d perfected that made her stand out, even though, currently, she wanted nothing more than to fade into the background.

‘What brings you here?’ Lola asked.

‘Oh, I just needed a break,’ she began, trying for nonchalant and non-committal, but there was something in the way Lola was looking at her that demanded the truth. ‘Nothing was going well back home and I needed to get away. Relationship ended, developed crippling writer’s block and well, here I am.’ She held her hands out in a ‘ta-da’ action.

Lola laughed. ‘Oh hun, that’s why we’re all here. Every one of us. I came here trying to find traces of my grandmother after she died, Freya was fleeing a horrible ex. Although Effie was sent here. She runs the bookshop next door. She’ll be thrilled there’s a writer here.’

‘Oh God,’ Bella groaned. ‘I was hoping to keep under the radar for a bit.’

Lola studied her for a few seconds longer than was comfortable. ‘What do you write?’

‘Romance, well, not exactly romance, more like those timeslip books where there’s some past story for the present heroine to uncover, you know,’ she explained badly.

‘Ah, I know the sort.’ Lola nodded before leaning in. ‘Don’t tell Effie but I’m not much of a reader.’

‘That’s OK, I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine.’

Lola raised her teacup. ‘Deal.’

Bella sealed it by chinking hers against Lola’s before settling back in her chair. There was something almost of a kindred spirit about Lola. Bella sensed there was so much more to the glamorous café owner than her floral vintage dress and perfect hair indicated. Bella’s own sixth sense twitched a bit, so she was hardly surprised when Lola reached into her handbag and pulled out a worn box of tarot cards.

‘Now, you don’t have to, but I do struggle to take no for an answer,’ Lola said as she lifted the lid off.

Bella felt the magic rise from the cards as they were freed from their container. Her fingers itched to touch them. She loved the esoteric. Other realms, ghost stories and spiritual practices fascinated her. ‘They look well used,’ Bella said, reaching for the cards before pulling her hand back.

‘Go on,’ Lola encouraged.

Bella picked them up reverently, cradling them in her palms, understanding how precious these worn, well-loved cards were. She could feel the futures they contained, the warnings and promises as she began to shuffle them. ‘I tried to learn to read them when I was a teenager,’ she explained, ‘but mainly it was a bit of fun for me and my friends. Thought we were cool dabbling in a bit of witchcraft. I don’t think our powers were very potent though, but I did get Jimmy Kerney to kiss me at the leavers’ ball, so who knows?’ She laughed at the memory, the awkward shuffled slow dance, the tentative kiss as the lights came up. ‘So, do you do this?’ She signalled to the cards.

‘Oh yes.’ Lola’s face lit up. ‘I can’t help but read the cards of everyone who arrives in the village. One, I’m nosey, and two, they’ve all come here because they’re lost. Usually there’s a lot more resistance than you’re putting up, no one has so willingly shuffled the cards before, but am I right in thinking this is your kind of thing?’

Bella grinned. ‘The gothy clothes are a bit of a giveaway, aren’t they? Yes, I guess so. I’ve had readings before, but nothing has ever come of them. Still, I can’t help but give my money away full of hope and curiosity.’

‘Well, this is free and my success rate is at one hundred per cent, I’ve never been wrong, have I, Freya?’

‘Nope, not that she needs more encouragement,’ Freya called from where she was tidying up the counter, ‘but I begrudgingly have to confess she was one hundred per cent right for me.’

Intrigue sparked through Bella. She studied the cards in her hands. The softened edges, the blue and gold backs, tightening her grip on them. Did she want to know the future? It terrified her as much as it excited her. But could she pass the cards back to Lola and never know? No. Instead she placed them on the table between them.

‘Ready?’

Bella nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Make three piles and then choose the one you are most drawn to.’

Bella did as she was asked and studied the three piles until she was drawn to the middle one. She laid a finger on it.

Lola picked up the other two piles and placed them back in their box. With a smile, she picked up Bella’s selection and said, ‘Let’s see what the cards say. Oh, I love this bit!’ Lola did a little shimmy as she started to lay them out on the table.

Picking Mimi up for moral support, Bella leaned forwards, watching as Lola laid the cards out.

‘Oh my, this—’ she tapped one ‘—a horrible ex. He betrayed you. What a scoundrel! And with a friend. Awful!’

‘Oh God, he’s not coming back, is he?’ She’d managed to spend the last few months dodging his pleas to talk. There was nothing Bella wanted to go over again.

‘No,’ Lola reassured her, ‘he won’t be back. Don’t lose any sleep about it. But you do need to sort things out between you so that you can properly move on. Financial, you know, your house.’ Lola waited until Bella nodded in acknowledgement of this before laying down the next card. ‘This one is good though, you’ve come here searching for something. Inspiration. Work? Whatever it is, it will return. You’ve been blocked and lost for a while. Sea air and a change of scenery will unlock all this for you. This card shows the shedding of an old life and this one hints at complete renewal.’

Bella brightened at this. ‘That’s a relief.’

‘Has it been hard?’ Lola asked.

‘Yes. Writer’s block. I have a January deadline. The book is about a girl who falls for a smuggler. That’s as far as I’ve got,’ she admitted.

‘Well, Cornwall is the perfect place to write about a smuggler,’ Lola said as she picked up the renew and unblock cards. ‘These two show you’ll find your inspiration. It’ll all be fine. But also, you need to be honest with everyone that you’re struggling, OK. You’re carrying too heavy a burden.’

Tears sprang into Bella’s eyes at hearing someone she barely knew so gently tell her it was OK to be finding things difficult. She finally felt seen. Nicki had been great, but she had a family of her own. Bella had lost friends in the aftermath of the split, but she’d been too shocked to really care.

Lola waited for Bella to nod before she continued, ‘Right, let’s see about the rest.’ She dealt out the remaining cards. ‘Oh would you look at that!’

‘What?’ Bella leaned even further in.

Lola picked up a card and wafted it under her nose. ‘Soulmates! Ah I love when that card comes up.’

‘Soulmates? No. No, I’m not looking for love.’

‘That’s what they all say, but there’s no denying what’s written here.’ She laid down two more cards. ‘It’s going to be fiery and passionate, instant attraction, but there’s going to be some hurdles to overcome.’ Lola laid the final card down. ‘What’s this? Interesting. A ghost from your past about to show up.’

‘What? Who?’

Lola peered at the cards. ‘I can’t tell you that, but what I do know is you’re going to find everything your heart desires in Polcarrow.’

Lola sat back and picked up her teacup, leaving Bella to study the cards. A ghost from her past? A shiver ran down her spine.

‘Everything my heart desires,’ she echoed, the promise thrilling but terrifying.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Three

‘Well, that’s the grand tour,’ Lola announced after she’d completed a whistle-stop tour of the cottage she used to call home, ‘do let me know if you need anything.’

Bella hugged Mimi to her. ‘I will. Just one question, if you don’t mind me asking?’

Lola quirked an eyebrow. ‘Go on, I’m an open book.’

‘Why are you leaving such a lovely place?’

Lola held out her hand where a sparkling engagement ring nestled against a simple gold band. ‘I got married. I can’t quite believe it myself. Me, a tarot card reading café owner fell head over heels in love with the local vicar.’

Bella laughed. ‘That sounds like something out of a book.’

‘Yes, it was a complete fairy tale,’ Lola sighed. ‘I’ve moved into the rectory, it’s a bit dated but I’ve had permission to give it a makeover. I think Tristan is sick of paint samples and fabric swatches, which was my plan all along of course, he’ll just hand over the reins to me.’

Bella had spent less than an hour in Lola’s company but could already see that the woman would be a force to be reckoned with. She couldn’t help but warm to the charming café owner. People’s quirks fascinated Bella; she stored them away in her imagination box, just in case one day she was rifling through searching for the perfect character.

Lola picked up her bag. ‘Right, I’ll leave you to get settled in. My number is in the guest book or you can just pop into the café. Just a word of warning, the villagers are friendly but very nosey, so don’t get worried if people start sniffing around trying to figure out what you’re doing here.’

Bella froze at the thought of the locals peering through her windows, spying on her. ‘Oh, erm . . .’

‘Don’t worry, they’ll keep their distance, it’ll all be fine. See you later.’ Lola reached to open the front door. ‘Apologies that I’ve not had the chance to decorate for Christmas yet. I feel terribly behind with it already being the end of November.’

‘No worries, I’m not really much of a Christmassy person,’ Bella said breezily, adding a little shrug as if to indicate it was no big deal.

Lola gave her a look, as if she sensed there was more to it than Bella was letting on, before heading out.

The door closed and Bella cuddled Mimi to her. Lola might be a lot of fun, but she was also slightly exhausting. Either that or Bella’s brain was tired from the epic drive she’d endured. She’d tried to make it feel like an adventure in her head, a rich lady fleeing convention, heading off to find fame and fortune in far-flung shores, but after four relentless hours on the motorway, even Bella’s usually overactive imagination had had enough.

‘Shall we have a proper look around?’ Bella asked Mimi before setting her down on the hallway floor. ‘Where takes your fancy?’

Mimi sniffed along the skirting board and made her way into the front room. It was gorgeous. A deep blue sofa was positioned against the wall, with a matching armchair tucked into the space beside the window. Bella knew this would be absolutely the perfect position to drink her morning coffee and mull over the words she wanted to write that day. Well, more like hoped to at the moment. It had been a depressingly long time since she’d been able to get more than a sentence down.

Not wanting to sink back into the creative despair that had been hanging over her all year, following her to writers’ events and meetings with her agent, Bethan, to retreats where she pretended she was working really hard. It had even infiltrated her family and personal life. Bella was sick of being so down in the dumps, so she suspected her nearest and dearest were just as fed up with her behaving like a wet weekend. Not that she’d let on to anyone just how bad it was. Just how close she was to offering her advance back and finding a normal job.

Polcarrow was her last attempt to get something going, even if it was rough, half the desired word count, she just wanted to write again. She missed it, missed the magic sparking in her brain, flowing through her

fingers. Missed the way she could get lost in her fictional world, retreating into it for days, only emerging euphoric when she had tens of thousands of words under her belt. Bella felt as if someone had sucked her entire soul out of her body.

As she skimmed her eyes down the bookshelf, she took in travel guides, a few novels chosen to appeal to holidaymakers, all stacked up next to a blue and white Cornishware vase. Bella picked it up, solid and weighty. Next time she popped out she'd get some flowers to put in it; she loved having flowers in the house.

Bella replaced the vase on the shelf and leaving Mimi sniffing the skirting board, made her way into the kitchen. It was small and compact, with a round table and matching chairs with red checked cushions on them giving a rustic and homely vibe. Bella peered through the window onto a small back garden. It was a little unloved, but she could forgive that as the beach was a mere stone's throw away.

Bella had packed some supplies but opening the fridge and exploring the cupboards, she was pleased to see Lola had left the basics for her: bread, milk, eggs, some local apples and a bag of scones. Bella opened the bag and inhaling their freshly baked scent, figured it wouldn't be too bad a thing if scones became her writing snack of choice. Help her get into the mood and all that. Bella resisted the temptation to devour another one by putting them in the cupboard. As she did, her phone pinged.

How's it going? the text from Nicki read.

Clicking onto her camera app and selecting video, Bella made her way upstairs, providing a gentle commentary on the property. Nicki had been concerned that Bella was running away, but with Christmas drawing closer and the twins' excitement reaching new levels, she understood that Bella needed some space.

'So, this is the upstairs,' Bella said as she pushed open the door to the smaller bedroom at the back. 'Isn't it adorable?' Bunting hung from the bookshelf that ran across the top of the bed and it was decorated in a cosy floral theme.

'I think this is the main bedroom,' she said as she made her way down the hallway towards the bedroom at the front of the house. The walls were a pale cream and an old patchwork quilt was laid across the duvet. 'Isn't that

gorgeous?’ She rubbed the material between her fingers before turning to the window.

‘Don’t be jealous, sis, but I have a sea view, look. OK, it’s a bit misty, but you get the idea. I’ll send you more photos once the weather clears. Send my love to the girls.’ Bella blew a kiss at the camera, sent the video and placed her phone on the bed. Pushing open one of the windows, Bella leaned out as far as she could. Through the swell of the mist, she could hear the drag of the waves against the beach, the squawk of the gulls.

Again, she felt that pricking in her brain, her dormant imagination stirring, but could she trust it? It had tricked her like this over the past few months. Half abandoned chapters, characters that felt dull, underdeveloped, pages screwed up, files deleted. Bella couldn’t deny that just being in Cornwall made her feel settled and hopeful. Was Lola right? Was she really going to find everything she needed here?

Suddenly she had the urge to get outside. After hurrying downstairs, Bella checked in on Mimi, who was curled up like a croissant, fast asleep on a cocktail chair. A wave of affection washed through her at the sight of her companion. Mimi might have her little demands, but she was faithful, which was more than could be said about some people.

Bella grabbed the keys and let herself out of the little cottage, pulling her jacket tighter as she crossed the road. Her car was still parked across from the café; it would need emptying and moving. A task that could wait a few minutes.

She made her way down the steps onto the beach and paused at the bottom, ears pricked to calculate how far out the sea was. The last thing she wanted was the embarrassment of sloshing into the surf because she wasn’t paying attention. The sand was damp and Bella’s trusty Doc Martens left prints as she stepped carefully away from the harbour wall.

The sea air was damp and sweet as she inhaled it. Bella always felt cleansed when she went to the sea, as if the waves were washing away her past, smoothing her out to create a new future. It felt fitting for Polcarrow. The rush of the waves hurled itself through the foggy atmosphere, the sound a ferocious reminder of the power of the sea. Bella tingled with the thrill of it. This was exactly the sort of world her smuggler hero would be coming ashore to. Treacherous and shrouded like a secret. Bella patted down her

pockets but she'd left her phone and notebook in the cottage, so instead she closed her eyes and tried to commit the feel of the misty beach to her mind.

Bella allowed the sea mist to settle like a film on her skin, felt it cling to her hair. Licking her lips she could taste the saltiness, smell the briny aroma, fresh and clean. She gave herself up to the moment, shutting off her own thoughts in an attempt to get into those of her heroine. What would she be feeling when she stood on the beach waiting for her lover to return? Fear that he wouldn't? Hope that he would? A rush of disappointment, followed by one of love? Opening her eyes, Bella took in the scene before her, the way the shadows shifted through the mist, the way it filled up the spaces. Standing there, waiting, heart thudding with every crash of the waves, Bella realised the intensity would be almost suffocating.

Knowing she needed to get back quickly so that her thoughts could tumble through her pen onto paper, Bella made her way across the beach and up the steps. So engrossed in her heroine's state of mind, Bella nearly jumped out of her skin when she almost collided with a rather large dog.

The dog gave a warning bark which caused Bella to let out a shriek of surprise. This was followed by an amused chuckle.

'Don't mind Scruff, he just likes to make himself known.'

Bella turned in the direction of the voice and saw an old man standing by the harbour wall, a fluffy sheepdog at his side. 'Oh gosh, I'm so sorry, I was miles away.'

The man gave a little shrug. 'It's OK, we've come out to see the mist, it doesn't usually hang around like this.'

'It's fascinating,' Bella agreed. Bending down, she indicated towards the dog. 'Is he friendly?'

The man laughed. 'The life and soul of the party. Loves a fuss.'

Bella gave Scruff a scratch behind his ears, the dog almost crooning in bliss. 'You'll have to meet my Mimi, but she's a lot smaller than you.'

'Oh no, the last thing he needs is a girlfriend.' The man rolled his eyes.

Bella laughed. 'She's a bit picky, mind.'

'Good, he could do with someone to keep him on his toes. Are you the lady renting Lola's cottage?'

Taken aback, Bella asked, 'How did you know?'

The man tapped his nose. 'Intuition. Nah, just passed by the café, Freya said you'd arrived, all dressed in black like a witch. Oh no, sorry, probably

shouldn't say that!'

Bella couldn't help but laugh. 'It's a fair description and I'll take it. I do like witchy things. I'm Bella.' She held her hand out.

'Alf.' He shook it. 'I've been here forever, anything you want to know, I'm your man. Still, fog like this can surprise me, even at ninety you know. What brings you here?'

Bella glanced around wondering how much to reveal before settling on the truth, instinctively knowing this wasn't the place to try and hide anything. Not if everyone was going to find out anyway. 'I've got crippling writer's block. I have a deadline in two months and I've not written a word. So, I decided to come away and what better place to come than Cornwall, especially since my book is set here?' She watched Alf take in everything she'd said, feeling exposed and slightly silly for sharing her flimsy plan. Coming to Cornwall for inspiration. It suddenly felt cripplingly like a cliché.

'Well, if you want a good local yarn, head to the pub. Steve knows all sorts of local stories, usually you can't get him to stop talking about the myths and legends, so I reckon he'll be pleased to see you. Got a new chef. Does a very good fish pie too. Tell Steve I sent you.'

The thought of a cosy pub and a fish pie was music to Bella's ears. 'I will! Thank you.'

Scruff pulled at his lead. 'I better get on,' Alf said. 'Good to meet you. Come and tell me how you're getting on, I'm usually in Lola's every morning.'

'I will,' Bella said, realising she meant it as she watched Alf amble away until he was swallowed up by the mist. Another spark ignited in her brain. Wouldn't it be mysterious if her lovers also met under the mist, like a mirage to each other, a little suggestion of hope?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Four

Bella had just finished unpacking when Mimi wandered into the kitchen. ‘Well, you’ve been a lot of help, haven’t you?’ Mimi gave a little shake in response. ‘What shall we have for dinner?’ Opening up the fridge, she studied the scant contents: butter, jam, a bag of apples, a pint of milk, some cheese and ham. In the cupboards there were a box of eggs, a loaf of bread and a box of Weetabix. Hardly inspiring fare. She’d have to find a supermarket and do a big stock up.

Alf’s promise of the pub’s fish pie popped into her head, far more appealing than rustling up an omelette. ‘How do you fancy checking out the pub?’ she asked Mimi who responded with an affirmative bark. ‘Perfect, let me just get ready.’ Bella put a few biscuits and some water in a bowl to keep Mimi busy and headed upstairs.

The bathroom was small, but someone had managed to cram in a claw-footed bath. Even though she’d only met her once, Bella couldn’t help but think it was a very Lola thing not to skimp on luxury. It was tempting to run a bath, but Bella’s stomach rumbled so she opted for a quick shower. Cramming her long burgundy red hair into a shower cap, she turned on the shower and stepped under the stream, sighing with relief as the hot water cascaded down her aching body. Driving always stiffened her up.

Once showered, Bella wrapped herself up in the soft towels that had been left for her usage and after wiping the steam from the mirror, set about applying a tiny bit of makeup. When had she started to look so fatigued, she wondered, as she added a bit of extra blush and prayed the fresh sea air would brighten her mood and complexion. Bella ran the hairdryer through the damp ends of her hair, fluffing out the layers. Everyone had always thought she’d outgrow her goth stage, and maybe she had a little, but that

goth girl was still just beneath the surface – the black clothes, the Doc Martens, her fascination with the occult. Her teenage love of the other realms and past lives still fascinated her, and it was a joy to channel them into her much-loved timeslip romances.

Pushing the thought of writing out of her mind and dressed in her signature black, Bella made her way downstairs to find Mimi waiting by the front door, a ‘what took you so long?’ expression on her face.

‘OK, OK, darling, I’m ready now. I met another doggy earlier, a big fluffy one, maybe you can be friends. Oh, Mimi, don’t pull that face, and hold still, let me get your harness on. I don’t want a seagull carrying you away, they’re huge down here.’ Bella struggled as Mimi skipped around her feet. The little dog always saw going out as a game.

Eventually, they were both ready for their next foray into Polcarrow. Before opening the door, Bella looked down at Mimi, who looked back up at her. ‘Ready?’ Mimi barked twice and Bella opened the door, stepping out into the mist, which seemed to have started to dissipate, much to her disappointment. She was glad she’d managed to get some hurried notes down after returning from her walk.

Outside, Bella couldn’t exactly say that the sun was setting because the mist still lingered, however, the light had changed, an almost spectral yellow glow tinged the sky. Having never seen anything like it before, Bella paused to take it in, a smile spreading across her face. She’d been in Polcarrow a matter of hours and already the little Cornish village was delivering magic right into her hands.

Stomach rumbling, Bella headed along the harbour side towards the crooked pub perched precariously at the end of the peninsula. It was surrounded on three sides by the tumbling coastline and the swirling sea, as if it was clinging on to the harbour for dear life. Only one side of it faced in towards the village. The sea lapped right up over the rocks and through the darkness, Bella caught a hint of a beer garden at the side facing the sea, which she imagined would have stunning sea views in the summer.

A sign reading ‘The Shipwreck Inn’ swung in the breeze. It seemed an appropriate name for a building with a slanted roof and walls bowed with age. When they stopped outside, Bella saw a carved wooden plaque above the worn wooden door announcing that the pub had been trading since 1678. Bella laid her hand on the door, the ancient wood covered in thick

black gloss paint, and wondered who had stepped through it during the past three hundred years. What stories had they dragged in with them, like flotsam on the tide?

Bella pushed the door open and stepped inside. The pub was compact, the walls painted a rich ruby red, and the low flickering lights made her think of a smugglers' den. A delicious scent of seafood wafted from the kitchen, making her stomach rumble. To her right stood the small bar, crowded with beer pumps, local and more well-known brands, the shelves behind the bar glittered with a treasure trove of spirits.

Mimi barked her approval and Bella picked her up, tucking her safely under her arm. Glancing around, she took in a few older men ensconced in the corner, half-drunk pints and a game of cards on the table. The hearth was unlit, but its stones were scarred from centuries of fire. Bella imagined the souls it would have warmed, the plotting and carousing that would have taken place around it.

Drawn towards it, she ran her hand along the worn lintel, cast her eyes up and around at the beamed ceilings. The stories the place would be able to tell made Bella giddy with delight. The past almost leached out of the woodwork, an amalgamation of seafaring tragedies, rousing songs and celebrations. Along the top of the lintel sat various candles, vases and an odd assortment of fishing paraphernalia. It was eclectic but Bella loved the homage to the village's history contained in such a small space.

Bella had a knack for picking up the essence of a place. It was her own sixth sense, like she could tap into the ghosts who were waiting to tell their stories. She frowned, this pub was crammed with tales that had become embedded in the woodwork, the plaster, trapped under the layers of modern paint. She made her way to the bar and was running her fingers along the scarred, nicked edge when she spotted a carving, a few crude letters. She was peering at them, trying to decipher the shapes when a voice broke through her musings.

'No one knows who did that. I've always fancied it looks like the initials of two star-crossed lovers.' The thick Cornish accent curled around her.

Bella glanced up. The voice belonged to the older man who stood behind the bar, almost draped across the beer pumps. His blue eyes twinkled with the stories he'd ingested from his protected place as barman.

He made up for his baldness by sporting one of the most outrageous handlebar moustaches she'd ever seen.

'Steve—' he held his hand out '—pub landlord, storyteller and unofficial historian of Polcarrow.'

'Bella,' she announced as she shook his hand, 'and this is Mimi. Is she allowed in here?'

'As long as she's not going to start a riot,' Steve said as he gave the tiny dog a scratch under the chin. Mimi closed her eyes in bliss.

'I'm pleased to report her rioting days are well behind her. So, if you're the unofficial historian, is there an official one?'

Steve laughed. 'No. So anything you want or need to know about this place, I'm your man. What can I get you?'

'A glass of red, please, Merlot would be fine,' Bella said as she hoisted herself onto one of the bar stools. 'I've only been here a few hours and I've already been tipped off about your fish pie. Alf, the old man, told me all about it.'

'Good old Alf. High praise indeed.' Steve chuckled as he placed a glass of red wine in front of Bella. 'The new chef is very good and I'm not saying that just because he's my son, he's got the knack. My cheese toasties are legendary though. I don't offer a huge range of food; much prefer to do a few things well. Are you placing an order?'

Bella's stomach rumbled. 'That's a yes!'

Steve rang her order through the till. 'So what brings you to Polcarrow? Is it just you and Mimi?'

'Yes.' Bella sipped her drink and snuggled Mimi to her. 'I'm writing a book set in Cornwall. Or I'm supposed to be. I've been having a bit of writer's block. Well, more than a bit,' she admitted. It felt good to be honest. 'Whenever I get like that I always have to take myself off to wherever the book is set, immerse myself, pretend I'm my heroine. Gosh, that must sound mad.'

'Not at all,' Steve said. 'What sort of books?'

'Timeslip romance. You know, the ones where a modern-day heroine uncovers a tragedy from the past and it affects everything she knew about her life. I'm fascinated by how the past can play out in the future, all the secrets tucked away in people's homes and families. And who doesn't like a happy ending?'

‘Interesting, you should speak to Effie in the bookshop, got us all reading romances. You know what, I quite like them, especially sagas – those girls get put through the wringer.’ Steve leaned in and confessed as if it was top secret. ‘So, what’s going on in your book?’

Bella’s face flushed. ‘Oh gosh! Whenever anyone asks me that I always forget how to explain it smoothly. Well, it’s a bit of a mess. It’s about a girl and her grandmother’s dress. Sounds so boring when put like that! Nothing is working right; it’s not coming together properly. Like the puzzle pieces don’t fit.’

‘I’m sure you’ll find your spark. Does it have a happy ending?’

‘I don’t know yet. Probably. Well, for the modern couple, yes. I’m quite an intuitive writer; I need to get into the book and feel like I’m drawn along by what happens. Almost as if the characters are telling me their story rather than me making it up. Sorry, that must sound mad.’ Bella laughed.

‘Not at all,’ Steve reassured her.

‘Thanks.’ Bella sighed as she took another sip of her wine. ‘I think being here might help me figure out the story. Or find a new one. It’s amazing. I mean that mist, wow, I’ve never seen anything so atmospheric in my life.’

‘Do you like the spooky stuff?’ Steve dropped his voice as he leaned towards her.

Before Bella could reply, the kitchen door swung open and a voice groaned, ‘You’re not boring the customers with more ghost stories are you, Dad?’

Bella glanced up, freezing as a ghost from her own past loomed in front of her.

‘Izzy?’ The chef carrying her dinner baulked, confusion and disbelief contorting his face, which had gone white with shock.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Five

Bella turned away, stunned. It couldn't be.

Izzy.

The name transported her back to a hot August night five years before. The smell of fried onions, the taste of cheap beer, music throbbing in the background, her friends dispersed, dancing somewhere in the festival field. She'd only had eyes and ears for the man in front of her. His tan golden against his worn white T-shirt, his eyes as deep and dark as the midnight sky, his words hopeful promises dripping into her ears.

They'd wound their bodies closer, inseparable, the start of a future sparking between them. It may have only been three days, but she knew, as she fell under his spell, that he was the one for her. A jolt from the moment their eyes had met in the hot dog queue. So romantic, they'd laughed, as they'd been drawn together. As the festival wound down and dawn slunk over the horizon, realising her phone battery was dead, Bella had grabbed his and happily tapped in her number. He'd promised to call, before they parted with a kiss that had sealed the deal.

He had never phoned and she hadn't been called Izzy for a long time.

Mimi's ears pricked up and she gave a little bark, drawing Bella's attention back towards the direction the voice had come from. She might spend her life writing romance novels but she had never, ever experienced the jolt she felt as her eyes met with those of the man who was walking towards her carrying her dinner. He stopped in his tracks.

'Aidan?' she gasped, the shock swelling like a wave. All the anticipation, the waiting, the disappointment. The acceptance that she'd never see him again. The tears, the resolve. And here he was. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him.

She'd have known him anywhere. The years had been kind to him, weathering him in a distinguished way. He was still gorgeous in the dark smouldering way that always got her right in the heart. His long dark curls were pushed back from a tanned forehead, his blue eyes flashed with something she couldn't read. His jaw was tense, his body frozen as if he'd forgotten how to make himself function.

Steve glanced between them confused. 'You know each other?'

'We met once. A long time ago,' Bella said coldly, dismissively. She wasn't going to let him see how he was scrambling her up inside.

Aidan placed the steaming plate in front of her.

'Time for a reintroduction? Aidan is my son,' Steve said, 'and this is ...'

'Bella,' she supplied, almost spitting her own name in his direction.

A question flickered in Aidan's eyes as he registered her name change. 'Bella,' he repeated as if trying out this new version of her.

There was a pause whilst Steve watched them curiously. A few awkward moments passed before Aidan held out his hand, as if to indicate a fresh start. Bella paused before taking it. To not shake it would be rude. Yet she knew touching him would awaken too much that she'd buried deep. Aidan's warm hand engulfed hers and she had the sensation that if she wanted to cling on to anything in a storm, it would be this hand. Strong and firm. Flustered, she pulled away.

'Just don't let him get going on the ghost stories, you'll be here all night.' Aidan rolled his eyes. Despite the playful tone, his body language was stiff, as if he didn't know whether to stay in the bar or retreat back into the safety of his kitchen.

So, this was how it was going to be. Aidan was going to pretend that time they spent together meant nothing. Well, Bella reasoned, two could play at that game.

Bella's eyes lit up as she tore them from Aidan and onto Steve. 'I love a ghost story. Is this pub haunted?'

Aidan gave his forehead a whack with his palm. 'No.'

At the same time Steve said, 'Yes!'

Bella glanced between them before asking Aidan, 'Do you not believe in ghosts?' It came out like a challenge.

‘Of course not, they’re not real, are they?’ he scoffed. His dismissive attitude instantly raised Bella’s hackles.

‘They are!’ Bella said as she scooped up a forkful of creamy fish pie, sighing with delight as the flavours burst on her tongue. Her eyes caught with Aidan’s. Bella instantly masked her enthusiasm, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing his cooking was good. A chef, she remembered, his big plan. They’d discussed it as they waited in the queue for the bar, not caring how long it took to reach the front, too absorbed in each other.

‘You seriously believe dead souls are hanging around here?’ Aidan laughed nervously.

Bella glanced around the old pub, the wonky beams, the blackened hearth, the roar of the sea just audible. She paused, listening, attuning herself to the atmosphere. There was a thickness to it, she felt like she was being watched, not maliciously, but with curiosity. She met Aidan’s gaze, held it like a challenge. ‘Yes, yes I do.’

‘Ha!’ Steve grinned as Aidan shook his head in despair.

‘That’s all he needs. Encouragement for his tall stories.’

Bella watched a flicker of hurt cross the older man’s face and narrowed her eyes at Aidan. He might be utterly gorgeous, but his dismissive attitude cooled the fire in her belly. It reminded her of Max, her ex, the way he belittled her interest in the occult as some silly indulgence. Had Aidan been like this before and she’d not noticed? Had all the alcohol distorted her memory of him? Or had something in the intervening years hardened him? Bella dampened down the flair of curiosity.

Taking another bite of her pie she turned to Steve. ‘OK, so tell me more about these ghosts.’

‘If you’re looking for smugglers, you might be very interested to hear what I have to say.’

Bella fed a piece of fish to Mimi and settled down onto her stool, casting an eye at Aidan before turning back to Steve. ‘OK, go ahead, I’m all ears.’

She half expected Aidan to head back into the kitchen, but to her surprise he took the stool next to her, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. Mimi craned her neck towards him. *Traitor*, Bella thought as she watched Mimi happily sniff Aidan’s offered hand.

Thrilled to have an audience, Steve lowered his voice and began. 'It was a dark and stormy night.'

'Oh, come on, Dad!' Aidan laughed.

'But it was!' Steve protested.

'Let him tell the story,' Bella admonished. Her eyes caught with Aidan's. Bella tried to ignore the pull towards him that was as strong tonight as it had been five years ago. Did he feel it too? Forcing her attention back to Steve, she encouraged, 'Please go on, I really want to hear this.'

Steve gave Aidan a triumphant look before clearing his throat and starting again. 'It was a dark and stormy night. Jago was his name. A young lad with a taste for adventure. Fell head over heels for Merrin, the local baron's daughter. Legend says she was beautiful. Hair golden as the sunshine, eyes as blue as the sea, her father's pride and joy. Fancied he'd make a good match for her, secure his fortune and all that. Wasn't reckoning on her crossing paths with young Jago, was he? Nope.

'Jago was as dark as she was fair. They'd sneak out to meet up and fell in love in the process. Merrin knew her father wouldn't let her marry Jago, and Jago knew he didn't have two pennies to rub together. Took to smuggling he did. Lucrative. Dangerous. By all accounts he was good at it.' He paused to take a sip of his drink and noticing Bella's almost empty glass, asked, 'Another?'

'Yes please.' She drummed her fingers impatiently on the bar whilst she waited for Steve to get back to his story.

'Anyway, Jago made some money, got a bit of notoriety, a good-looking lad like that you know. His heart belonged only to Merrin. But her dad, well, he found out, didn't he. Livid. Banned her from seeing him. Hurried up with the marriage contracts. Practically locked her in the house. Her maid though was sympathetic. Helped her get a message to Jago. They planned to run away together. Romantic, isn't it?'

'Totally,' Bella sighed.

'A bit far-fetched,' Aidan scoffed.

Bella gave him a withering look. 'Don't you believe in true love?' He definitely had five years ago.

Put on the spot, Aidan spluttered a bit before finding his tongue. 'But is it true love or recklessness? Would a lady really leave a fine life to go off

with a smuggler?’

‘In my books they would,’ Bella bristled, as the story began to worm its way into her brain. She turned back to Steve. ‘Please carry on.’

Amusement flickered over Steve’s face as he watched Bella and Aidan’s bickering. ‘OK, well, they chose the night, the maid helped Merrin sneak out, it was all going really well until they got to the pub and the fog blew in. Like today, you can’t see anything, can you? Merrin and her maid waited for hours until they heard the oars against the roar of the sea. So excited and so looking forward to seeing her lover, Merrin ran forwards. Now, as a fine lady, she wasn’t used to our shoreline and she slipped on the rocks and fell into the sea. Her body was never found. The maid was distraught. Jago heartbroken. Her poor old dad became a recluse.’

‘See, it didn’t turn out well,’ Aidan pointed out, breaking the spell.

‘That’s so sad. What happened to Jago?’

‘Took over this building and waited for her to return. Believed she would. She never did but he never gave up hope. They say both their ghosts haunt this pub, doomed to wander for evermore without ever meeting each other.’ Steve gave a solemn shake of his head at the tragedy. ‘If you’re lucky, you might meet one of them.’

Bella shivered. ‘Wow! Jago’s here?’

Aidan looked at her as if she was mad. ‘No, because obviously he’s not real.’

Steve crossed his arms. ‘I tell you son, he is. Many a time’s I’ve had a drink with old Jago. Usually sits right where you are.’

Aidan leaped from the stool.

‘That’s quite the reaction for someone who doesn’t believe in ghosts,’ Bella pointed out, laughing.

Aidan ran his hand through his dark curls and glanced around the pub nervously as if he was expecting Jago to walk up behind him. ‘Do you really believe in ghosts then?’ he asked her.

Bella paused, unsure how much to reveal. She glanced between the two men, Steve’s interested, encouraging look spurring her on to confess, ‘Not only do I believe in them, but I can sense them. Well, sometimes. You see, spirits are all around us but only the ones who want to make themselves known will appear to you. Sometimes they have a message or sometimes

they just want their presence felt. They're mostly harmless,' she said as if talking about ghosts was completely normal.

Aidan stared at her in disbelief, as if trying to figure out just what she was saying and how to react to it. She sensed he thought her stupid but knew he wouldn't dare voice such an opinion. Bella had encountered this attitude before, but she knew what she'd seen and felt and had developed a thick skin when it came to the naysayers. She studied him with disappointment. They clearly weren't the same people as they'd been five years before. There was a disillusioned spikiness to him now. Despite her better judgement, Bella wanted to smooth him over, ask who'd chipped him away.

'There you go, son, it's not just your old man who believes this stuff,' Steve said before turning to Bella. 'Maybe you'll see Jago. I mean, he's usually hanging around. We've had people here hunting for Merrin but she's a bit shier. I mean, I don't think I'd waft out of the woodwork if people turned up with night goggles and probes and sound recorders and stuff, would you?'

Bella shook her head. 'Spirits should be left alone, shouldn't they, Mimi?' She stroked the little dog's head and cast her eyes around the pub, but it was too busy and she was too riled up by Aidan's appearance and dismissive attitude to sense anything. 'Can I leave Mimi with you for a minute? I need the loo.'

To Bella's surprise, Aidan reached out and took the dog off her. Mimi brightened up and attempted to lick his face, making him laugh and squirm at the same time. A glimpse of the younger man he'd been cracked like sunshine through his clouds.

'She likes you,' Bella said as she slipped off her stool. Traitorous dog, she thought, as she followed Steve's directions to the Ladies', desperately needing some space. Strange emotions were swirling in her at the sight of Aidan. Her head and heart already arguing about what to do. 'I'm too exhausted for this,' she muttered to herself in an attempt to quell the internal storm.

The bathroom light was harsh after the gentle cosiness of the bar area. Bella washed her hands then rubbed at the mascara that had flaked under her eyes. She looked as tired as she felt. Well, a deadline looming over her hadn't exactly been conducive to a good night's sleep. Stepping back out

into the corridor, Bella shivered. The temperature had plummeted. Looking left and right she saw a door at the end of the corridor and made her way towards it in case someone had left it open.

The door, however, was locked shut. Bella gave it a push and a tug, but it didn't budge, just rattled slightly in its ill-fitting frame. A breeze curled under the door and around her ankles. Bella experienced the briefest sensation of being pulled forwards, like the air had snared her. A chill ran down her spine, from the top of her head, all the way down to her feet – the presence of something, someone.

Bella laid her hands, palms flat, against the door and listened. The icy air was like a breath against her face, the handle rattled slightly as if someone was trying to get in. Rationally, Bella knew there was no one on the other side, but it engulfed her, the sorrow and the waves, and she felt briefly as if part of her was being washed out to sea.

Shocked, terrified and intrigued in equal measure, Bella pushed herself away from the door. Catching her breath, she stared at it until she felt the presence ebb away. It was as if the corridor became brighter, the energy lifted and Bella glanced around as if she wasn't quite sure where she was, or what had happened.

Should she tell Steve? No. This was something that was just for her. Could it be the mysterious, uncatchable spirit of Merrin? Or was it the second glass of wine taking effect? Bella made her way back into the bar and forced a smile across her face.

'You OK?' Steve asked.

'Yeah, sure, it's just been a very long day,' Bella excused with a yawn. 'I think I'd better take this young lady home to bed.' She reached out for Mimi, who was snuggling against Aidan, and gave her owner a look to say she didn't want to move.

'Oh, Mimi, come on.' Bella put her hands around the dog's body and tried to prise her away from Aidan. Her fingers brushed against his T-shirt, feeling the heat of his body. As Mimi reluctantly transferred herself into Bella's arms, her eyes met with Aidan's and she had the strangest sensation that rather than walking away from him, he was the person she should be heading straight towards.

Discombobulated, Bella picked up her bag and turned to leave. 'Goodnight, I'm sure I'll be back soon.' She gave Steve and Aidan a wave

and headed to the door. Tiredness fell like a weight over her. There was too much to process. Too many unanswered questions. Too many what-ifs.

Pulling the door open, she glanced back. Aidan was watching her, his intense gaze rooting her momentarily to the spot. Flustered, she stepped outside into the cool night air and exhaled. Polcarrow, it seemed, was full of more plot twists than she could ever have imagined.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Six

‘A ghost from my past, well she was right about that, wasn’t she, Mims?’ Bella growled as she locked the cottage door behind her. Bending down to remove Mimi’s harness, she gave the little dog a fuss. ‘Aidan, hey? What on earth is he doing here? And what’s with that stinking attitude? What an absolute . . .’ She huffed as she pulled her scarf off. ‘Who does he think he is? How could you paw at him, Mims? He was practically laughing at his poor dad. It’s not like the ghosts harm anyone, is it?’

Rather than reply, Mimi skipped off into the kitchen and set about slurping her water. What *was* he doing here? Well, if Steve was his dad Bella realised it made more sense for Aidan to have ended up in Polcarrow than her. Coincidence or fate, Bella mused, both options discomfiting her.

Memories resurfaced. Those sparkling Atlantic-blue eyes blazing with a passion for life. That voice which had curled like a sea mist into her ears. The softness of his accent, the almost other-worldliness of it smoothing out the sharper London tones. One weekend and these images were indelible in her mind. Aidan had become a spectre in her life for the past five years. The ‘what if’ had lingered behind every turn and coloured every choice Bella made, only being silenced by meeting Max three years ago.

Max. She didn’t want to go there tonight. There was already far too much emotional upheaval to sift through. She’d come to Cornwall to get away from romantic disappointment, among other things. Bella headed upstairs. Removing her makeup, she regarded herself in the mirror, wondering how different she looked from five years ago. The light in her eyes had dimmed but after the past year, that was to be expected. Her hair was longer, redder. Aidan had recognised her though. Then again, Bella had always been sure she’d know him anywhere.

Changed into her comfiest checked pyjamas, Bella padded back downstairs and into the kitchen. Flicking on the low under-cupboard lamps, she filled the kettle, then rooted around looking for a teapot, pleased when she found a sturdy red and white striped Cornishware pot, complete with matching mugs. As the kettle boiled Bella took in the quaint space, wondering if she should move on. That would definitely be running away. She could hear Nicki's disapproval in her head. Bella got the distinct impression Aidan had not been pleased to see her. Then again was she pleased to see him? Bella mulled this over as she took the tea bags from the cupboard. Maybe there was a reason she was in the same village as Aidan after all this time . . .

'No, stop this,' she told herself firmly as she made a pot of chamomile tea. 'This is not a story you're writing; this is real life. Anyway, it's been five years, he could be married with kids, couldn't he, Mimi?'

Mimi cocked her head to the side as if considering the answer. Bella hadn't spotted a wedding ring. 'No ring doesn't mean there isn't a girlfriend. He's too gorgeous to be single.' She sighed as she loaded the pot, a mug and a packet of chocolate digestives onto a tray and carried them into the living room.

Setting the tray down on the coffee table, Bella switched on the fairy lights that were hung around the shelves. She might be trying to avoid Christmas, but she couldn't resist the magical twinkle of a string of fairy lights. Curling up on the sofa, she tugged a multicoloured crocheted blanket over her knees and patted the space beside her. Mini jumped up and did a couple of twirls before settling down and promptly falling asleep.

'All right for some,' Bella said as she stroked Mimi's head. Despite the exhaustion that had almost felled her in the pub, she was now too wired to go to sleep. Bella's brain careened around like an out-of-control pinball machine. Aidan. The ghost stories. Polcarrow. Her deadline. Lola's tarot reading. The second glass of red wine. There was no point trying to go to sleep when she was like this.

After pouring a cup of tea, Bella snuggled into the sofa cushions, closed her eyes and started to breathe slowly in and out. This usually did the trick. Brought her back to the centre of herself. The chaos started to dissipate until all she could hear was Mimi's gentle snores and the distant lull of the sea, as constant and reassuring as a pulse.

Sipping her tea, Bella opened her notebook, leafing through the pages of scribbles. Ideas with question marks next to them. Shopping lists. Abandoned paragraphs. Reminders to book appointments. Bella read through her sketchy notes, but they were flat, uninspiring, a story she was trying to force into a certain shape, one she could now see was never going to work.

Closing her eyes she couldn't help but go back to the tragic story of Jago and Merrin. Bella's heart cracked thinking of their poor spirits trapped in the pub, unable to meet. Doomed to roam amongst the drinkers for all eternity. Were they real? Not just the ghosts, but the people. Had there been a Jago and a Merrin full of love and hope two hundred years ago? Or was Steve just an excellent storyteller?

Bella couldn't help but turn her mind to the two protagonists. What had they been like? Jago must've been quite the charmer to turn the head of a high-born young lady. Bella imagined him working in the stables, sparkling eyes, a disarming smile, muscles honed from labouring. Merrin would sneak out to watch him work, fascinated by his earthiness. Or they would have grown up together. Born mere days apart. Their friendship not considered a risk until Merrin reached marriageable age. Yes, that was it! Jago would be pulled aside, Merrin's future explained to him. Would he accept it? No, he'd be angry, fired up, determined to prove himself.

As for Merrin . . . Bella tapped her pen against her chin. She'd be a pale wisp of a girl. Sunlight to Jago's midnight. Delicate but born with strong conviction. She knew what she wanted. Jago. Not some neatly turned out, frock-coated minor noble. Merrin was wild underneath the surface. Bella figured you'd have to be to risk it all for a smuggler.

Nestled into the comfy blue sofa, slowly making her way through her pot of tea, lamps turned low and atmospheric, Bella scribbled all sorts of thoughts into her notebook, jotting down everything Steve had told her, embellishing his outlandish tale with her own ideas. The beginning of a story began to tantalisingly find its way into her brain. The whos, wheres and whats. After months of being blocked, she hardly dared believe that the old magic might be returning.

Shaking her aching right hand, Bella flicked through the pages, her brain working quicker than her fingers could move. Some of the ideas were illegible. She'd underlined some questions. But she felt it, right in her soul,

that there was something here. Fancying that the other-worldly encounter she'd experienced by the ladies' toilets was Merrin, Bella found that she desperately wanted to give the poor girl her happy ever after.

Bella closed her notebook with a contented sigh, resolving to contact her agent in the morning. She'd create a synopsis and a strong argument for an eleventh hour swap of storylines. Bella knew there was something here, knew she'd be able to convince Bethan. A heartbreaking story, both devastating and true, that she'd only scratched the surface of, but she knew it had legs.

Then it happened. The fear overtook. Freezing her to the spot. She'd been here before, all fired up, raring to go and then . . . nothing. The blank page, the impatient cursor. The crushing anxiety.

Ideas were just ideas, Bella reminded herself. They weren't a novel, just a jumble of frantic thoughts dashed across the page incoherent and imperfect. Yet this did feel different. Full of something Bella hadn't felt in ages: hope. The way her brain had skittered about colouring in Steve's ghosts, bringing them back to life. Maybe she'd snoop around Polcarrow a bit more, chat to Steve and Alf, the old man with the dog. Dig into some local history. Keep it to herself, just in case this also came to nothing.

Bella yawned. Checking the clock she saw it was gone one. Slumber started to settle in her limbs, the long drive finally catching up with her. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, Bella made her way upstairs, climbed into bed, tucked the duvet around her and fell into a deep dreamless sleep. She woke just as the pale fingers of dawn were stretching across the harbour. A fresh day, a new start, and no blinking cursor watching her.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Seven

‘So, Mimi, ready to go exploring?’ Bella asked her little companion the following morning as she finished her tea. Mimi looked unsure. ‘Come on, it’ll be fun, we can’t stay cooped up in here all day. Well, I’ll go without you then.’

Bella only managed three steps away from the kitchen before Mimi skipped over and performed a little dance, pawing at her shins, wagging her tail, not wanting to be left out.

‘Ha, knew you wouldn’t be able to resist. Which jumper do you want?’ She reached into Mimi’s bag of things and pulled out a blue and white striped one and a pink one with a big red heart on the back, and waggled them in front of the dog. Mimi pawed at the pink one.

‘Interesting choice, you don’t normally like this one,’ Bella said as she crouched down and wrestled Mimi into the little jumper. ‘Very nice.’ She gave her a scratch under the chin. Max had always thought she was mad for talking to her dog, which was silly, and anyway, Mimi had turned out to be far more loyal than he’d ever been.

Not wanting to ruin her first morning in Polcarrow thinking about Max, Bella laced up her boots, wrapped a deep red scarf around her neck and pulled on a matching beanie. Stuffing her phone, wallet and keys into her coat pocket, she managed to get Mimi’s lead on in a record-breaking three attempts.

Once Bella had unlocked the door, Mimi almost dragged her outside. ‘Slow down, my lovely, honestly, we have all day. Now, do you fancy the beach?’ Mimi didn’t look so sure. ‘Come on, how do you know you don’t like it if you’ve never tried it? Dogs always like the beach.’

Mimi gave her a look as if to say, *Don’t be so sure about that.*

The mist had vanished, leaving behind a flat, dove-grey sky, as gentle as a pause in time. Bella and Mimi made their way across the road towards the harbour wall and down the steps, Bella resorting to picking Mimi up when she began to resist. Pausing at the bottom of the steps, Bella took in the winter seascape. There was something out of time about being by the sea in late November. As if she was playing truant from real life. To an extent she guessed she was. The sea was out, the sand a deep biscuit colour, the air fresh and briny. She set Mimi down.

‘Come on.’ She gave her lead a gentle tug. Mimi pawed the sand, not sure what to make of it. Bella encouraged her as she took a few experimental steps before coming to a grinding halt. Bella switched the lead to extendable and slowly walked away from Mimi, hoping the dog would follow.

Bella picked up a stick, drew a heart in the sand and wrote ‘Mimi’ in the middle of it. ‘Still not your thing, baby?’

The dog gave a little shudder. So much for taking long winter walks on the beach, or skipping through the shallows together. Maybe Nicki was right and she had totally spoiled the dog. However, Mimi had been by her side through one hundred per cent of Bella’s bad days, so what if she’d been indulged?

‘OK, OK, so you don’t like the beach.’ Bella sighed, scooping Mimi up and brushing the sand from her tiny paws. ‘Want to have a little walk along the seafront instead? Do us both some good.’

Mimi looked indifferent. As Bella reached the bottom of the steps, Aidan whizzed past above them, a blur of orange and blue, long tanned limbs working as he pounded the pavement, running back in the direction of the pub. Despite a flash of annoyance that he’d not seen her, Bella couldn’t help but admire his toned, tanned calves. Mimi was almost rolling her eyes when Bella put her back down.

They went on a little amble along the seafront. Now that the mist had cleared, Bella could get a better impression of Polcarrow. Absolutely tiny, clinging on for dear life to a hillside that sloped towards the sea. Rows of white cottages packed as tightly as teeth. She imagined it was the sort of place where no one’s business stayed private for long. Maybe she would’ve been better renting a swanky city flat somewhere she could have been

anonymous. Then again, she had rather liberally shared her writer's block with three people already.

However, there was something completely delightful about the little hamlet. Didn't everyone want to live somewhere where the neighbours really cared? Bella didn't think she'd ever really known what was going on with any of her neighbours back home, just friendly waves over the fences, parcels taken in, tight smiles, watching each other to see who put the correct bins out first.

They carried on walking until they reached the headland at the opposite end of the village from the pub. Bella scanned the scene before her. The bay a perfect golden arc. It was easy to imagine the smugglers, Jago in particular, landing their boats on a treacherous dark night. Unloading their wares. The frantic industry, the low voices, the heightened expectations. No wonder Merrin had fallen for him.

Bella tried to imagine the village stripped of its modernity. Would there have been as many houses? Well, they probably wouldn't have been painted like an array of summer ice creams. Would it have felt even more cut off from the rest of the world than it did now? Nobody really knowing what was going on. Wouldn't that be bliss? Could she write Jago and Merrin's story instead of the one she'd started? She'd need to do some research, find some local history books before she let her imagination carry her away.

Suddenly it felt like a gargantuan task. To research, plot, write and tweak a whole novel by the end of January. Two months. Yikes. Bella usually had much longer. Well, she had had almost a year but strangely enough, her life collapsing around her hadn't been conducive to creativity. The creeping shame of failure crawled up her spine.

Picking Mimi up, she snuggled her against her chest in an attempt to keep the self-destructive thoughts at bay. Out of the corner of her eye, Bella saw someone exit the café. She knew what would cheer her up. The cosy sweetness of freshly baked cake.

'Fancy a treat, Mims? Good, because I think we've earned it.'

Bella put Mimi down and at a quicker pace, they made their way back towards the harbour front. Bella decided that the bookshop would be a good port of call for local history books. Plus, she couldn't resist a bookshop, even if it did seem a strange, out of the way place to have one.

Pushing open the door to the café, Bella almost sighed with pleasure at the warming aroma of freshly ground coffee. Before she could take even one step towards the counter, Mimi started barking. Mortified at her yapping, Bella turned to see what had excited her dog and came face to face with Alf and his rather unimpressed sheepdog.

‘Mimi,’ Bella hissed before trying a firmer, ‘Mimi,’ which at least startled Mimi into silence. ‘I’m so sorry, she always wants to try and exert her authority, especially over bigger dogs,’ Bella explained, embarrassed.

The old man laughed. ‘Don’t worry, I don’t think Scruff’s too impressed though.’ He held his gnarled hand out towards Mimi, waiting patiently as she took a few tentative steps over and gave it a sniff, then an enthusiastic lick. ‘Aren’t you sweet, hey, small but fierce by the looks of it,’ he said. ‘Look at your little jumper. Lola knitted one for Scruff last Christmas, had it on for all of five minutes. Now, love, take a seat, tell me how you’re getting on. Did you go to the pub?’

Bella glanced between Alf and the counter. Freya was busy serving a group of customers.

Sitting down, Bella unzipped her coat and pulled off her hat. She turned to Alf. ‘Yes, I did go to the pub, you were right about the fish pie,’ she enthused, giving little thought to the man who had made it.

‘Told you. That Aidan, nice lad, used to come here on his holidays, always a bit like he didn’t fit in this world but really wanted to,’ Alf said, ‘but that’s not my story to tell.’

Bella shook her head, but couldn’t deny she was intrigued. The thought of Aidan as an unsure, gangly youth felt strangely absurd, but also, reminded her of how little she actually knew of him. It had been one weekend, fuelled by alcohol, maybe she’d filled the memory of those hours with too much subtext over the years. Made the feelings bigger than they actually had been. Over time, Aidan had become more of a ‘what if’ than a real person, so finding herself face to face with him was too much for her brain, and heart, to process. The fact he hadn’t got in contact with her, despite taking her number, was an embarrassing indicator that she’d got the wrong end of the stick.

‘Did Steve tell you his ghost stories?’ Amusement coloured Alf’s face.

‘He did! Oh my gosh, I love a ghost story! Are they true?’ Bella glanced up to see Freya waiting. ‘Can I have a mocha, please?’

‘Sure, Alf probably knows more ghost stories than Steve does,’ Freya said before heading back to the counter.

‘Not sure about that, but what I don’t know about Polcarrow isn’t worth knowing.’ Alf gave Bella a long look. ‘As for the ghost stories, I guess it depends on what you believe. We heard them all growing up. There’s an old tin mine out the way, used to terrify each other about it as lads. Me personally, no, I don’t think they are, but who doesn’t like an old pub with a ghost.’

Bella felt a bit deflated. ‘That’s a shame. I liked the tragic romance of Merrin and Jago. The hope, the despair, being trapped for eternity without being reunited.’

‘Ah, that’s his favourite. Everyone likes a tragic romance,’ Alf told her, ‘it’s a good story. But imagine being trapped in that pub for all eternity.’ Alf laughed. ‘Don’t think I’d fancy it.’

Bella laughed too. ‘Good point, I don’t think I would either.’ She cast her mind back to the spooky sensation by the ladies’ toilets, an even less fun place to be trapped. Although she wasn’t about to share what she’d felt with anyone. Bella hardly believed it herself. She’d have to work out a way of returning to pick up the presence without looking like she was stalking Aidan. No need for it to be more awkward than it already was.

Bella studied Alf. He was definitely the sensible sort but she detected mischief in his eyes. He probably wouldn’t think she was being silly, but she wanted to tell someone how inspiring her trip to the pub had been. Alf, with his weather-beaten face, kind blue eyes and fluffy dog, seemed the right choice.

Before she could say anything, Freya brought over her mocha, a small piece of shortbread balanced on the side. ‘Sorry about the wait – morning rush. As a consolation prize here’s a sample of one of our Christmas treats, cranberry and white chocolate shortbread.’

‘Oh, thanks.’ Bella picked up the biscuit, and caught two sets of expectant eyes watching her. She took a small bite, the flavours popping like a hint of Christmas on her tongue. ‘That’s delightful,’ she mumbled, figuring that a cranberry shortbread wasn’t going to break her no Christmas rule.

‘Excellent, I’ll report back to Lola.’ With a smile, Freya turned back and headed towards the kitchen.

‘They’re very good, I’ve had about six.’ Alf patted his middle. ‘Wait until Lola gets the mince pies out, you’re in for a treat then!’

‘Mince pies?’ Bella asked as she picked up her drink, a sense of foreboding washing over her.

‘It’s December next week. Christmas, the best time of the year! Honestly, you’re going to love it here. We have a tree made out of lobster pots, carol services, the whole village gets in on it. I can’t wait to see what Sue is cooking up this year.’

‘Sue?’ Bella felt the blood drain from her face. Had she arrived in a village that was going to explode with baubles and tinsel come the first of December?

‘Head of the committee, don’t even try saying no to her. Won’t hear it. Her ideas might seem a bit mad but there’s never actually been a bad one.’ Alf chuckled to himself. ‘I like still being surprised at ninety.’

‘That’s erm, wonderful to hear, Christmas and being surprised. I hope I’m still like that at ninety,’ Bella realised she was waffling. Putting her cup down, she decided to steer the conversation away from Christmas. ‘I wanted to ask you some things.’

‘Go ahead. If it’s about Polcarrow, as I said, there’s not a lot I don’t know.’

‘Well, the thing is, you know I’m a writer. I write romances. Merrin and Jago’s story captured my imagination. This might sound silly if you don’t believe in ghosts, but the thought of them being trapped in that pub, well, it breaks my heart. I’d like to write their story, give them the happy ending they never got. Oh gosh, that sounds so silly, doesn’t it? Forget I said anything.’

‘Not at all, it sounds very exciting. You know no one knows if it’s real so you can do what you want with it,’ Alf encouraged.

‘Thanks, well, I’m not actually meant to be writing a book about a smuggler. It’s supposed to be about a young woman who finds a mysterious dress that belonged to her grandmother, but it’s honestly awful. But that mist, the ghost stories! I finally think I might have a good idea,’ she said. ‘The problem is I don’t know anything about Cornwall, or smugglers. Can you help me?’

Alf considered his response for so long that Bella started to regret asking. ‘Now, you know what I was saying about still being surprised at

ninety, well, I've never helped someone write a book. I don't even know where I'd start, but I can listen, if you want. Tell you a bit of local history. How does that sound?'

A smile spread across Bella's face. 'Perfect.' She liked the idea of this gentle, kind old man holding her hand through the usually lonely writing process. 'Where do we start?'

'Follow me.' Alf stood up, Scruff giving a low whine at the thought of leaving the cosy café.

'One second.' Bella scooped up Mimi and paid for her drink. 'Where are we going?'

'You'll see, I think you might like it,' Alf said as he pushed open the door, a cold blast of wind hitting Bella in the face.

Following his shuffling steps, Bella felt as if she'd thrown herself into a new adventure, one that was as unpredictable and as thrilling as a smuggler's mission.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Eight

Alf drew to a halt outside the bookshop next door, which was as quaint as Lola's café and complemented it perfectly. Yellows and greys, sea greens and blues.

“‘Books by the Sea’,’ Bella read the sign, ‘perfect name for this location.’

In the window a display of autumn-themed books lingered, hanging on like leaves clutching branches, despite the rapidly accelerating descent into winter. Brightly coloured children's books and cosy pumpkin-themed romances were nestled amongst an adorable group of cuddly squirrels, owls and bats. A wreath of red, gold and orange leaves hung on the yellow door, which was a cheerful pop of colour against the grey morning.

‘I know. Effie, who runs it, has turned us all into readers. We have a monthly book club. I'm sure you're in time to join the Christmas one.’ When Bella didn't respond, Alf pushed open the door. ‘You coming in?’

‘Are dogs allowed?’ Bella asked as she picked up Mimi.

‘Of course they are, although, Scruff isn't much of a reader.’ Alf winked, holding the door open for Bella. ‘Bet this little one has a much superior taste in literature.’

‘Oh, you'd be surprised – the trashier, the better,’ Bella joked as she stepped inside, grinding to a halt as she took in the interior. The bright colours hadn't just been for the window, they rippled like a rainbow around the space, creating one of the cosiest, most colourful bookshops Bella had ever set foot in.

‘Be with you in a minute,’ a voice called from somewhere behind the scenes.

‘That’s fine, take your time, I’ll have a browse,’ she called back as she took in the shop, marvelling that it managed to be both light and airy, and as welcoming as a hug.

Bella flopped down onto one of the two yellow armchairs situated in the bay window, a table stacked high with recommendations between them. Bella studied the sea view. It was the most wonderful place to sit and read that she’d ever seen. All she needed was a blanket and a pot of tea and she’d be sorted for the afternoon. She took a photo of the stunning view and set-up and quickly uploaded it to social media, captioning it with ‘The cutest seaside bookshop ever.’ Bella leafed through the coffee table books, photos of Cornwall, an Italian recipe book and a children’s story about a monster potato.

Glancing around the shop, she took in the shelves, each carefully marked with their genres. Local history. Cornish-themed novels. Crime and thriller. The shop may have been small, but it was doing a valiant effort to cover all reading tastes. Bella loved the eclectic nature of the shop – shelves of books broken up with rows of bookish souvenirs, framed prints, postcards and a small second-hand selection by the door. Tucked away at the back was a colourful kids’ area full of the latest children’s picture books and baskets overflowing with plush toys.

‘Oh my gosh, there’s a romance section.’ Bella got up and made her way towards the delightfully arranged shelves, as always, wondering if any of her books would be tucked in amongst the pastel-coloured assortment. Her heart skittered to see two of them. She pulled them out reverently and gazed at the covers, the usual disbelief that she had done it, achieved her childhood dream, squeezed her heart. Sliding them back into place, she wondered if she would be able to do it again, write another book.

Scanning the shelf, Bella took in the names of authors she knew personally, ones she looked up to, books that she’d loved and a few she’d found disappointing. Cowboys and dukes, cosy cafés and animal rescue centres. Shelf upon shelf of escapism and daydreams. Ah, the latest by Annabella Adams. She’d been looking forward to it publishing but had put off reading it, not wanting to compare herself to her favourite author. Just as she pulled it off the shelf, Bella was startled by a loud exclamation of, ‘Oh my God!’

Book in hand, Bella pivoted towards the voice to find a young woman, wild blonde hair piled on top of her head, dressed in a snowman print jumper and pink dungarees flapping her hands in disbelief. Bella swallowed. Had she been recognised?

‘Bella Fox? Are you Bella Fox?’ the woman asked with disbelief.

Bella glanced from Alf to the woman. ‘Erm, yes.’

‘Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh! I’m so excited to meet you. And is that Mimi? She’s even cuter in real life.’ Mimi, who was less stand-offish than Bella, craned her head forwards towards this new person. She was just as Instagram famous as her author owner, maybe even more so.

The woman held her hand out and giggled as Mimi licked it. ‘She’s so friendly! I’d love a dog, but I rent my flat and I’m not sure it would be allowed. I’ve read all your books. Twice! I loved the one about the *Titanic*. Oh my gosh, I cried, sobbed at the ending! I can’t wait for your next one.’

*Me too*, thought Bella as she tried to figure out whether or not it’d be good to have a super-fan in town. The woman’s enthusiasm, however, was infectious, reminding Bella of why she spent hours slaving away at the keyboard, or chewing over the perfect description of her hero. She did it for the readers. Thawing at the enthusiastic welcome, Bella beamed. ‘Lovely to meet you, erm . . .’

‘Effie, and this is my shop. Well, not my shop, I run this branch for my boss, he’s back in Penzance, the main shop is there. Oh Lord, stop waffling!’ Effie gave her head a playful whack. ‘I can’t help it, I love books, especially romances. You really are one of my favourites. Ah, I see you have the latest Annabella Adams there. It’s her best, honestly, the hero is chef’s kiss swoony.’

A smile spread across Bella’s face. Chatting about romantic heroes was one of her favourite pastimes so it was nice to meet a kindred spirit. ‘Lovely to meet you, Effie, your shop is gorgeous. I’ll definitely be taking this, especially on that recommendation.’ She held up the paperback and scanned the blurb. ‘Is Flynn hotter than Cal?’

‘A million per cent,’ Effie assured her. ‘Vying for a place in my top five heroes of all time.’

‘Top five of all time, hey? That’s quite an accolade.’ They exchanged smiles of kindred spirits, and despite Effie’s giddy introduction, Bella felt

that they could easily be friends. Maybe that's what she needed? A romance aficionado to pick the brains of.

Alf shuffled forwards, amusement on his craggy face. 'Now we've done our introductions, and rated fictional men, can you help us with something, Effie?'

'Sure,' she said, 'anything.'

'Bella here is looking for some local history books, especially ones about smuggling, do you have any?'

Effie's eyes widened. 'Follow me. Are you setting a book here? I know there's lots of books about Cornwall, but it is so beautiful, I don't think there can ever be enough. I can't stop reading them. And I live here!'

Bella considered skirting around the answer, but Effie's keenness was infectious. Maybe now was the time to fake it until she made it? 'I am. It's early days, but you're right, it's so beautiful here. Steve got me inspired by telling me about Jago and Merrin.'

Effie turned to her, a pained expression on her face as she pretended to clutch her heart. 'I know. It's so sad. Imagine being trapped like that forever. Jake thinks it's a bit silly.'

'Jake?'

'My boyfriend.' Effie beamed. 'He's a photographer. We met when I came to set up the shop. Did you know Polcarrow is a bit magic?'

Bella turned to Alf. 'Is it?'

Alf, who'd taken a seat in one of the armchairs, Scruff at his feet, shrugged. 'I don't know about that, but strange things have been happening since Lola arrived.'

Effie nodded. 'Did she read your tarot cards?'

'Erm, yes.' Bella glanced between them warily.

'She's always right,' Effie said. 'Always. So, whatever she told you, pay attention to it. She told me I'd meet Jake, predicted Freya and Angelo would get together. Anyway, that's probably not my business to share. Now, what are we looking for?'

Bella's mind flashed to Aidan, the shock on his face that had transformed into a scowl. *A ghost from your past*. Lola had been right, but Bella didn't want to start sharing that with everyone. 'Smugglers,' she said instead, 'and local history.'

‘Are you going to write about Jago and Merrin?’ Effie asked as she grasped a slim hardback volume titled *Cornish Myths and Legends*.

Bella realised she wasn’t going to be able to hide anything from the keen bookseller, her eyes were bright with hope and excitement.

‘Erm, maybe. I mean it’s early days, but yes, their story did get me here too.’ She touched her heart. ‘I’d like to give them their happy ever after.’

Effie almost swooned at the admission. Something flickered inside Bella, that old spark, the determination to write, all coming back to life, spreading from her heart out towards the tips of her fingers. A tiny flame, one she couldn’t fully trust, but as Effie piled up book upon book about the local area, gabbling away as she did so, Bella knew the people of Polcarrow would help her keep it burning. That alone warmed her soul.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Nine

Bella left the shop with armfuls of books. Local history, shiny new romances and Effie had even hopefully pressed a copy of next month's book club read into Bella's already full hands.

'Join us, you have three weeks to read it,' Effie told her. 'Always the more the merrier. We meet in Lola's. Practically the whole village comes.'

One look at the glittering, frosted cover and Bella's heart sank. She didn't have it in her to tell Effie she was boy-cotting Christmas this year. Too much to explain, and far too personal to share. 'Sounds fun,' was her non-committal response. 'Thanks for all your help, you've been a star.'

With a storm forecast to hit the coast the following day, Bella dragged herself out of the gentle village cocoon and made a dash to the out-of-town supermarket, stocking up on enough supplies to see her through both the storm and her research. The bright lights had been a lurid reminder of real life. Bella hurried around, trying to ignore the blaring Christmas music, throwing in all the essentials and stocking up with her favourite writing snack: jaffa cakes. Back in Polcarrow, as she unloaded her bags, Bella noticed the wind had risen and there was an air of the whole village battening down the hatches.

Shopping put away, Bella lit the lamps in the living room, lit the logburner and hunkered down on the sofa. Notebooks, sticky notes, highlighters and a range of different coloured pens littered her nest of cushions and blankets. Pouring a cup of chamomile tea, she delved into the book about local myths and legends, lapping up the stories of mermaids, sea monsters and King Arthur, imagining herself getting lost in the mists of time.

Bella read until the words began to blur. Her more nocturnal hours had driven Max mad, so she relished having no one to answer to. The wind whistled down the chimney like a banshee, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. Tucked up in bed, Mimi curled at her feet, Bella couldn't deny that she was curious to see what the storm would be like. She could hear it coming in across the sea, buffeting the cottage. Back home in Hitchin they usually only got the tail end, an umbrella destroying gust, a drenching whilst running to the car. The combination of rain and the swell of the sea lulled her to sleep.

The insistent tap of raindrops against her bedroom window woke Bella the following morning. On opening the floral-sprigged curtains, she watched the scene before her, daylight wrestling with the weather to make itself known through the dense clouds. Bella watched the rain skitter down the pane, the grey churn of the sea, nature immense and thrilling. Would it be mad to go out in it?

'Good morning.' She patted a bleary-eyed Mimi, who took one look at the sky and snuggled back down amongst the blankets. 'Suit yourself,' Bella said before heading downstairs and flicking the kettle on.

Never one for switching on the big light, Bella turned on the lamps. A gentle golden glow permeated the encroaching winter gloom. Bella imagined them flickering like candlelight, her smugglers gathering in the darkness of the pub, plotting, talking in whispered codes. She cracked open the local history book and began to read as she ate her porridge, fascinated to uncover the spirit and soul of Cornwall before it was transformed into a sought-after holiday destination. Tin mining, fishing, local communities struggling and trying their best, replaced by surf schools, cafés and second homes. Histories displaced for profit.

Did Merrin have to be a rich man's daughter? Bella wondered. Couldn't she be a slightly desperate, idealistic and adventurous daughter of a tin miner? A rebellious spirit rather than a compliant one? Hard living conditions drawing the locals into difficult decisions, clandestine actions taken. An element of risk. Trying to escape the spying eye of the powers above.

Bella was scribbling down these thoughts when Mimi padded into the kitchen. 'What time do you call this? Look how busy I've been!' She held

up the notebook to Mimi, who cocked her head to one side as if trying to read it.

Mimi gave up and pawed at the back door. Opening it, Bella was almost knocked off her feet by a gust of wind, and a shower of rain blew over her fluffy slippers. Mimi yelped and gave Bella a distressed look, before hopping outside to quickly do her business.

Leaving Mimi with bowls of food and water, Bella got dressed. Standing by the window as she brushed her hair, she watched the waves in the harbour swirl and swell against the shore, erupting against the wall in plumes of spray as they hit the stone. She studied nature's performance for a few minutes, fascinated by the way the sea had transformed itself from placid silver the previous day, to swirling, hurling pewter.

Would it be mad to go out in it? Just for a few moments? What was the bad weather etiquette here? She didn't want to be labelled as a dumb, thrill-seeking tourist. Didn't want Nicki to roll her eyes seeing her sister on the ten o'clock news as a cautionary tale about keeping safe in a bad storm. But what would five minutes do? Surely it wouldn't hurt? Anyway, how could she write about a ferocious storm if she hadn't experienced one? And here was one, right in front of her eyes, like the universe had answered all her creative prayers.

Bella hurried downstairs, crammed her hair into a hat and pulled her coat and boots on. 'Mimi, I'll be a few minutes at most.' Before she had time to consider the sheer madness of what she was about to do, Bella grabbed her keys and was out the door, battling against the wind to cross the road.

OK, so the wind was a lot stronger than it had looked from the safety of her bedroom window. It pushed against her chest, as if to hold her back, making it almost impossible for her to breathe properly. The air was sticky with salt. It got in her eyes, she could taste it on her lips. Sea foam had washed through the railings and was scattered, like invading bubbles, across the pavement.

Bella stopped at the side of the road, leaving a safe distance of pavement between her and the harbour railings. The noise was unbelievable, a great crushing, powerful rush of water, a stern reminder that the sea was not to be messed with. Bella gasped as frothy white fingers reached over the railings as if trying to grab her. Like a kraken, she thought,

keen to pull her under, teach her a lesson for this folly. Transfixed, Bella stepped forwards, only to have something, someone collide with her and pull her back as a giant wave broke over the railings, flooding the path.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ The voice was angry, strained with disbelief at her stupidity. The hands that gripped her arms were tanned, neat nails, long fingers, streaked with rainwater. Bella glanced up, her eyes meeting a pair that flashed like an angry blue flame under a furrowed brow. Aidan.

‘I came to see the storm,’ she stuttered, her brain discombobulated by everything. His proximity, his scent, the wave that had managed to grab them both, showering them with cold, salty water.

Aidan tugged her away from the railings. ‘How stupid can you be? Look at it!’ He signalled at the sea as it gathered itself for another assault.

‘I knew what I was doing. I only wanted to see what it felt like. The atmosphere, the smell, the whole . . . vibe of it.’

‘The smell? Oh Jesus.’ He raked his hand through his soaking wet hair.

Bella noticed his running kit clinging to his body and tried not to stare. Lean and toned. ‘You’re out here,’ she pointed out.

‘Yes, but I grew up in Cornwall,’ he stuttered realising she was right. ‘I know what it’s like, how dangerous it can be.’

‘Well, if it’s safe enough for you to run in, then it’s safe enough for me to look at.’ She folded her arms, proud that her argument left Aidan floundering.

Aidan ran his hand down his face. ‘Bella, this is serious, any closer and you could’ve been washed over. You can’t predict what these waves are going to do. I was running on the other side of the road until I saw you. You can’t always see those big waves coming.’ Although his eyes flared, his tone had softened.

Bella held up her phone. ‘Can I just film it? It’d look great on my feed . . .’ The look he gave her silenced her.

Aidan swore under his breath, the gentleness from a moment ago gone. ‘Did you not hear me?’ he growled. ‘Go back inside, Bella, this isn’t a spectacle to post all over social media like some Cornish theme park or something. Jesus.’

Admonished, Bella slipped her phone into her pocket. ‘No need to put it like that,’ she snapped back, rather than admitting he was right.

They glared at each other for a few moments, eyes searching, grappling for something to hold on to in the other, the roaring sea around them, until the heat went out of their stares.

Bella sank into herself. Another wave washed over the railings, catching them both with a cold, wet slap of reality. It had been a silly risk. Thrilling but stupid. 'Thank you,' she eventually mumbled, suddenly wanting to be as far away from him as possible.

'You're welcome.' Aidan's voice was tight.

That was it. The conversation at a close. The passion of his concern, of her counter-attack nipped into strained politeness. They took each other in, the way the years had softened and lined their features, the lives they had gone on to live, the truth of what happened unspoken between them. An anger simmering between them that had nothing to do with reckless behaviour in a storm and everything to do with a promise that hadn't been kept.

He'd said he'd call. He hadn't. It was as simple and as painful as that.

Aware of the cold water creeping down her neck, of Aidan being soaked to the bone, Bella broke the silence. Rather than saying any of the things she wanted to, she simply said, 'I'd better go in.'

'Yes, good idea,' he said.

Bella brushed past him and stomped across the street. Unlocking her door, she glanced back. Hands on hips he was watching her, the waves behind him crashing, and she knew in her heart that there had also been so much more he wanted to say. But was she ready to hear it?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Ten

Following her stormy encounter with Aidan, Bella was almost too embarrassed to show her face in the village the next day. She cringed, imagining her reckless behaviour making its way through the village grapevine, everyone tutting and rolling their eyes at her stupidity. Admittedly, she'd been a little shaken up by the power of the waves, not that she was going to admit that to Aidan or anyone else. The damage had been fixed by a long soak in a hot, bubbly bath. Candles flickering, an ethereal playlist wafting through the house, it had been as blissful as any spa.

Wrapped in a blanket, she'd sat and watched the rest of the storm from the safety of her living room, Mimi curled up on her lap. The wind died down as the light faded, moving on across the country, seeking new havoc to wreak. Bella settled into another evening with the twinkling fairy lights, cheese on toast, her pens and notebooks, her story growing in a way she wanted to trust but didn't know if she could.

The sunrise woke Bella because she had forgotten to close the bedroom curtains. A tentative pink hint on the horizon like a kiss, the sky already promising to be clearer. Washed and dressed, Bella and Mimi ate a slow breakfast in the kitchen, the little dog happily licking the toast crumbs from Bella's plate.

A brighter day beckoned. Bella knew she should go out. She always suffered with cabin fever when cooped up for too long and she had a headache from a day spent reading. Walking was always the best way to mentally chew over her developing plot. Even though Mimi pretended she didn't like being outside, she'd never shunned her lead.

‘Right, Mims, shall we go and face the music? See if everyone watched me almost get swept out to sea? Yes, I know it was a bit silly, but, I’ve never seen anything like it, you understand, right? Good. Come on.’ Standing up, Bella clapped her hands together.

Togged up in their winter walking gear, Mimi shot out the door the second Bella opened it. A large seagull waddled along the harbour wall and Mimi very loudly tried to exert her authority over it. Barking and yapping, yanking at her lead, she was creating a complete scene. The seagull remained uninterested.

Not wanting to draw any more attention to herself, Bella bent down to stroke Mimi’s back. ‘Ssh, darling, it’s OK, it’s just a seagull, please don’t try to fight it, I think it’s bigger than you.’ Mimi licked her fingers as Bella slipped her a treat, or maybe it was a bribe. ‘Come on, shall we see what the rest of the village is like?’

Although Bella was craving a caffeine fix, she headed in the opposite direction to Lola’s café, taking the path that wound away from the small harbour, her eyes straying to the pub, still closed up, its sign swaying in the breeze. They paused when they reached the church, small but stately in its prime location. Bella loved an old church. Pushing open the gate she made her way up the path, past the sullen, moss-covered gravestones towards the door.

‘Look at that,’ Bella said to Mimi as she ran her fingers over the seashells that had been pushed into the mortar surrounding the door. ‘Isn’t that magical? Shall we see if anyone is in?’ Bella tried the door, pleased when it swung open.

Removing her hat, Bella stepped inside. Her reverence for a church always humbled her. Who had sat in these rows of pews over the years? How many prayers had been offered up? The space communal yet private at the same time, spanning the milestones of life, encompassing both happiness and sadness. Lives led in rhythm with the services, in accordance with the lessons and psalms. Bella wasn’t religious, it sat a bit awkwardly with her, but she loved the history of churches, their endurance through societal shifts and changes. The fact that you were never quite alone in them. There was strange comfort there.

Light filtered through the windows, creating a hopscotch on the flagstones. Bella followed it back up the nave until her eye caught

something unusual and exquisite. ‘Look at that, Mimi,’ Bella whispered as she led the dog over to a mural on the back wall, a seafaring scene – *St Peter by Angelo Borelli and Freya Harris* the notice read. ‘Freya, you kept that quiet,’ Bella said, amused to see that St Peter looked a little bit like Alf.

‘Come on, shall we see what else the village has tucked away?’ Bella escorted Mimi out of the church, where she had a little sniff between the graves.

They carried on up the sloping streets. Bella didn’t complain or give Mimi a tug when she stopped to sniff or mark her territory, it gave her time to admire the whitewashed cottages, see the ways in which the owners had made them their own. A pink door, a small boat used as a flower bed, a rather sorry-looking palm tree, but all of it was utterly charming and Bella snapped away merrily with the camera on her phone.

The further she walked from the harbour, the more modern the houses became, ones with front gardens and little spaces for parking cars. They’d been built in keeping with the village, local stone, slate roofs but they looked newer, sturdier. The only one that stood out like a sore thumb was the last house in the village. Perched on top of the hill was a large mid-twentieth-century build, a little art deco, like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. Despite the debris of renovation stacked in the front garden, it was beautiful.

‘Imagine living there,’ Bella sighed to Mimi. Spinning around, she took in the scene before her, the village almost tumbling down the hill, the winter sun sparkling on the waves. ‘That view.’ Her stomach rumbled. ‘Shall we go and get a treat, hey? Think we’ve both earned it.’

Mimi gave a little skip, and they made their way back down the main road towards the harbour. Bella paused at the railings, closed her eyes and tipped her head back. As the sun streamed over her face, she could almost pretend it was summer. Opening her eyes, she wondered if she’d love Polcarrow as much in the summer when it was brighter and busier. She’d be long gone by then, so little chance of finding out. Bella wasn’t sure why that thought doused her with something chillier than yesterday’s storm had.

Not wanting to dwell too much on the future, Bella led Mimi away from the harbour wall, towards the café, both their paces quickening. Pushing open the door, Bella was surprised to find what looked like an impromptu meeting taking place. Lola and Freya stood behind the counter, Alf and a

handsome blond man sat at the table in the window, a pot of tea and two empty plates in front of them. They were all listening to a woman with an overflowing handbag, who was waving around some papers, as if trying to drum up business.

Bella loitered awkwardly in the doorway, her heart skittering to a halt, colour rising to her cheeks when her eyes met Aidan's. He was stuck near the counter, takeaway cup in hand, next to a tousle-haired man of a similar age. Realising everyone's attention had been drawn towards her, Bella tried to step back but collided with the wall. The woman stopped talking and made a beeline for Bella, engulfing her with a welcoming smile.

'You must be Bella, so pleased to meet you, welcome to Polcarrow.' She grabbed Bella's hand and gave it a squeeze. 'I'm Sue, head of the Polcarrow committee. Here, have one of these.' She shoved a flyer into Bella's hand.

*The Festive Festival!* Bella's heart sank at the title. Oh gosh, how was she going to get out of this? 'Erm, thanks, but I'm only visiting,' she managed.

'Nonsense, Lola tells me you're going to be here until Christmas, so don't worry, there's plenty you can get involved with. We're having a special committee meeting tonight to discuss this year's plans.' She turned to the rest of the café. 'It's going to be even better than last year, you're going to love it.'

'Sounds great,' Lola called, 'I can't wait! Wonder if we can eat more mince pies than last year?'

Alf exhaled. 'Now that'd be a challenge.'

'So, you're all coming?' Sue waited for everyone to nod before shoving the flyers back into her bag. She turned to Bella. 'Be lovely to see you there, you can meet everyone. We're all dying to find out more about you. Righto, better go, see you all later. Seven thirty,' she told Bella.

Like a whirlwind blowing across a field, Sue was out of the door. Bella stared at everyone. 'What was that?'

'You've been Sue-d,' Alf chuckled.

Bella held up the flyer. 'I'm not technically a resident, more a holidaymaker, do I get a choice in this?'

Aidan held her gaze. Was that amusement sparkling in his eyes at seeing her squirm? 'No, I'm afraid not. Welcome to Polcarrow, Bella,' he said,

with a strange emphasis on her name. He took a sip of his drink, pushed past her and headed out into the morning.

Bella watched him go, feeling a mixture of having been short-changed and ambushed at the same time.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Eleven

Bella waited until the last minute to leave for the committee meeting, in two minds whether to go. She was assailed with images of Sue banging down her front door and dragging her along. Deciding to take Mimi with her, she reasoned if dogs weren't allowed, it would be the perfect excuse to go home and skip the meeting altogether.

Despite being sworn off Christmas, Bella couldn't deny that she was intrigued. Her writerly senses were on high alert. Everyone she'd met in Polcarrow had been friendly and full of character. Bella found people watching fascinating. From their clothing choices to the way they spoke or carried themselves. It was one of the reasons she struggled to get any proper words down when she went to a café to write – too many distractions, too many conversations to listen in on.

Full of curiosity, Bella walked the short distance to the church hall, Mimi in tow. It was a small modern building tucked away behind the church, as if they wanted to keep it hidden. Bella looked down at Mimi. 'Don't worry, I won't get us involved in anything cult-like.' Mimi appeared to nod her head.

'Right. Here goes.' Bella squared her shoulders and pushed open the door. Seeing what looked like the entire village milling around, she almost beat a hasty retreat. Instead, she braced herself and stepped foot into the hall. The door slammed behind her, alerting everyone to her presence. This was not helped by Mimi, who loved being the centre of attention, giving a welcoming bark, further announcing their arrival. Was it Bella's imagination or did the volume drop a bit as everyone craned their necks to get a good look at her? Bella picked Mimi up, cuddling the dog for moral

support. Chairs had been laid out in two blocks with a central aisle, most of them occupied.

Sue's face lit up. 'Bella, you made it!' She hurried up the aisle and took hold of Bella's elbow, practically peeling her away from the door. 'We're just about to get started.'

'Is Mimi allowed?'

Sue took one look at the little dog. 'Of course she is! We're very inclusive. Let me introduce you to everyone.'

'Won't that take some time?' Bella glanced at the villagers who were taking their seats. Sue couldn't possibly take her around everyone . . . But that wasn't what was going to happen, Bella realised as Sue pulled her to the front of the hall, spinning her round so she was facing the crowd. Bella squirmed under the scrutiny, while Mimi strained in her arms, desperate to make friends. Bella's face blanched as Sue banged her glasses case against the table, drawing everyone's attention. The plan to slip in at the back and observe evaporated.

'Good evening, everyone! Can you hear me? Good. Before we start, I want to introduce our newest resident, Bella,' Sue announced with a flourish in her direction.

'I'm not really a resident, I'm just here on an extended holiday,' Bella corrected as she took in everyone watching her. Effie and Freya with kindness, Lola with amusement. Her eyes were drawn to Aidan, his brow furrowed, his thoughts indistinguishable but utterly, heart-stoppingly gorgeous. Her face flamed. She was fine doing author talks where she was in control, had planned out her material, but this, oh gosh, it was her worst nightmare. There was going to be no way she could scurry up the aisle and sit at the back.

Mimi yapped to remind Bella that she was also there, breaking the tension. 'And this is Mimi, she's very pleased to meet you all.' Everyone laughed as Mimi responded by wriggling out of Bella's arms. Bella watched in horror as she sauntered over to Aidan, pawing at his legs, tail wagging. Aidan tried to ignore her, but Mimi was not a quitter. The scowl on Aidan's face eventually transformed into a smile as the little dog jumped onto his lap and attempted to lick his face.

'She's such a show-off!' Bella managed, her mortification rising. 'Sorry, Aidan, let me rescue you.' Mimi narrowed her eyes and gave Aidan one last

lick before jumping onto the spare seat next to him. She circled it three times before settling down.

Bella scanned the rest of the room; there were a few spare seats. Would it be rude to pick up her dog and head to the back of the room? Probably. Would Mimi make a fuss? Definitely. She sensed Sue watching her, waiting to start. *Well, she could've started five minutes ago if she'd just let me slip in at the back*, Bella thought. Admitting defeat, she scooped Mimi up off the seat. Realising she had no choice but to sit next to Aidan, she dropped onto the hard plastic chair and wished the ground would swallow her up.

Beside her, Aidan shifted in his seat, as if trying to put some distance between them. The tension that emanated from him engulfed Bella like a black cloud, making it difficult for her to concentrate on whatever Sue was saying. Something about a lobster pot Christmas tree. What was that? Bella pulled Mimi closer, but the dog's attention remained fixed on Aidan. Why was she so fascinated by him? Why couldn't Bella stop the internal debate over whether she wanted to confront him or kiss him? Mimi couldn't have picked a worse place to sit. Aidan, to his credit, did a sterling job of ignoring them both, resulting in Bella feeling worse.

'Now we have the tree sorted and the carol service is arranged, let's move on to my next initiative. Stop groaning, you're going to love it, honestly. Effie helped me cook it up.' Sue summoned the bookseller to the front. 'See, you can't hate it if Effie is involved, can you?'

'I don't know about that,' Effie said as she stood next to Sue. 'You're better at explaining things than me, you start.'

Sue pretended to protest but Bella could see she loved being in charge. 'You all love Effie's themed shop windows. I think they're marvellous. So why shouldn't we extend them around the village? Like a village advent calendar. Each morning a different house or business reveals a Christmas scene in their window, or front garden. What do you think?'

There was a buzz of murmurs in the hall. Bella glanced around everyone with a sense of dread creeping in. A lobster pot tree, a carol service, a village advent calendar. Rather than escaping Christmas it felt like she had been launched right into it. From the responses to Sue's suggestion, Bella realised with horror that Polcarrow loved Christmas. She threw a glance over her shoulder. It wasn't far to the door; she could make a run for it. People expected erratic behaviour from writers and artists. She'd

slam the door on the cottage, hunker down and not show her face again. Or, even better, find somewhere else to retreat too. Like a secluded moor. No Christmas. No Aidan.

Except there was something about the excitement that buzzed through the hall. Something Bella hadn't felt for ages. A sense of ambition and hope, of the community all working together as one. As she settled back into her seat, she realised Aidan was watching her with amusement.

'What?'

'I thought you were going to make a run for it,' he said, holding his hand out to Mimi. They watched as she placed her paw on it. Why was he kind to her in one breath, but scowling at her the next?

Before Bella could respond, Sue banged her glasses case again and the rumble of voices died down.

'So, you all like the idea?'

A chorus of yeses sounded around the hall. Sue clapped her hands together in delight. 'I've drawn up a list of days. As December is next week, Effie will take December the first, I'm doing the second, and Lola has agreed to do the third. Give you all a bit of time to think about what you want to put in your windows. You don't have to sign up tonight, but I do really want all the days covered. You can catch me here for a few minutes or in the pub. Anyone have any other business?'

No one had anything to raise and relief washed through Bella as the meeting was brought to a close. She waited until other people started to stand up before rising to her feet.

'Making a swift exit?' Aidan asked her.

'Yes.' Her voice was tight as she took a step away from him.

Aidan stacked her chair on top of his. 'Good luck with that,' he said, as he picked the chairs up. 'I wouldn't be surprised if I find you in the pub in ten minutes.'

'Oh? Why's that?' Bella arched an eyebrow.

Aidan said nothing but nodded towards her shoulder. She turned around to see Effie, Lola and Freya standing there. 'Oh hi,' she managed.

'You are coming to the pub, aren't you?' Freya asked.

'Well, erm . . . it's just . . .' Bella floundered for an excuse.

Lola stepped forwards, slipped her arm through Bella's and began to lead her away. 'It's tradition,' was all she said. 'Your dog seems to like

Aidan.’ Lola searched Bella’s face as if she knew there was more to it. Bella didn’t flinch under the scrutiny.

‘Yes, she does, but Mimi likes everyone,’ was all Bella was willing to say as they left the hall and made their way to the pub. Outside, she put Mimi down.

Thankfully, any further interrogation was curtailed by Lola’s face lighting up at the sight of the handsome blond man Bella had seen sitting with Alf in the café.

‘Bella, this is Tristan, our vicar and my husband.’ Lola giggled. ‘It’s been six months and I’m still not used to calling him that!’

Tristan gave Lola a kiss on the cheek before turning to Bella and giving her hand a firm shake. ‘Hi, Bella, I’ve heard all sorts about you.’

‘Really?’ Bella’s eyes skittered between Tristan and Lola, wracking her brains trying to work out what people may have heard. Hopefully not the storm-soaking incident. ‘I’ve only been here a few days!’

‘Word travels fast in Polcarrow,’ Tristan playfully warned her. ‘Are you coming with us?’

Bella glanced at Lola and Tristan. There was kindness in their eyes, a joint desire to include everyone and make them feel welcome. Bella knew she’d be a complete spoilsport if she didn’t go along, get involved. She would draw the line at anything Christmassy though.

‘Sure, just for one,’ she accepted.

Following them along the harbour, she turned her face skywards, catching the stars sparkling. The more she looked, the more seemed to appear. All those light years away. Was there life out there? Impossible to think there was, but equally as chilling if there wasn’t. The stars fascinated her. Could their placements really have any sway over people’s destinies? The romantic part of Bella loved the idea of fate being written in the stars, spread across galaxies; however, she couldn’t deny that there was something slightly preposterous about the notion.

Mimi used Bella’s pause to start sniffing the harbour wall, trailing her little nose along the bottom of it until she was tugging on the lead, pulling Bella towards the comforting glow of The Shipwreck Inn. A thrill ran through her at the thought of another attempt to conjure Jago and Merrin from the dust and stone of the building.

By the time they arrived at the pub, it was busy with everyone who'd dispersed from the committee meeting. Bella put away her thoughts of ghost hunting, as she stooped to pick Mimi up. As Bella straightened up, her eyes caught Aidan's. He was behind the bar, pulling a pint. He gave her a tight nod of acknowledgement, then turned back to the customer he was serving, breaking into jovial banter with them as they paid. Rage flashed through Bella. How dare he act hot and cold? He was the one who hadn't been in touch with her all those years ago.

Bella made her way to the bar, squeezing in amongst the regulars. She half wanted to be served by Aidan, half wanted to be rescued by Steve. At least he'd be friendly. She drummed her fingers as she waited, glancing around her, taking in the pub. With everyone enjoying their drinks, the chatter and the low-level music playing, she wondered what Jago would make of it all.

'What's got you all amused?'

Bella shifted her gaze from the lit fireplace to the voice. Aidan. He was studying her as if trying to figure her out, as if he had as many questions about her as she was seeking answers to. 'Just wondered what Jago would think of the Spice Girls,' she said as the track changed on the playlist.

Aidan laughed. It was like dawn breaking through a stormy night. 'I think Geri would've been his favourite,' he played along.

'Oh, so now you believe in him?'

Aidan shrugged. 'I didn't say that. I still think it's completely made up, but, if Dad likes it, and the punters do, what can I say? You won't find me telling ghost stories though. What can I get you?'

'Glass of red please. Merlot is fine.' A memory resurfaced of the bottles of beer they'd swigged, the glass dripping with condensation, wedges of lime shoved in the tops. She hadn't drunk beer like that since. It didn't taste the same.

Bella watched as he turned to pour her drink, taking in the person he had grown into. Broader across the shoulders, an attempt to tame the wild curls she remembered running her fingers through. Snippets of conversation surfaced – she remembered Cornwall, but nothing about a pub by the sea, but being a chef, yes, that was familiar. Five years ago, was this where he imagined he'd be? A tiny village, working in a pub, enduring his dad's ghost stories? Bella couldn't help but sense it wouldn't have been. The

Aidan standing before her was different from the boy she'd met, and she felt her perspective shift along with the realisation. Could she go on hating someone she didn't actually know?

Bella reflected on the past five years of her own life. Max, the book deals, her nieces growing up. A life forged together from interlinking pieces that had never fitted perfectly. She'd just crossed her fingers and hoped desperately that it would all work out. Now here they both were, Aidan and her, almost back at the beginning. What would have been different if he had called her? Would they have burned bright before dying out or would they be happily married, with two kids and a dog?

Aidan placed her glass of wine in front of her. Her cheeks flamed from her previous thoughts. He clearly had never thought about what could have been. Yet that same attraction licked like a flame. Could he feel it too? Or was his heart as cold and closed off as his eyes were? Humiliation that he hadn't called rose like smoke through the embers of desire. Bella paid for her drink, but as she went to pick it up, Aidan reached out, grabbed her hand firmly, as if he was afraid she might float away. Her brow furrowed with a question.

'I think we need to talk.' His voice was strained as if he had carefully chosen the words.

Bella bristled at his serious tone. She didn't remember this side of him from before. That Aidan had been joyful and fun, this Aidan, well maybe it just was proof they hadn't known each other. Did she want to get to know this version of Aidan? Maybe. He wanted to talk? Well, she also had plenty to say.

'Yes, we probably do.' She glanced around the bar. It was getting rowdier as the beer was consumed. Someone was starting up a sea shanty.

'Not tonight,' he said, 'we're busy. Tomorrow morning. I'll meet you at the café. Weather's going to be fine, we can go for a walk. Ten o'clock.'

'Sure,' she agreed whilst secretly groaning inside. The café, it would be like broadcasting their acquaintance across the ten o'clock news. Soon everyone in Polcarrow would know that she'd been ghosted by Aidan.

## Chapter Twelve

‘Why are you so keen to go out?’ Bella crossed her arms and leaned against the banisters, watching Mimi scratching frantically at the front door. ‘Is it Aidan?’

At the sound of his name, Mimi did a happy little twirl and yapped once. Bella rolled her eyes. The last place she wanted to go this morning was Lola’s café to meet Aidan. Despite that, she’d spent the past fifteen minutes trying to hide the dark circles under her eyes. A combination of the wine, Aidan’s request to meet, running through what she’d say to him and fretting about her writing had kept her awake past midnight. Sleep, when it arrived, had been as choppy as a stormy sea.

‘Talk? What on earth does he want to talk about?’ Bella huffed at Mimi. ‘Do you think he’s going to apologise? I hope he doesn’t think I turned up here to stalk him. If that’s the case, I’m going to give him a right piece of my mind. He’s the one who owes me an apology! Maybe I should stand him up? Give him a taste of his own medicine. Oh Mimi, don’t look at me like that. He’s not a good guy, all right?’

Mimi yapped again. Resigned to her fate, Bella picked up Mimi’s lead and, bending down, put it on her.

‘Honestly, munchkin, if you knew what I knew you’d be biting his ankles, not skipping out to lick his face,’ Bella grumbled as she pulled on her coat, scarf and hat.

Another soft grey day greeted them, but the air was noticeably chillier than the previous days. The type of cold that managed to work its way through any gaps in clothing or, in Bella’s case, make her eyes run. ‘Great,’ she muttered as she dabbed at the tears, glad her mascara was waterproof. ‘Panda eyes are the last thing I need. Come on, let’s get this done.’

In answer, Mimi tugged at the lead, practically dragging Bella along the seafront to the café. Why had he chosen the café? Everyone would see them meeting and jump to conclusions. Bella wanted to keep their former acquaintance as secret as possible. She'd go in, get her mocha and wait across the road, pretend she was admiring the view. Give nothing to anyone who might be twitching their curtains.

As she pushed open the café door, her plan was instantly thwarted. Aidan was the only customer. He spun round as the door opened. Bella spied the smile that spread instinctively across his face before he smothered it, the scowl she was more used to these days furrowing his brow. Mimi reared onto her hind legs and pedalled her front paws in sheer delight at seeing the object of her affections. Aidan crouched down as Mimi threw herself at him.

'Show some decorum,' Bella tutted as Mimi enjoyed Aidan's fusses, using the moment to admire him. His navy wool coat was beautifully cut and fitted as if it had been tailored exactly for him. Nice shoulders always made her swoon and she could never resist a man in a good coat. 'Come on, that's enough, leave the poor man alone.' Bella's voice was terse as she pulled Mimi away.

Aidan took the opportunity to straighten up, catching Bella's eyes as he did. Of course she believed in soulmates and destined love, she was a romance author after all, she just hadn't expected to still feel all those fated feelings for someone who'd discarded her heart. Aidan's eyes skittered over her face as if reminding himself of a place he'd once wanted to explore but had misplaced the map.

'There's your cappuccino.' A voice broke through their moment. Bella's eyes slid past Aidan onto Lola who was placing a takeaway cup on the counter. She beamed at them as if she knew everything that had happened before and everything that was to come.

'What will you have?' Aidan asked, taking his card from his wallet.

Bella ignored Lola's eyes almost popping out of her head. 'A mocha, please.'

An awkward silence descended as Lola made the drink. This didn't seem to stop her from leaning back as if to listen in. Lola's prediction resurfaced. A ghost from her past. Had she known? Well, here he was. Lola turned and placed the mocha on the counter, a satisfied smile on her face.

She met Bella's gaze and gave a subtle nod in Aidan's direction. Bella ignored this, thanked her and hoped her tight smile gave nothing away.

'Anything else?' Lola asked.

*An escape plan*, Bella was tempted to answer but instead shook her head. 'No, thanks.' Aidan was already opening the door, Mimi straining at her lead to follow him. 'Aidan's biggest fan.' Bella signalled to Mimi. 'See you later.'

'Where now?' Bella asked once they were safely outside, the cold sea breeze like a slap of reality across her face.

Aidan turned his collar up against the wind and sipped his drink. 'This way.' He nodded towards the headland. 'Fewer prying eyes up there.' So, he was wary of the gossips too.

'Did Lola read your cards?' Bella asked to break the silence that had grown between them.

'Humph,' was Aidan's response. 'She tried to. Did she do yours?'

'Er, yes.' His dismissive response didn't encourage her to go deeper. He clearly thought tarot cards were a load of bunkum too.

They fell into step with each other as they made their way along the harbour front, Mimi alternating between stopping to sniff the wall and prancing in front of Aidan.

'I'm not really a small dog person but she is very cute,' he said. 'How old is she?'

'Almost five. When I first got her, she was so tiny she fitted in the palm of my hand. I could've bought the entire litter, they were so cute. But I think I'm a few years away from being a mad chihuahua lady. She was my thirtieth birthday present to myself.'

A memory resurfaced. The hours they'd spent swapping as much information with each other as possible, as if cramming for an exam. Marvelling that their birthdays were mere days apart, adding to the lore of their meeting being fated. Hers the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May, his the 25<sup>th</sup>. The happy discussion that they could go on joint adventures, spoil each other. Bella remembered every word even when they proved worthless. Did Aidan remember, too?

If he did, he wasn't letting on. 'Ah cool. I went to New Zealand and did *The Lord of the Rings* tour. It was stunning. Worth every penny. What? Why

are you looking at me like that?’

Bella sipped her drink and shrugged. ‘I find it a bit strange that you like *The Lord of the Rings*, all elves and dwarves and stuff like that, but draw the line at ghosts.’

‘Why are you so interested in this ghost business?’ Aidan groaned. ‘I hear Dad telling the stories night after night. Embellishing them, scaring the customers. I’ve never seen anything.’

‘Just because you haven’t seen anything, doesn’t mean there isn’t something there,’ Bella protested.

The look he gave her was a withering combination of disbelief and annoyance.

Bella didn’t protest. Instead, she remained tight-lipped, not wanting to give any of herself away. He’d taken enough of her the night they’d met. The fact they were different people now wasn’t salve to the wound from him vanishing on her. She followed him along the seafront, climbing up to the headland to the same bench she’d sat on when she’d first arrived, surveying Polcarrow like it was her new kingdom. As she sat beside Aidan, Bella felt as if she was going to be given a banishment.

They sipped their drinks in silence, eyes trained on the sea, beautiful and bleak. The lap of the tide would have been soothing if Bella wasn’t so wound up. She wasn’t going to be the one to break the silence. After all, she hadn’t asked for this chat.

‘Why did you come here?’ Aidan asked eventually.

Feeling his eyes on her, Bella turned straight into his searching gaze. It dawned on her that her earlier assumption had been right. He thought she’d come to Polcarrow because he was here.

‘You think I came for you?’ Bella let out an astonished laugh.

Aidan shrugged but didn’t deny it.

‘Oh gosh, how egotistical are you? You really think I came all the way here because I’d found out where you were after five years? A man I didn’t even have a surname for? You only told me you were from Cornwall, but, if you’ve not already noticed, it’s a pretty big place.’

Aidan shifted uncomfortably as she exposed the holes in his theory. ‘You’ve got to admit it’s a bit of a coincidence.’

‘Too right it is, but I did not come here because I was searching for you. As if! I came here because . . .’ She trailed off, he didn’t need to know,

didn't deserve to know, the intricacies of her life. 'Tell me, why would I drive all the way down to Cornwall in search of a man I spent a weekend with five years ago, who ghosted me despite promising to call?' Bella rose to her feet and glared at him.

Confusion flashed over Aidan's face. 'Ghosted *you*?'

'Yep.'

'So, you think everything I said was a lie?' he spat, incredulous.

'Clearly.' Bella folded her arms. 'That's what they call it when someone disappears. A ghosting.'

Aidan let out a bitter laugh. 'You think *I* ghosted *you*? Ridiculous. You're the one who gave me the wrong number!' It was his turn to look triumphant.

'What?'

'I called you, but a builder called Kev picked up. You gave me a fake number.'

'What? Oh, come on, that's unlikely, I was crazy for you, we mapped out our entire future for God's sake. Why would I give you a fake number?'

'I don't know. I assumed you didn't want to see me again!'

'That's the sort of shitty excuse any guy who ghosted a girl would give to make himself look better.' Bella huffed. She hadn't taken Aidan's number because her battery had been flat. Too many selfies with her friends enjoying themselves at the festival with copious amounts of cocktails. All of them awful. Without a surname, she'd been unable to find him on social media. It had started to feel like she'd imagined him.

Aidan placed his cup down on the bench. 'Right, you don't believe me? Let me show you.'

Bella watched as he pulled his battered old smartphone out of his pocket, tapped at the screen and began to scroll. 'See.' Aidan turned the phone around to show her the message and call log.

The entry read 'Izzy Festival'. Like a portal to a different time, a different her. Tequila shots and flowers in her hair.

'Ha! That is my number,' Bella signalled to the phone. Aidan passed it to her, but as she read out the number her voice slowed from triumphant to a disbelieving halt. All her blood drained away. 'Oh God, it should end seven-seven-zero not seven-seven-eight.'

Swearing under her breath, Bella thrust the phone back at him. It had all been her fault. Not able to look at Aidan, Bella turned towards the sea. Dragging in some deep breaths, she wished the ground would swallow her whole. All these years she'd thought he'd ghosted her, that he had been lying about seeing her again. That he was the worst of men. The tears and disappointment when she realised he wasn't going to call. All of it was because in her drunken haste she had fumbled putting her number into his phone.

Could she just walk back down the hill, pack up her stuff and drive on? Why did everything in Polcarrow trigger her desire to flee? She sensed Aidan waiting for her response, her apology. Bella dropped down beside him and took a sip of her drink. It was cold.

'I didn't ghost you,' he said gently.

'I know now,' she replied turning to him. 'I didn't give you a wrong number because I didn't want to see you. It was late, I, we, were drunk and ...' Her voice trailed off. 'I remember now, you said you didn't do social media.'

Aidan winced. 'Yeah, at the time it was a bad principle to stick to. I tried to get my mates to find you, but no luck. No surnames. Maybe I was looking for an Izzy when I should've been trying to find a Bella. Which one are you?'

'I've always been Bella online. Bella Fox sounded better as an author. I was trying to fake it until I made it.' She let out a hollow laugh. 'Why don't you use socials?'

Aidan shrugged. 'I think it's a bit pointless. But I know it can be great for business.'

They turned to each other, the people they were now. Bella's eyes skimmed Aidan's face as he took her in, both noting the changes in the other, the magnitude of how that one incorrect digit had changed the course of their lives. Or had it? Here they were now. A fresh start? Bella realised she was tired of being angry with him. The misunderstandings of the past fell like a weight lifted from their shoulders as they silently agreed to put them aside.

Each took the other in as if for the first time. It was still there, that irresistible pull towards the other. An alignment of stars. Was being in

Polcarrow together their second chance? Bella wiped the thought from her head. Better not to get too carried away with fate, that was Lola's job.

'It was a very good night,' Aidan said carefully.

'It was the best,' Bella admitted. 'Oh God, I am so sorry, you must've thought the worst of me.'

'And you clearly thought the worst of me,' he pointed out.

Bella exhaled. 'Yes.'

They were silent for a few moments as the possibility of what next began to swell between them. Could they salvage something from five years ago? Did they both want to? There was a pause, as if the world was holding its breath, waiting to see what they'd do next.

'Yet here we both are,' Aidan said, laying it out like a possibility, stretching his fingers out as if to grasp it.

Bella studied his hand, tanned, long fingers she wanted to link hers through. 'We are. For whatever that means.' She raised her eyes back to his.

Aidan held her gaze. His eyes as dark and intense as midnight. Bella held herself back from reaching across and closing the gap between them.

'What do we do?' Bella asked, her voice choked.

Aidan shrugged. 'I guess we each have to try and forgive the other. Come on, it's getting cold.'

Bella watched him stand. She wouldn't have minded sitting for a bit, sorting her brain out, but Mimi was trailing after Aidan, like a link between them. They didn't speak on their way back to the village. Too much to process. They passed the café and despite Lola waving at them, neither slowed their step, just threw a wave over their shoulders and carried on.

They made their way along the harbour, drawing to a halt where the path divided, one direction to the pub, one to her cottage. Aidan stepped close, the wind whipping at his curls. Bella inhaled the sandalwood and citrus scent of his aftershave.

'You still smell the same,' she whispered, but as soon as the words were out of her mouth, she wished she could cram them back in.

Amusement sparked in Aidan's eyes. 'And you, well, you're everything I remember you being.'

Bella didn't counter this; he didn't need to know how life had chipped away at her. Those scars were buried deep. 'What happens now?' she asked, not liking the tinge of desperation in her voice.

Aidan reached for her hand. Bella hesitated but let him take it, giving it the briefest of squeezes. A current flashed through her body. 'I think we should start as friends.'

'Friends, yes, that sounds, great,' she managed.

He dropped her hand, bent down to give Mimi one last fuss. 'I'll see you soon, come and say hi to those ghosts.'

'I will.' Bella watched him stalk towards the pub, realising she knew absolutely nothing about this version of Aidan. The one she had pined for had been smooth and unruffled by life, as had she. Underneath those layers he'd have his own chips and scars. The curiosity to uncover everything that had made him the man he was now, was undeniable.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirteen

‘So much for coming to Cornwall to clear my mind,’ Bella sighed to Mimi as she made herself a cup of tea the next morning. She let out a yawn, having been awake half the night thinking, and not about the book she was meant to be writing.

Following the revelation with Aidan, Bella had found herself unable to concentrate. Rather than a cosy afternoon tucked up with her notebook, a box of jaffa cakes and her coloured pens, plotting out her next novel, her mind had been consumed by him. After all this time Bella still fancied Aidan. He was even more gorgeous than she’d remembered. For the first time in years, she allowed herself to think about the weekend they had spent together. The rickety Ferris wheel where they’d clung onto each other for dear life. Dancing to support acts giving it their best shot in a bid for stardom. The gorgeous sunset over a muddy field that had rose tinted the entire experience. Their excited promise to meet sealed with a kiss. Her imagination turned to Aidan, filling her brain with a carousel of what-ifs. The irony that this was the most she’d used her imagination in a long time was not lost on her.

An email from Bethan ‘just checking in’ hadn’t helped either. Bella had hovered over the reply button before putting it off again, feeling a pang of guilt for all the ‘another days’. The book about the girl and her grandmother’s dress was dead, she needed to come clean about that. However, her ideas for bringing Jago and Merrin back to life were still too sparse. She needed something more solid to approach Bethan with, something that blew all her other ideas out of the water. Frame it in such a way no one would be able to say no.

‘What should I do, hey?’ she asked Mimi, who cocked her head to one side as if throwing the question back. ‘Oh I know what you’d like, to go and make use of your membership to the Aidan fan club, wouldn’t you? Well, that’s not going to help me is it, darling?’

Bella finished her tea, fed Mimi and then went upstairs for a luxurious soak in the bath. She always did her best thinking in the bath but as she sank beneath the bubbles, eyes closed, she couldn’t conjure up Jago and Merrin. Instead, Aidan’s face swam before her. Ugh. Maybe the magic was gone? Maybe after six books in five years she needed a break? Could she take one after the end of this contract? There were still the finances to sort out, her share of the house she’d bought with Max. But that would mean dredging everything up between them and Bella really didn’t have the energy for those sort of hostile conversations right now.

Or what if she continued writing and just stuck as close to the truth as possible? What if she crafted the modern-day tale around her and Aidan? A story of windswept second chances set against a squally Cornish winter? No, autumn, much spookier, more atmospheric. Her modern-day heroine returning home, the boy she’d loved as a teenager still in town. She could be a historian, writing a book about smuggling or something. But how could she join it all together? That was the missing link.

Water cooled, skin pruned, Bella got out of the bath, wrapped the towels around her. Maybe she should just contact Bethan, hash out the ideas. The irony that Bella needed to get some of these ideas out of her head and onto paper and in some sort of order was not lost on her. Applying coconut-scented body lotion, Bella had to admit she couldn’t wrangle this mess alone any longer.

Dressed in comfy leggings and a thick jumper, she headed back downstairs to find Mimi lingering hopefully by the door. ‘Oh God, give me a few minutes, but we are not going to the pub, OK. It’s way too early.’ Aidan may have suggested they be friends but Bella had no idea how to go about doing that.

After wrapping herself up against the chill, Bella pulled a little jumper onto Mimi. ‘Stop squirming, they’re saying it’s going to snow. Anyway, you know you look pretty in this one and don’t you want to look pretty in case we bump into your new boyfriend? We’ll have a quick walk, then I really must get on with trying to do some work.’ Catching her makeup free face in

the mirror, Bella wondered if she should be taking the same advice as she was giving her dog, but anything other than the slightest lick of lip balm would look like she was trying too hard on a cold Friday morning.

Deciding she looked passable, Bella and Mimi left the house. Bella had planned to turn left but their attention was caught by a commotion taking place along the harbour. A large load of lobster pots were being stacked by some of the village men, overseen by Lola and Sue. Alf was sitting on a crate, Scruff at his feet, directing proceedings.

Bella was halfway there before she realised one of the men balanced halfway up the structure was Aidan, the sleeves of his jumper pushed up revealing strong tanned forearms. Seeing him, Mimi barked happily, making everyone turn in their direction. Bella's eyes flickered to Aidan, his own face unreadable as he paused, lobster pot in his hands. He broke the contact first, called back to task by the sandy-haired man she'd seen him with in the café.

'What's going on?' Bella asked as she drew to a halt beside Lola and Sue.

'Our lobster pot Christmas tree,' Sue explained, passing a photo across to Bella. 'It was a showstopper last year so we're trying to make it even better this year.'

Bella studied the photo. Lobster pots were stacked up in a pyramid, decorated with glowing lights and seaside bits and bobs, a mermaid sculpture balanced on the top. 'It's enchanting,' she admitted as she passed the photo back, heart sinking as she realised there would be no way to escape Christmas in Polcarrow.

'We're getting it ready for the festive festival next Saturday. Various businesses or groups in the village decorate a tree in the church, there's a Santa for the kids and when it gets dark, we switch on the lights on the tree,' Sue explained.

'You really like Christmas here, don't you?' Bella turned to the other two women.

Lola was studying her, as if trying to read her. 'We love it. Why? Are you not a Christmas fan?'

Bella shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. Memories resurfaced from last year. The lavish party she and Max had thrown, parties they had become famous for amongst their friendship groups. Last year's

party had been their downfall, ending in tears and recriminations. Bella didn't want to dwell too closely on that memory. 'Erm, not really, sorry.' She shrugged as if to indicate it was no big deal.

Sue gasped and almost collapsed with shock. 'You don't like Christmas?'

'Erm, that's not what I said.' Bella took a step back. 'I'm just not mad into it, you know, we all have our personal preferences.'

Sue looked down at her clipboard. 'So you won't be taking up decorating a window? There's only a few spaces left and you're one of the only places that haven't signed up. I was hoping to cajole or even bribe you into taking part.'

Bella's resolve almost cracked under Sue's disappointed stare. 'I'm sorry, but I'm just here as a visitor.'

Even as she said it, Bella's heart sank. It didn't feel like a holiday. Watching Sue tuck her clipboard back into her bag, Bella wondered why she couldn't just say yes to these kind women who were weaving her into the fabric of the village and their lives. It didn't need to be much, just a model snowman or something. However, she didn't want to commit to something that she might not be able to deliver. Bella realised she needed to try and stay on the outskirts, not get too sucked into the politics and party planning. It would make it easier for her to leave. After only a week, Bella was already starting to feel like Polcarrow was home. That was as enticing and as dangerous as the flare in Aidan's eyes.

From the way Lola was looking at her, she knew the mystical café owner had already figured out how this was going to end. Bella felt uncomfortable under her scrutiny. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know. Since arriving in Polcarrow life had thrown up so many more complications than the one she'd come to escape from.

## Chapter Fourteen

‘So, let me get this right.’ Bethan glanced down at her notes. ‘Your email said you want to write a sweeping love story about a ghostly smuggler?’

‘Pretty much.’ Bella snuggled Mimi to her. She’d sent a few notes and a rough, rambling outline across to Bethan. Even though she hadn’t written a single word, it had felt like the right moment to catch up with her agent via video call. ‘Can you see it? Jago and Merrin trapped forever, unable to be reunited. Swirling Cornish mists, yearning, a heart-stopping sense of danger. Ella, my modern-day heroine, is going to break the curse and find a way to help them be together in the afterlife.’

The less said about how that curse was going to be broken, the better. Bella was constructing this new book on a wing and a prayer. She kept her fingers crossed under the table.

‘OK, that sounds good. I like it actually.’

‘Phew,’ Bella sighed with relief. ‘You have no idea how pleased I am to hear that.’

‘I think it’s got potential. Would you also like me to try and negotiate an extension as well as a change of story?’

Bella nodded. ‘Yes please, and send my apologies. It’s just been a very difficult year what with Max and everything. But I really think this book could be something special.’ She couldn’t help but gush even though she had no idea if she still had the ability to get the thing written.

‘Sure, I completely understand. If you could get a synopsis and an opening chapter across to me, I’ll see what I can do. I believe in this idea, Bella, it has all the hallmarks of your first few books, the sweeping love story, the wild landscape, I think this could be your best one yet.’

‘Thanks, so do I.’ Bella laced her voice with enthusiasm. Faking it until she made it.

‘So, how’s it going down in Cornwall? Have you managed to write much?’

The events of her stay in Cornwall flashed through her mind. ‘Well, it’s quite inspiring, stunning landscape. I’m still sorting the story out, but once I figure out how to open it, yeah, I think it’s going to just flow.’ *Oh gosh*, Bella cringed inwardly, *why on earth did I say that?*

‘Excellent, well, I can’t wait to read it,’ Bethan enthused before they wrapped up the call.

Bella sagged back against the sofa cushions after the call ended.

‘Oh God, Mimi, what am I like? “Just going to flow.” Think that went well though, didn’t it?’ she said after putting her phone down. ‘Now, all I have to do is write the blasted thing. Ugh.’

It hadn’t been for want of trying. Bella had spent every spare moment trying to craft the opening of the book, wanting to capture the way the mist fell over the Cornish village, dense with secrets. She could picture it in her head, feel it in her fingertips but every time she sat down to write, it was like wading through mud. The words clunky, the phrases clichéd and basic. The old adage of not being able to edit a blank page circled in her brain.

The synopsis came more easily. Usually Bella found it the worst part of the whole writing process, trying to corral her sprawling ideas into two sides of A4. She had enjoyed allowing all her ideas to come together, the intricacies of Ella and Adam’s lives in the present, all their old hurts and missed opportunities. Teenage sweethearts discovering that their feelings hadn’t been packed away along with their schoolbooks. Bella had enjoyed going to town embellishing the tragic love story of Merrin and Jago. So, why was it almost impossible to actually write the damn thing?

Could she go to the café? Heading out of the house usually helped ease her writer’s block. There’d be a wealth of tempting treats. Bella’s mouth watered at the thought of tucking into a cream tea as a reward for getting some words down. But would she get the privacy she needed? Most likely not. Polcarrow was the friendliest place she’d ever been, but it also meant that nothing stayed private for long, and peace and quiet might be hard to come by. She couldn’t imagine setting up her laptop, putting on her

headphones and not being distracted by Lola or disturbed by Sue, who was still trying to get her to sign up for a Christmas window.

Could she drive to another village? Find a café there? Even the thought felt like betrayal. Lola would probably run her out of town if she heard she'd sampled someone else's scones. She doubted they'd be as good anyway.

That only left the pub. Maybe Jago's ghost breathing down her neck would help. Maybe she'd be able to try and connect with Merrin's spirit again. At least moving location would feel productive. There'd be less chance of being interrupted in the pub than in the café.

'Fancy a trip to see your boyfriend?' Bella asked Mimi, who leaped off the sofa and bounded to the front door, scratching at it, desperate to be let out. 'Oh, Mimi, less keenness please, it's really not cool.'

Bella packed up her laptop and notebook and pretended she wasn't checking her makeup when she peered into the bathroom mirror. She'd have to do. Didn't want to look as if she was trying too hard. Downstairs, she had no trouble squeezing Mimi into her jumper or putting her harness on. By now Bella was used to Mimi eagerly tugging her across the road the moment the door was opened and allowed herself to be pulled along.

'Slow down, Mimi, you might not like it but I want to see the sea.' Bella bribed the little dog to sit with a treat. Pausing, she inhaled the sea air, taking in the way the weak winter sunlight gilded the wet sand. There was something about the seaside in winter, revealing its true magic just for the residents. Bella felt honoured to be included.

'Shame you don't like the sand, Mimi, you're missing out,' Bella said as she led the dog towards the pub, her stomach churning with a sudden bout of nerves. Would Aidan be there? Did she want him to be? She hadn't spoken to him since their heart-to-heart. Bella couldn't work out if she'd been avoiding him or not. Or was he avoiding her? She was well aware that Aidan threatened to become a distraction from the book, albeit a very nice one.

'Ha, like I'm even writing the book,' Bella muttered as she pushed open the pub door, relieved to find it mostly empty. Not surprising as it was only half eleven in the morning.

Steve glanced up from where he was restocking the fridge. 'Bella! Bit early for a pint. What can I do for you?'

A laugh escaped her mouth. 'I need somewhere to work. I thought about the café but—'

'I get it, never a moment's peace with it being the hub of the village. People were a bit sceptical when Lola arrived, but she's really done wonders for the community.'

'Oh, so she's not been here long?'

'Only a couple of years, if that. Helped me loads. People come for a cream tea, stay for a pint. So, what can I get you?'

'Bit early for a whisky, I think, so I'll go for a Guinness Zero.' She had never adhered to the whole 'write drunk, edit sober' thing. It had been the performative mantra of her university boyfriend, who overestimated his creative ability, believing himself to be the next Hemingway. His drinking resulted in terrible prose he then thought was too good to be edited.

'Take a seat, I'll bring it over.'

Bella made a beeline for the darkest corner of the pub, tucking herself into a booth, all the better to remain undetected. Steve brought over her pint and a bowl of water for Mimi, who gave it a slurp, then snuggled down at Bella's feet.

Sipping her drink, Bella allowed herself to settle into the atmosphere of the pub, tapping into the history that was embedded in its walls. Steve had maintained the air of a smuggler's lair and Bella began to envisage Jago strolling in, ordering a tankard of ale, buoyed up by the success of his latest raid. The risk he was taking would make him dangerous, glamorous, enchanting to Merrin . . . Merrin, who'd be the innkeeper's daughter! How else would she meet Jago? Oh gosh, Bella could feel the tragedy of the innkeeper creeping over her.

Opening her laptop and selecting the document she'd been working on, Bella decided to skip over Ella's arrival in the village and went straight to the first scene she'd imagined with Jago, all long-haired swagger and a patched burgundy frock coat, his eyes the colour of the illicit brandy he was shipping. Bella selected a sound of the sea playlist to get her in the zone.

Her fingers flew over the keys with a fluidity she'd not experienced for months, the words tumbling out of her. Jago's banter, Merrin's heart almost stopping as she caught his gaze for the first time. The slowing down of the moment between them, illicit and irreversible. A secret only the two of them would share. A secret that would be their downfall.

She tapped away at the keyboard, completely lost in the moment she was creating for her doomed young lovers. Her mind transported to the late-eighteenth century, breathing in and feeling the world she was creating, the smoke from the fire, the flicker of candles, a raucous burst of laughter, life thriving inside the safety of the tavern, despite the elements running wild along the coast. As Bella built up the layers of the lives she imagined, they slowly became real to her.

Bella flopped back against the banquette as the scene finished, eyes closed as the emotion she'd stirred up for her characters settled in her, coupled with the potent buzz of having written. She allowed herself to come back to the present, blinking back the surprise to find herself in a twenty-first-century pub. It had been an age since writing had felt so good, since the words had flowed from her soul.

Looking round, she came face to face with Aidan. He was watching her with a mixture of awe and disbelief.

'Where did you go?'

'What?' Bella asked, confused. 'I'm here.'

'No, you've been somewhere else for the past hour, banging away at that keyboard. I didn't want to interrupt. It's like you've just come back to the present.' His voice was laced with amazement.

'Oh, that.' Bella gave a nervous laugh. 'I'm writing my next book,' she said almost as if it was nothing, as if giving it too much credence would make it vanish, 'I get very engrossed. Sorry.'

'No, don't be, I, well, it's amazing. So, you did it, then?' His face broke into a beaming smile, 'You wrote a book? I remember you telling me about the big dream you had, the story you were writing about Venice. A cursed necklace, right?'

Bella's heart stuttered. He remembered. She'd been nursing the sting of another rejection at the festival, drunkenly venting to him that her dream seemed so far out of reach. She'd poured her heart out, he'd listened, encouraged. The deal that got her published had come through two weeks later. It had felt like the universe had served her up the best ever consolation prize.

'Wow, you remembered. Yes, the cursed necklace and the noblewoman who ran off with a gondolier,' Bella exhaled. 'Yes, I did. I got there in the end. That Venice one did really well, people loved it. This will be my sixth

book.’ She hesitated before admitting, ‘It’s not been a very easy book to write. Since coming here, I’ve changed my mind about the plot.’ She paused. Usually she told very few people about what she was writing but she felt she needed to see how he’d react as that would determine if they could be friends. ‘I’m writing about Jago and Merrin. I found their story fascinating.’

‘I see,’ was all he said for a while. ‘Look, I’m sorry I’ve been a bit anti-ghosts. I know it’s a good story, I look forward to seeing what you do with it.’ Aidan picked up a beer mat and turned it over and over in his hand. ‘I feel like I need to explain why I’ve been a bit, well, dismissive. I hardly saw Dad when I was growing up, just got shipped down here by Mum in the holidays. I now know it wasn’t his fault. Anyway, I’d listen to him telling all these stories, and my teenage self, who thought he knew better, knew they weren’t true, so I just fell into knocking it. I thought he was more interested in the ghosts than me . . .’ Aidan trailed off, then moved to leave. ‘Shall I go, sorry if I’ve interrupted.’

‘No, no, that’s fine, I’m done. I’ll be heading off in a bit,’ Bella said but the idea of going back to the cottage, of leaving the cosiness of the pub and the friendliness in Aidan’s deflated eyes made her cold. Her stomach rumbled. ‘Oh!’

Aidan laughed. ‘If you’re not rushing off, I might have just the thing to help with that. It’s way past lunchtime.’

Bella glanced at the clock. Almost two. No wonder she was starving, it was hours since she’d had breakfast. Instinctively she wanted to refuse, but the earnestness on his face and the memory of the fish pie resurfaced. Now that she was out of the writing zone, she couldn’t deny that there was a delicious aroma permeating the air.

‘OK, that would be great.’ She smiled at him, enjoying the sudden shyness that had settled between them. Bella wondered how, and if, they would cross that boundary. Both the same, yet not the same people they had been. Upgraded versions, perhaps.

Aidan headed back into the kitchen. Bella packed away her writing things, zipped her bag up and picked Mimi up, passing her a treat. ‘You’ve been such a good girl, hey. Shall we see what treat Aidan is bringing us? I hope it’s good.’

‘I hope it’s good too,’ he said as he placed a tray down on the table between them. ‘I’ve been working away on these all morning, trialling flavours for the light switch on. I’m offering hot food after the event, just small things, although I’ve not figured out if it’s practical to serve soup.’

Another memory rose between them like the steam off the soup. Aidan’s plans to start a beach burrito bar, his own frustrations with his business partner. She recalled they’d just found the perfect location. He’d been buzzing with the possibilities.

‘So, you did it too.’ Bella signalled to the delicious smelling dishes. ‘You became a chef. I remember the burritos.’

‘Oh yes, the burrito bar!’ Aidan laughed awkwardly. ‘That was a while back, but it was a strong start. I’m not quite a chef, more a multi-skilled cook and hospitality worker. We moved the burritos to a microbrewery a mate was running, turns out beers and burritos are popular with surfers. It went well until, well, it didn’t.’ Aidan swiftly changed the subject by dropping his gaze from hers and started to set out the dishes. ‘This first.’

Curious about what he was hiding but not wanting to break the friendly atmosphere that was growing between them Bella asked, ‘What is it?’

‘Spiced parsnip soup.’

Bella spooned some into her mouth and sighed with pleasure. It was creamy, the sweetness of the parsnips warmed by the gentle spices and a sprinkling of black pepper. She swallowed another mouthful. ‘That is gorgeous. Can I finish it?’

‘Go ahead, that’s the best praise.’ He exhaled and appeared to relax now the first course had her seal of approval. ‘I could serve it in little cups. Some fresh bread on the side.’

Bella placed the empty sample bowl down. ‘I’d be first in line for this if I was coming.’

‘What? You’re not coming to the switch on?’ Aidan said with disbelief. ‘It’s a huge thing. Why? Just because you’re a visitor doesn’t mean you can’t join in.’

Bella paused. How much should she tell him? The truth required a level of intimacy she didn’t think they had yet. ‘I’m just not a big Christmassy person, that’s all.’ She shrugged as if it meant nothing.

Aidan narrowed his eyes at her. ‘That’s fine, but there’s always a reason why someone doesn’t like Christmas. You might as well tell me, or

someone, maybe Lola. If it's something bad you might want to keep Sue away from you. I wouldn't want you being forced into anything and Sue can be pretty persuasive.'

Bella laughed. 'Yes, she can.' She placed the bowl back on the tray carefully, considering what to say next. How much to tell him. The truth was a burden around her neck, a heavy sadness of accumulated hurt and humiliation. Her shoulders sagged under the weight of it. She studied Aidan. Maybe it was time she told someone.

'I used to love Christmas,' she started, stroking Mimi's head as she spoke. 'If I could put tinsel on it, I would. If I could mull it, I would,' she laughed. 'Max, my ex, and I used to throw these amazing Christmas parties. Fancy dress or Christmas jumpers. They became the social event of the year.'

Bella paused and snuck a glance at Aidan. He was alert, listening, compassion on his face because she knew he sensed what happened next.

'Until last year. I caught them, at the party. Max and my friend Loz. All over each other. It was awful. Loz was married. Her husband was there too. It completely broke my heart. Everything collapsed. Max and I owned that house. We still haven't unpicked everything. I don't think I know, or have the strength to know how.' Bella sat back and closed her eyes, the usual defeat when she thought about untangling the mess of their lives crushing her.

Aidan was silent for so long, Bella opened her eyes and fixed him with a look that she hoped was bright and sunny, as if pretending none of it mattered. It was all a year ago, but she felt her lip wobble. Why did it still hurt after all this time?

'I'm so sorry to hear that, Bella, that's awful. How long were you together?'

'Four years.' The fact that it was most of the time since they had met fell between them. Bella had moved on quickly and never voiced too loudly her suspicion that Max had been a rebound after Aidan's ghosting. 'Loz left her husband. I heard she and Max tried for a bit, but apparently it wasn't the same when it wasn't behind everyone's backs. Not as exciting.'

Aidan pushed across another plate. 'I know these won't fix anything but they might cheer you up. Hot honey-glazed pigs in blankets.'

A smile spread across her face to see him trying. Bella picked up a fork and chose a glistening sausage. She took a bite, the flavours bursting on her tongue.

‘Oh wow,’ she sighed, ‘I might be speechless.’

‘It’s a long time since I’ve made someone speechless,’ Aidan admitted nervously as he absently-mindedly chewed on one of the sausages. ‘You see, Bella, I do understand how you feel. About being betrayed. Everything was going well, we were top of our game. I’d been working with Evan for about six years, we’d been friends since primary school. We’d just got the premises when I first met you. We set up the burrito business, won some local awards, moved into the microbrewery, everything was perfect. I had plans to expand, open another branch, but then . . .’ Aidan sat back and ran his hands through his hair. Whatever had happened next still cut deep.

‘Then I found out he’d been syphoning off the profits, using the money to fund his gambling addiction, take his new girlfriend on lavish holidays. I’d been so busy planning our next move, I never had the chance to question where he was getting the extra cash from. We had to close. Hardest day of my life. I couldn’t face the sympathy, the gossip, any of it, so I came here.’

Aidan sat back, his own admission heavy on his shoulders. They studied each other, reconfiguring the bright, hopeful young people they’d been at the festival with the jaded, heartbroken adults they were now. Tattered lives patched together as best they could. Their eyes met in silent communication, sharing a little bit of hope and wonderment. Was there a reason why their two shattered hearts had been reunited?

The spell was broken by Mimi letting out a bark, desperate for a bite of sausage.

‘I don’t think these are for you, Mims,’ Bella said as she pulled a treat out of her bag. ‘Honestly, Aidan, these are smashing.’ She reached for the last one before hesitating.

‘Go on.’ He offered her the bowl.

‘So, we’re both a bit broken?’ Bella ventured, although as she said it, she realised the cracks had started to heal into scars. Still sore, but no longer weeping.

‘Maybe not as much now as I was—’ Aidan gave her a knowing look ‘—but I do feel like I’ve brought the tone down a bit. I’m sure neither of us wants to dwell on our what-might-have-beens.’

‘No,’ Bella clarified and shook her head, ‘I don’t. I’m having a nice time chatting to you, Aidan.’

‘Me too,’ he replied almost shyly, pushing the next bowl between them and setting two spoons down. ‘This should sweeten the mood, well, I hope it will. Mulled apple crumble. Dig in.’

‘Apple crumble is my favourite! And I loved mulled things!’ Bella’s face lit up as she dug in, spooning a massive portion into her mouth.

‘Hey, save some for me!’ Aidan counter-attacked with his own spoon.

Bella swayed her shoulders in a little happy dance as the warm apple flavours hit her palate. Taking another spoonful, she pushed aside her vow to swear off everything festive, including anything mulled. Aidan was a very talented cook, everything he’d offered her had been perfect.

‘How is it?’

The tinge of insecurity as he asked, the not quite believing how good a cook he was, melted Bella. His confidence had clearly taken quite the knock.

‘Honestly? The best. This might just convince me to come to the switch on.’

A triumphant smile illuminated his face.

‘Might,’ she clarified, going in for a third spoonful, ‘no promises.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Fifteen

The first of December dawned with a burst of bright fuchsia light on the horizon. Thirty-one days left in the year and twenty-six of them to be handed over to the frivolity of the festive season. Carol concerts, frantic last-minute shopping, stacks of Christmas cards, mince pies and party food. Everyone in Polcarrow was looking forward to it.

Everyone except Bella.

The pink light on the horizon stirred her. In Polcarrow, with the late winter mornings, she'd taken to sleeping with the curtains open, allowing the sunrise to rouse her. There was something almost decadent about not setting an alarm, stirring as the day filtered into her room, gently nudging her awake. There was nowhere to be, no one to see. Blissful to have so much uninterrupted time to herself, to spend it lounging in bed if that took her fancy. It had seemed rude to linger in bed when she'd been living with her sister, who always welcomed an extra pair of hands helping with the twins. A task Bella, as Fun Auntie, did not really begrudge.

Could she stay in bed for all of December though? Have her groceries delivered. Make her own coffees. Pretend she was hunkered down writing. The temptation was strong, but Bella knew she'd picked the wrong place to escape to if she really wanted to give in to her reclusive tendencies. She'd last about four hours before someone knocked on her door, with well-meaning intrusion.

Throwing back the duvet, Bella eased herself out of bed, watching the sunrise over the harbour. No two mornings had been the same, giving Bella a new-found appreciation for how differently each day began, from creeping in as if it didn't want to be seen, to a full blaze of glory. She'd miss this when she went home.

Home. But where was home? No longer the semi-detached house she and Max had shared, which had always felt more like his home than hers, despite the fact he'd allowed her to choose the colour scheme. He hadn't complained at the pale pink living room or the botanical prints she'd hung above the bed. Max admitted he'd have painted the entire thing grey, causing Bella to shudder and question her taste in men.

She'd get a little money from the house, but hardly enough to start over again. Nor could she keep living at her sister's. She'd heard Nicki and her husband, Darren, whispering late at night, a harsh exchange, a bargaining over Bella's place in the household. Maybe it was feeling unwanted back home that made the inclusion she'd found in Polcarrow sit strangely upon her.

Bella peered out of the window. There was a bit of life on the harbour. School kids waiting for the bus, Effie emerging from the sea after braving a swim, Aidan out for a run. Aidan. Her heart skittered. It had been two days since their intimate lunch in the pub. Bella felt ground had been gained and was keen to keep working on smoothing over the past for whatever thrilling possibility their future held. She'd not seen him when she'd been in the pub the previous day. Steve had passed her a pint and let slip information that he was out at a wholesaler. Bella did her best to pretend this news didn't disappoint her. She'd made do with one of Steve's infamous, and totally delicious, cheese toasties.

But the words had come, with blissful relief, only another few thousand, miles off a full novel, but enough of a start to give her hope. Bella had sent them over to Bethan, along with the synopsis, and proceeded to offer up prayers to every deity she could summon whilst fretting in equal measure. Bethan had acknowledged the email. Bella told herself it'd take her a few days to read it, that the best thing to do was keep her head down and keep typing. It was hard not to resort to chewing her nails and refreshing her inbox.

Bella got herself and Mimi ready for the day. A long breakfast of toast and trying to complete a crossword. First of December, the start of the Polcarrow advent windows. It was all she'd heard anyone talking about when she'd been out. Villagers eagerly discussing themes and designs, comparing notes on who was doing what. It sounded as if people had pretty big plans, which was another reason for Bella not to get involved. She'd

only let the side down. So far she was still managing to swerve being dragged into Sue's scheme, despite being repeatedly cajoled with 'Everyone else on harbour row is involved. It'd be a shame to have one window not decorated.'

There was an itinerary of festive events stuck with a magnet to the fridge door. Bella didn't know if she'd placed it there as a reminder to attend, or a warning not to go. The community was so friendly that despite her sudden aversion to Christmas, Bella knew ignoring all the events would be top-notch Scrooge behaviour. She might as well go around hissing 'Bah humbug' at everyone.

'What do you think, Mimi? We used to love it, didn't we? We did, we did.' Mimi closed her eyes happily as Bella stroked her head. 'I'd have the tree up by now, wouldn't I, and the wreath on the door? I'd be unpacking my Christmas jumpers and planning menus, marking all the events I wanted to attend on a calendar.'

Tears welled in her eyes. Ever since she'd been a child, Christmas had always been her favourite time of year. The magic of being ushered in to see Father Christmas at a school fair, the whispered wishes of what she hoped for, leaving with a cheap present clutched to her chest. Pantomimes followed by hot chocolates. Circling toys in the shop catalogue, writing out her Christmas list. The joy of running down the stairs on Christmas morning to see the presents under the tree, the pure rush of disbelief that 'He's been!'

The parties, the carol concerts in freezing cold churches, fairy lights twinkling like stars through the winter blackness, fending off the deep winter gloom. She'd loved all those things. She recalled the first Christmas party she'd thrown after she and Max had bought the house, red and gold themed, cranberry cocktails and crumbly stollen cake. It had been such a success, Bella had looked forward to planning the next. It had grown into their signature event, the talk between all their friends. A celebration of their relationship and her love of Christmas all rolled into one. All those things she'd loved, that had been a centre point her entire life, ruined by Max's smug selfishness. Max, who'd only been sorry he'd been caught with Loz, not sorry that he'd kissed her.

Bella's thoughts clouded. What was Max doing this year? Was the tree up? Twinkling in the bay window for all the neighbours to admire? Would

he even bother? Why did she even care?

Wiping away the tears, it dawned on Bella that she had allowed Max to take everything she loved, and she was the one suffering in exile. The house, her security, her friends and, worst of all, her love for Christmas. He'd tainted her favourite season, marred all the happy memories. The cold realisation that she had let him do this, let him keep the power over her life, dropped. For how much longer would she let him influence everything she felt? She was still wallowing in that hurt almost a year later. Did Max deserve to have that sort of hold over her? No. He did not.

Anger rose through the sadness, white hot and potent. Why should Max keep Christmas when it was her favourite time of year? He'd never been that bothered before she came along and sprinkled fairy dust all over December for him. Fired up, Bella crouched down in front of Mimi and stroked the dog's little round head.

'Hey, Mimi, what if we try to reclaim Christmas this year? How does that sound baby? Ugh, that's a bit too keen.' Bella held her away as Mimi licked her face. 'Let me get ready and maybe we can see what's going on with the window thing.'

Bella changed out of her pyjamas into a pair of jogging bottoms and a cosy sweatshirt, her usual walking Mimi/book writing attire. Mimi was waiting by the front door when Bella came back downstairs, clearly very keen to re-embrace Christmas.

'Let's take you for a walk, get a coffee and then we can go and write.'

Mimi gave a bark of assent.

Outside the sunrise had given way to a muted day. The sea breeze whipped sharply at Bella's face as they made their way across the road and along the harbour wall. She took in some deep inhales and exhales as Mimi had her usual little sniff. It had become their morning ritual. Bella's steps slowed as they drew closer to Lola's. A crowd was gathered outside the bookshop waiting for Effie to reveal the first advent window.

Bella wavered. There were a lot of people. Some of them were wearing Santa hats and there was jangly Christmas music playing through a tinny speaker. Was she really ready for this – what reclaiming Christmas entailed? Bella ground to a halt and watched the villagers, feeling very much like an outsider. She couldn't do this. It was too much. She could go back to the cottage, and no one would even realise she'd been out.

She was about to head back when the opening bars of *White Christmas* fluttered like a flurry of snow through the air. Bella stalled, swallowed. It was her favourite. She found herself swaying along, whispering the words as the gentle tune coaxed her onwards. It was always the first on her playlist, she loved every version from Bing Crosby to Ella Fitzgerald. Her heart stirred. Was this a sign?

Bella didn't have time to ponder this as Mimi let out a bark of delight and tugged Bella across the road. Aidan. Of course! He was still in his running gear, face flushed from the exertion but still looking more handsome than anyone should first thing on a cold December morning. They hadn't seen each other since their heart-to-heart and sharing his new dishes. Bella felt suddenly shy as she approached him, tucking a stray strand of hair into her hat.

'You made it!' His face lit up. Mimi pawed at his legs, so he bent down and picked her up, scratching her under the chin.

'Yeah, well, I almost didn't but Mimi wanted to come,' she explained, rolling her eyes.

Aidan smiled, buying her excuse. Bella's brain was saved from fumbling for something to say by Sue turning down the music and calling for everyone's attention.

'Right, can you all take a step forward? Perfect. Thank you all for coming this morning. I can't believe we have such a turnout! And such an uptake on creating windows, although there's still a few spots left.' She lifted her clipboard and gave it an encouraging wave.

Bella felt as if Sue's eyes lingered on her for longer than necessary.

'Anyway, without further ado, shall we get cracking?' Sue laughed at her own joke before signalling to Effie, who was holding a sheet up in front of the window, helped by Jake, her boyfriend and a local photographer.

'Drum roll please!' Jake encouraged and the crowd obliged. 'On the count of three.'

'One! Two! Three!' everyone chorused.

Effie and Jake exchanged beaming smiles before dropping the sheet, revealing the first Polcarrow advent window. Cheers and a round of applause went up. Relief washed over Effie's face. Jake bundled her into a triumphant hug, swinging her around, which only elicited more applause.

They had sprayed snowflakes onto the glass, tumbling from the top corners to the bottom, where they formed a snow drift. In the middle of the window, piled up high, was a tree made of books, complete with fairy lights and a star on top. A selection of stuffed bears, reindeer and other woodland creatures were gathered around the base. An enticing selection of festive-themed children's books were on display. The whole scene was beautiful and stirred Bella's frozen heart.

Wiping away a tear, she caught Aidan watching her rather than the window display. 'I thought you didn't do Christmas?'

Bella straightened her shoulders. 'Maybe I had some time to think. Maybe I don't want Max taking everything I loved from me.' Her voice was small as she revealed her new revelation. 'But please, don't tell Sue. I'm going to have to take it one day at a time.'

Aidan caught the plea in her voice. 'Good for you,' he said as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, bundling her in for a quick, one-armed hug. 'Don't worry, your secret is safe with me.'

The contact was brief but it unbalanced Bella. Straightening up, she caught Lola's eye and saw a knowing smile on her face, as if Lola was pleased everything was going to plan.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Sixteen

Bella's curiosity got the better of her the following day. It was Sue's turn to unveil her window display and Bella wanted to know how far the committee leader had gone with her design. The fact that the unveiling coincided with Mimi's morning walk was pure coincidence. Bella couldn't deny that gathering outside Effie's bookshop the previous morning, surrounded by all the excitement and amazement of the villagers, had gently coaxed the embers where she'd burnt down her love of the festive season. It had been impossible not to have her heart stirred by the community spirit, a reminder of how she used to be at the heart of such a special time of year.

Still, it felt slightly strange to be attempting to embrace her smouldering Christmas spirit after having fled to avoid the festivities. As Bella pulled on her hat and wrestled Mimi into her jumper, she realised how nice it was to belong to something and how much she'd withdrawn in the last year. Everywhere back home had been a reminder of her heartbreak. The streets she'd walked down, the pubs they'd frequented. Bella hadn't realised how much of her life had become entwined with Max's until she had been cast off.

When the initial shock and sympathy wore off, Bella had found herself alone. Her friends were busy with wedding plans and new babies; the women she'd known through Max quickly showed their alliance. Bella had been shocked it hadn't been with her but then realised she'd never quite fitted in with them, that their sympathetic looks were fake, knowing that underneath it all they were just relieved it hadn't been their husbands. They'd closed ranks and Bella was squeezed out. She quickly realised she didn't mind; it wasn't only their sympathy that had been false.

The writer's block had stopped her from meeting up with her valued writing friends, thankfully this was easily explained by pretending she was eyeball deep into a difficult draft. The fact the words had remained unwritten was her secret. Maybe she should have been honest with everyone months ago? Support would have flooded in even if solutions hadn't. Bella kept up the pretence that everything was fine on social media. If her followers believed everything was fine, then maybe she'd be able to convince herself too.

As Bella made her way along the seafront on another cold grey December morning, she realised how much she loved the community in Polcarrow. Yes, Sue's determination to get her to sign up to decorating her window was annoying, but she meant well, as did everyone else. Every kind word and gesture came truly from the heart; the villagers genuinely had each other's best interests in mind. Was it, maybe time to fully embrace village life? She'd go for a coffee afterwards, talk with Alf. After all, she'd told him she'd let him know how the book was coming along.

Bella realised she had no idea where she was actually going. She didn't know Sue's address. Glancing around she tried to catch sight of anyone who might know, assuming that everyone would be going to see the window. She was just about to give up and go home when she saw Effie and Jake hurrying along the harbour front, hand in hand, dressed in matching dry robes.

'Bella!' Effie squealed with delight. 'Are you going to see Sue's window?'

'I was but I realised I didn't know where she lives,' she admitted.

'That's fine, we're going there now. Join us. Jake, this is Bella Fox, you know, the author I told you about.' Effie's eyes sparkled at her boyfriend.

'I've heard so much about you, well, your books—' Jake grinned and held out his hand '—lovely to meet you.'

Laughing, Bella shook it. 'I guess my reputation precedes me.'

'I'm rereading *Venetian Blue* for the third time. Oh my gosh, Carlos, he's so swoony, I still get annoyed with Mia for falling for Giacomo's spell,' Effie enthused as they set off towards Sue's house. 'I'm going to get Jake to read it next.'

'Do you like romance?' Bella asked him. She'd eschewed the genre whilst her writer's block reigned supreme. Seeing their delight in happy-

ever-afters jolted a desire to write through her, to give this adorable couple something to cosy up and read together. She could imagine them, curled up together on the sofa, comparing notes on the story as they read it.

‘I’ve been introduced to cowboy romances and regency dukes. Honestly, Eff’s flat is propped up with romances.’ He gave Effie an affectionate squeeze.

‘That’s so wonderful. Romance gets such a bad press but we all need something heart-warming in our lives,’ Bella told him.

‘Do you think you’d be able to do an author talk whilst you’re here?’ Effie asked. ‘I know that’s really forward of me, but I’d love to grab the opportunity and my friend Maddie would probably never speak to me again if I didn’t try.’

Effie’s enthusiasm was so infectious and earnest that Bella found herself agreeing to giving a talk before her brain had time to catch up. ‘Of course! But I’m only here until Christmas.’

‘No problem, we can easily fit you in. I don’t have many events taking place. Just the Christmas book club, but I gave you the book for that. Have you started it? I’m actually not sure about the hero at the moment.’

Bella pulled a face and confessed, ‘I’ve not read it yet. Erm, I’ve been a bit off Christmas.’ Saying it aloud to someone who wasn’t Aidan was strangely liberating.

‘What? Oh my gosh! I’m so sorry! I love the season so much I didn’t think someone might not.’ Effie looked mortified.

‘It’s fine, honestly,’ Bella hurried to reassure her, ‘I did come here to get away from it, but I’ve realised that’s impossible, so I’m using my time here to try and reconnect with the season.’

‘How’s it going?’ Jake asked. ‘I know Sue can be a bit full on.’

Bella laughed, ‘It’s going . . . OK. Early days. It didn’t feel right to deprive Mimi.’ She gestured to the dog, who yapped in agreement.

‘It’s just down this here,’ Jake said, steering Effie away from the main road towards one of the streets of more modern whitewashed cottages slightly larger than the ones along harbour row, with front gardens and garages. Bella followed.

A small crowd was gathered. Bella glanced around, searching faces and ignoring the way her heart dipped when she couldn’t see Aidan. She scooped Mimi up but lingered at the back of the group. Lola, Freya and

Tristan were at the front. Jake went over to a curly-haired lady and gave her a kiss on the cheek. From the resemblance Bella figured this was probably his mum. Alf and Scruff were at the front. Alf sitting on a chair, Scruff at his feet waiting for the big reveal.

Sue peeked through the curtains, checking how many people were gathered. Deciding there was probably enough, she gave a nod to Lola, who turned to the crowd. 'You know the drill, on the count of three.'

'One! Two! Three!' Bella found herself joining in.

Sue pulled back the curtains to reveal a knitted nativity scene, complete with wise men, shepherds and the most adorable fluffy sheep. A round of applause went up. People surged forwards to get a better look, sweeping Bella along. They were skilfully crafted and it was the cutest thing Bella had ever seen.

Sue came out of the house. 'What do you think?'

'Oh, Sue, it's adorable!' Lola gushed. 'I love it!'

Agreement and praise went up from the other villagers.

'I don't know how we're going to compete,' some said, which garnered nods of agreement.

'It's not a competition,' Sue explained, 'it's a community event. If all you put in the window is a Christmas tree or some candles, that doesn't matter, we just want everyone to be involved.'

Bella felt Sue's eyes slide onto her. She took a step back, melting into the back of the crowd. As she did so, her mind couldn't help but begin to wonder what her own decorated window might look like.

'So, Bella, tell me how this writing is going.' Alf patted the spare seat next to him. They'd made their way back to the café after the unveiling and had just placed their orders with Freya, happy to wait whilst she served the takeaway customers.

Bella's need for a caffeine fix meant she'd been easily swept along with the tide of onlookers heading back to the café. She hesitated before slipping into the seat beside Alf. Mimi's ears pricked up at the sight of Scruff, who merely gave her a cursory look before snuggling down under the table, the perfect spot to catch a stray crumb.

'It's, erm, going, sort of,' Bella began. 'I've at least made a start I feel happy with but there's still a long way to go. My agent is negotiating an

extension. I have no idea if the book will be any good, but I finally feel something here.’ She placed a hand on her heart.

‘I hear you’ve been writing in the pub,’ Alf said neutrally, as if he knew more than he was letting on.

‘News travels fast,’ Bella laughed. ‘Yes. Jago and Merrin’s tragic love story inspired me. I just felt it, the trapped yearning, and that I needed to try and free them from it. Sorry if that sounds mad.’

‘Not mad at all. There’s all sorts of ghosts trapped here. Do you get those notions? Like our Lola does?’

‘Not in the same way. I can’t read tarot but I can pick up a vibe about a place, especially if something sad or tragic has happened.’ Bella leaned in and dropped her voice. ‘There’s something in the pub. I think Merrin’s there, not just Jago.’

Alf raised an eyebrow. ‘Well, maybe you can get them together. Speaking of romances, I’ll just let you know that various people are speculating about you spending time in the pub.’

‘Oh.’ The penny dropped. Not the pub. Aidan.

Alf nodded. ‘I’m not one to gossip but you can’t stop the rest of them. Just thought it was my place to let you know.’

‘Thanks, Alf,’ Bella replied. She wasn’t going to protest that there was nothing going on with Aidan, because well, there wasn’t, was there? No one needed to know about the past either.

‘No worries. Remember if you need to know anything about Polcarrow’s past, I’m happy to talk. Now, what’s Lola bringing us?’ His eyes lit up as the glamorous café owner set a tray on the table. A pot of tea, a blue and white Cornish-ware mug, Bella’s mocha and a plate piled high with golden mince pies, their sweet, festive aroma wafting temptingly.

‘Ah, Lola’s famous mince pies!’ Alf grinned. ‘Bella, look at them, aren’t they smashing? We’ll be eating them for the next month if last year’s anything to go by. Never seen as many mince pies in my life!’ Alf took one and bit into it, sighing with pleasure. ‘I think these might be even better.’

Lola beamed. ‘That is high praise. Bella?’ She offered the plate.

They smelled delicious, but when Lola pressed them forward, Bella cringed and was forced to confess, ‘I don’t really like mince pies.’

The café seemed to fall silent. Lola sank into the spare seat and Alf almost dropped his mince pie through disbelief. Scruff whipped his head up

to see what the commotion was about.

‘What?’ they chorused.

Aidan took that moment to push open the door. Taking in the scene of culinary devastation, his brow furrowed in the brooding way Bella couldn’t resist. ‘What on earth is going on?’ he asked.

‘Bella here doesn’t like mince pies,’ Alf pointed out.

Lola, still in shock, offered the plate to Aidan, who picked one up, took a bite and basically swooned.

‘Lola, that pastry, so buttery. Did you make the mincemeat yourself?’ Aidan inspected the pie as he chewed.

‘I’m not divulging any of my secrets,’ she said, with the implication being that perhaps she had not. She turned to Bella. ‘Are you sure we can’t tempt you?’

Mimi was staring at Bella as if she was desperate for a taste. ‘You can’t have them, baby, they’re not for dogs.’ She tried to distract everyone whilst feeling as if she’d committed a heinous crime against the village by not liking mince pies. She shifted uncomfortably. Aidan was watching her.

‘You know it is OK for Bella not to like mince pies,’ Aidan pointed out. ‘I mean, it’s not against the law or anything. I don’t particularly like brownies – you never know if they’re going to be squidgy or dry.’

Lola considered this. ‘You’re right. I don’t get why people like hash browns.’

‘There you go,’ Aidan said, the smile on his face transferred to Bella.

She smiled back at him gratefully. ‘Thank you. I do like Christmas cake though.’

Lola’s face lit up. ‘Perfect! You are in for a treat! I’m already taking orders. Would you like one?’

Bella, not wanting to disappoint Lola, didn’t think she could say no, despite knowing she’d be home for Christmas. ‘OK, I can always take it back to my sister’s.’

It was as if a cloud scudded across them all. A reminder that Bella’s time in Polcarrow was only borrowed.

‘Joining us?’ Alf asked, turning to Aidan.

Aidan hesitated before saying, ‘Just for a moment. I need to head off. Can I have an Americano please? Takeaway.’

‘Sure.’ Lola placed the plate of pies on the table. Alf took a second and crumbled a bit of the crust off for Scruff.

Bella shifted in her seat. She’d been planning to head to the pub after her coffee but now with Alf and Aidan both sitting at the table, she felt a little bit trapped. Surely the desperation she felt to get back to her book was a good thing? Trying to relax, Bella sat back, finishing her mocha, and pulled Mimi onto her lap because she wouldn’t stop bothering Aidan.

‘She likes you.’ Alf’s eyes twinkled.

‘I know.’ Aidan held his hand out for Mimi to sniff, which resulted in a lick. ‘Can she?’ He held out a small crumb of pie crust.

‘Sure,’ Bella said.

They all laughed when Mimi practically bit Aidan’s hand off for it.

‘One Americano,’ Lola called from the counter.

‘Right, I guess I’ll see you later or tomorrow for Lola’s big unveiling. What have you got in store?’ he asked her as he paid for his coffee.

‘Just you wait and see.’ Lola winked.

Bella didn’t care if it made her look obvious, she pulled on her coat and stood up. ‘I better be off too, you know, books don’t write themselves. See you all tomorrow.’

Alf and Lola exchanged a knowing look, which both Bella and Aidan chose to ignore. Bella followed Aidan out into the cold morning air, shivering as it poked its fingers through the gap between her collar and scarf.

‘They say it’s going to snow,’ Aidan said as they meandered away from the café. ‘Even down here’

‘Does it not normally snow here?’

Aidan shook his head. ‘No. Too warm.’ He stopped and took her hand briefly before dropping it again. ‘Bella, I won’t be at the pub today, got to pick some things up from the wholesaler’s, but, if you’re free this evening, would you like to go to dinner? It might be nice to talk without prying eyes.’

Bella’s heart skittered to a stop before picking back up at double speed. Was this a date? It was on the tip of her tongue to ask, but she crammed it back in. ‘Yes,’ she said instead, ‘that would be wonderful, thank you.’

Relief washed over his face. ‘Is Mimi OK being left? Sadly, dogs aren’t allowed, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh, she’ll be fine. She might give me some jealous silent treatment, but we’ll both live.’

‘Cool. I’ll pick you up at seven. See you later.’ There was a brief moment when Aidan paused and she swore he was going to lean in and kiss her on the cheek, but all he did was hesitate before sipping his drink and stepping back.

Bella composed herself, waving as he hurried away before turning to Mimi. ‘It’s a date, I think.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Seventeen

‘I’m sorry, darling, but you’re going to have to stay here,’ Bella soothed, ‘I know, I know. Aidan is your favourite, yes, but tonight you’re not invited. Look, I made your bed super cosy and I’ve put out your favourite food.’

Mimi narrowed her eyes before sulkily trotting off, burrowing into her soft pillows. She gave Bella one last look at her betrayal before turning her back on her and curling up into a little ball.

It had the desired effect. Bella’s heart crumpled with guilt. Maybe she should’ve asked Aidan if they could go somewhere dog-friendly so Mimi could come, but she selfishly wanted a night with Aidan all to herself. Plus, it was a long time since she’d been taken out for the evening. She and Max had slipped into nights at home, or only going out to see friends. Bella hadn’t expected the romance to last forever, but getting ready to meet Aidan, she realised she’d forgotten just how nice it was to get ready to go out with someone she wanted to impress and be impressed by.

The gentle knock at the door didn’t even rouse Mimi. Bella pulled it open and there was Aidan. Seeing him took her breath away. He’d made an attempt to tame his wild dark curls, his navy coat was unbuttoned, revealing a simple black shirt, which only made his blue eyes sparkle more.

‘Hi,’ Bella said, holding herself back from leaning in to inhale whatever delicious, citrusy scent he’d used.

‘Hi.’ A smile of admiration spread across his face, lighting up his eyes as he took her in. ‘Wow, you look lovely, Bella.’

‘Thank you. You, erm, smell nice,’ she blurted out before cringing.

Aidan laughed. ‘Thanks. You ready?’

Bella nodded and pulled on her coat and reached for her bag. ‘See you later, Mims.’ There was no response. ‘Fine, suit yourself.’ She stepped

outside, and locked the door.

‘Is Mimi OK?’ Aidan asked as he led Bella towards his car. He opened the door for her to get in before darting around to the driver’s side.

‘Oh yes. She’s just insanely jealous that I’m going out with you and she’s not. I’ll probably come home to a protest poop on the carpet.’

‘She wouldn’t!’

Bella caught his eye and raised an eyebrow. ‘She might look like a lady but . . .’

Aidan laughed as he started the car.

‘That’s not how I anticipated the evening starting,’ Bella said as they pulled away. ‘How was your trip to the wholesaler’s?’

‘Good, got all the stuff I need for Saturday’s festive menu, just got to hope I can pull it off,’ he exhaled. ‘I’m used to having a small team rather than doing everything myself, but what can go wrong with a bit of soup and some pigs in blankets?’

‘Hopefully nothing!’

‘Hopefully nothing,’ he echoed as they turned out of the village and down an unlit country lane. The darkness outside the car was almost total. ‘How was your day? Dad said you were in the pub and that you had to make do with a cheese toastie.’

‘Yes! But no offence to you, your dad’s cheese toasties are pretty good. Proper old school, no fuss, crispy ends, might even be one of the best things I’ve eaten down here,’ she teased.

‘You wound me.’ Aidan groaned. ‘If I’d have known a cheese toastie was the way to your heart, I wouldn’t have pulled out all the stops for tonight.’

‘Are you trying to access my heart then?’

Aidan sent her briefest of looks. ‘Maybe. I’m now reconsidering using my culinary prowess to win you over.’

‘Culinary prowess, who says that?’

‘Me, apparently. Even if it was just a bit of soup.’

‘I wouldn’t dismiss it as just a bit of soup, there was that crumble, you know. If you keep bringing that to the table, I might have to reconsider the cheese toasties.’

‘Noted.’

‘So, where are you taking me?’ Bella asked, aglow from the flirting.

‘It’s a surprise,’ he said, ‘but it’s somewhere I’ve been wanting to try. I think you’ll like it. Well, I hope you will.’

Bella settled into the companionable silence that fell upon them. She’d enjoyed the easy rapport that had surfaced despite a five-year hiatus. She glanced across at Aidan, his eyes firmly on the road, a sense of familiarity between them, as if they’d driven out to dinner hundreds of times before. ‘Do you ever wonder what would have happened if I hadn’t given you the wrong number?’

Aidan exhaled. ‘Every day.’

‘Every day?’

He nodded. ‘Well, most days, especially when things were bad. It was like this alternative life I could’ve had. But, of course, I thought you’d fobbed me off, so there was a bit of anger. But since seeing you again, yes, I’ve been thinking about it a lot.’

Bella was silent as Aidan indicated to turn left. ‘I’m still mortified by that. All those years I thought you’d ghosted me. I cursed your name, you know.’

‘Oh, I can believe it,’ he said as he turned into the sweeping drive outside The Cliff Hotel.

‘And now I find I have to reassess all that and I feel stupid. Like it was all my fault.’

Aidan pulled to a stop and turned off the ignition. Bella turned to him. He was studying her as if recalibrating his own thoughts.

‘Well, we’re both here now, or for now, so why don’t we make the most of this second chance?’

Bella swallowed and nodded. ‘Is this what we’ve got? A second chance at our relationship?’

‘I’d like that, if it’s what you want.’

Bella hesitated. ‘I’ll be leaving Polcarrow at Christmas.’ But even as she said it, she was unsure if that’s what she wanted. The village had quickly worked its magic on her, worming its way into her heart. The idea of leaving made her feel bereft.

Aidan linked his fingers through hers. ‘Hmm, I know, but let’s just see how things go. You ready?’

Bella gave his hand a squeeze. ‘Yes, I’m ready, let’s go.’ Letting go of him, she pushed open the car door and stepped onto the gravel driveway.

‘Wow,’ she exhaled as she took in the modern glass-fronted hotel, ‘this is a bit of a step up from a cheese toastie.’

Aidan offered his arm and Bella slipped her hand through it. ‘Yes, it is. The owner, Simon Cauley, has only recently opened this place. It’s an eco hotel. I’ve heard amazing things about the chef and basically, wanted to check out the competition.’

‘Oh.’

‘And spend some time with you, of course, away from everyone in Polcarrow.’

‘Ah yes, Alf did warn me that tongues are wagging,’ she said as they made their way up the front steps.

Aidan pulled open the door for her. ‘I’d forgotten how much people are in everyone’s business in a small village.’

‘Sometimes it’s just as bad in a small town,’ Bella said.

She stepped in through the hotel doors and was immediately stopped in her tracks. The foyer managed to be both sparsely modern and cosy at the same time. White walls, lush green plants and comfy-looking sofas. If it had been daytime, Bella knew the large glass window that ran the length of the space would have a gorgeous view of the sea.

‘You like it?’

‘Yes! Wow! We’ll have to come back in the daytime,’ Bella said, ‘check out the spa facilities. I could do with a massage. All that typing.’

‘We can do that,’ Aidan said, smiling.

The moment between them was suddenly charged, bursting with future possibilities. Bella realised that she had been right all those years ago. She’d convinced herself before that she’d imagined how good her and Aidan had been, put it down to the beer and cocktails they’d consumed, the heady starlit summer nights. Standing in the foyer of the hotel, she realised that perhaps their stars were aligned in some beautiful, mystic way, that everything she had felt back then was still between them today. Without even asking she knew he felt it too.

‘Come on, the restaurant’s this way.’ Aidan steered her through the reception, past a Christmas tree that sparkled with elegant silver lights, towards an open double door.

‘Good evening.’ The maître d’ gave a welcoming smile. ‘How can I help you?’ he asked.

‘I have a booking.’ Aidan gave his name.

The maître d’ scanned the bookings list. ‘Wonderful, follow me.’

Bella followed them into one of the sparsest, yet most elegant rooms she’d ever been in. A modern open fire flickered in the middle of the circular room, the tables spaced out around it allowed the diners an element of privacy. The lights were down low, creating a gentle ambiance, and on the tables candles glowed. Glancing up, Bella exhaled with wonder to see the stars sparkling through the glass roof.

‘It’s stunning, isn’t it?’ the maître d’ said as they took their seats. He passed them menus. ‘Georgie will be attending to you tonight. Please say if there is anything you need. Enjoy your meal.’ With a bow of his head, he retreated.

Bella leaned across to Aidan. ‘This place is unlike anywhere I’ve been before.’

‘I know. It only opened back in the autumn, so everything is new. I’ve been dying to try it,’ Aidan said, passing Bella the wine list.

‘Have you not always been in Polcarrow then? I remember you saying you lived in Cornwall but I don’t remember the place name. Sorry.’

‘That’s OK, I probably didn’t give specifics,’ Aidan said. ‘I was in St Agnes and Newquay for a while. Probably Newquay when I met you. Mum lives further up the county, closer to Devon. I grew up with her, didn’t have a great relationship with Dad until more recently.’ Aidan was cut off by the arrival of Georgie.

‘Good evening,’ she said, pouring them both a glass of water. ‘Can I get you any drinks?’

Aidan ordered a non-alcoholic beer, because he was driving. Bella chewed her lip over the wine list before settling on a Merlot.

‘Please don’t judge me if I have red wine with fish, I can’t drink white in the winter.’

‘No judgement here,’ Aidan said, sipping his water.

‘Why wasn’t your relationship with your dad good? It’s not because of the ghosts, is it?’

Aidan laughed. ‘No, not that. My parents met when they were really young, too young really to have a baby. Mum was twenty, an art student, falling in love and having a baby were certainly not in her plan. Then she met Dad. You’ve seen him, he’s quite the charmer when he wants to be,

likes to tell a story. They just hit it off, things happened really quickly, but he wasn't much older. Twenty-four maybe. I mean, that seems so young to me now. Mum moved back home with my grandparents to finish her studies. Dad tried to be involved, I mean, he did really try but it was difficult what with him running the pub. We all drifted apart.'

'What changed?' Bella asked.

'My grandad died. Not long after I first met you, actually. Mum was devastated. They had a wonderful relationship. It got me thinking, maybe I was the one who needed to try and give Dad some time. I started to come down to Polcarrow and we very slowly began to patch things up. We're not perfect, but we're getting on fine.'

They paused as Georgie brought over their drinks. 'What can I get you?'

'Oh, we've not looked yet,' Bella said.

'I can come back.'

'No, it's fine.' Aidan skimmed the menu before focusing on Bella. 'Do you know what you want?'

'Shall we share the prawns to start? You don't mind sharing stuff, do you?' Bella asked.

'Not at all, that way we can try each other's dishes. If you don't mind, that is?'

'Not at all. The prawns for me and the lamb for main.' Bella passed her menu to Georgie.

'Baby squid and the hake for me, please.' Aidan passed the menu back to Georgie and waited until she was a good distance away before continuing. 'Dad's old chef left, my business had just collapsed. I came down in the summer and saw the potential. It got me wondering, could I turn The Shipwreck Inn into a place people want to come and eat. Something a bit fancier than scampi and chips, you know?'

Bella nodded. 'Although don't knock scampi and chips. That fish pie was pretty amazing. Alf tipped me off about it.'

'Thanks, it's one of the few things we currently offer. I want to cook in a sustainable way, what I can get fresh that day, what's in season, offer a small menu. I'm going to see how my soup and pigs in blankets go, but I'm thinking of doing a winter menu night nearer Christmas, for locals, get

some friends in, some critics maybe, see if I can put Polcarrow on the foodie map.'

'That sounds wonderful. Isn't it already there with Lola's café?'

'Well, it's a strong start. The success of the café, and the bookshop, has really given me cause to hope we can build the village's reputation.'

'That's wonderful. It does sound like the village is on the up so I'm sure your culinary ideas will slot right in. What does your dad think?'

'He's ninety per cent behind it. I didn't know if he would be. He's savvy enough to realise other places are developing and expanding, so he was hardly going to turn down the opportunity to get more people through the door to tell his ghost stories to!'

Bella laughed. 'The pub definitely has its own very unique selling point.'

'And now we have a writer in residence. How's it going?'

'Fine. It's going fine. You don't mind me being in the pub all day, do you?'

'Not at all. As long as you don't mind being my menu guinea pig.'

'Hardly a chore! An incentive in itself to get me to keep the words going. I've got a good chunk of Merrin and Jago's story down. The nice bits where they meet, fall in love before anything starts to go wrong. Lots of yearning and pining. Stolen kisses, you know. I just want to tell their story. It's not usually like this. I'm usually more into the modern thread.'

'What do you think has changed?'

*You*, Bella wanted to say, but was saved by Georgie placing their starters in front of them. The prawns glistened. Aidan pushed the plates into the middle so they could share. She noticed Aidan's jaw tense when she took a quick photo of the temptingly laid out dishes and decided to post it on social media later.

'I'm glad we're sharing, I've got calamari envy.' She speared one of the pieces of squid and put it in her mouth, sighing with pleasure.

'Good?'

'Perfect.'

Aidan chewed and nodded. 'Perfect, you're right. You were explaining why it's different this time.'

Bella selected one of the garlicky prawns. 'So good, maybe I don't want to share! Normally I come up with the modern story. Girl goes to Cornwall,

stays in a haunted pub, uncovers the story about the ghost. That's usually the strongest idea. This time the historical side is almost intoxicating. The modern thread feels harder, like I'm forcing it. That's why I'm going to get Merrin and Jago down, see if there's enough stuff to branch out into historical.'

'Would that be easy?'

Bella shrugged. 'I'm known for timeslip – a mixture of both. Let's see what happens when I get to the end of Merrin and Jago.'

'What are your Merrin and Jago like?' Aidan asked as he helped himself to a prawn.

'Jago is the typical mad, bad and dangerous to know. Full of illicit glamour, like you know you need to steer clear, but you can't help but be drawn into his orbit. I see him with wild hair, his skin tanned and scarred from all his scrapes, a tattered old frock coat that he wears better than any king would. He holds court at the bar. The women all lust after him, very openly, and he's good with the women, but it's Merrin who wins his heart because she is different.'

Aidan was enraptured by what she was saying. 'How is Merrin different?'

Bella chewed thoughtfully. 'It might be a bit clichéd, but she's less worn down by life. As fresh as the spring breeze and that is what really gets Jago. It makes him want to be a better man. He's torn between wanting to have her, and wanting to protect her. Merrin knows she shouldn't fall in love with him, but she can't help it, but she also won't let him get away with treating her badly. Doesn't give in to his initial charm and advances. I admit she is a bit doomed for falling in love with a bad boy but she almost redeems him.'

'Only almost?' Aidan raised an eyebrow.

'Oh yes, we don't want him going too soft and anyway, Merrin has a backbone.'

'How are you reuniting them?'

'I don't know yet.' Bella paused. 'I hope you're not going to think me daft but, well, the more time I spend in the pub, the more my sixth sense will tap into Merrin's spirit and she will tell me herself what she needs.'

Aidan's silence was stretched out by Georgie coming to clear their plates. Humiliation began to flood through Bella. He'd been so receptive, why had she ruined it by sharing all that silliness about her sixth sense?

‘How does this sixth sense work?’ he asked.

Bella gave him a long look before asking, ‘Do you really want to know? You’re not going to think I’m ridiculous or silly or anything are you?’ Narrowing her eyes at him, Bella sat back and took a fortifying sip of her wine. Memories surfaced of Max laughing at her that one time they went to the Cotswolds and she couldn’t sleep with the light off because of the spirit lingering at the bottom of their bed.

Aidan exhaled. ‘Bella. I admit I’m not sure I believe in all this spooky stuff, but, you know, I like you and if it’s important to you, then it’s important to me. You’ve helped me change my mind. If both you and Dad think there’s a ghost, then maybe there is one. So, go on, your sixth sense, how does it work?’

‘I can’t see ghosts all the time, it’s not like that, it’s more that sometimes I go somewhere and I pick something up. There was someone, a child, at the end of the bed in the this really old Cotswolds hotel. Nothing malignant but it’s weird to know you’re not alone.’

‘Have you ever sensed something malignant?’

Bella nodded. ‘Once, in a holiday cottage in Suffolk. We were staying in this converted Tudor barn. Max and a couple of our friends. We had the room in the eaves. It was beautiful. Four poster bed, fairy lights, but you had to climb up an old flight of steps to get to it. There was something horrible stuck in the doorway, a presence that was suffocating.’ Bella let out a nervous laugh. ‘I wiped all the photos from my phone. I slept on the sofa. Max felt nothing. If anything he was more concerned that our friends would think I was ridiculous. In fact, no one else could sense anything. It was the weirdest experience of my life.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Aidan said. ‘Your ex doesn’t sound like he was very nice.’

Bella’s smile was tinged with sadness. ‘Yes, I’m starting to think that too.’

Any further conversation was stalled by Georgie arriving with their mains. The aromas were as tantalising as the artfully set out plates.

‘Can I get you anything else?’ Georgie asked.

‘I think I have everything I need,’ Aidan said without taking his eyes off Bella, referring to more than just the food. ‘Bella?’

Speechless, Bella shook her head. ‘This is perfect.’

‘Wonderful, let me know if you change your minds. Enjoy!’

‘Wow, look at this,’ Bella indicated to her lamb. ‘Do you want to share again?’

Aidan’s eyes glittered. ‘I was hoping you’d ask.’

As they tucked into the delicious dinner, the spectre of Max receded like a fading tide. Bella’s attention was back on Aidan, making her wonder if Max had ever held her entire heart, when there was so much space left in it for Aidan to slip back in, where he always belonged.

The night had been perfect. They’d lingered over coffees, sharing the meltiest chocolate fondant Bella had ever eaten, topped with pistachio ice cream. Neither had been in a rush to leave the intimacy of the restaurant. Lost in conversation with each other, they’d greedily gorged on morsels of each other’s lives, unwrapping them like after-dinner mints.

As they weaved childhood memories into reminiscing about the summer they’d met, they lost track of time. It had been cathartic to discuss the aftermath of the incorrect number, to almost find the funny side in it, which was easier now they had been reunited. When Aidan reached across for Bella’s hand, entangling his fingers through hers, she had not resisted, simply relaxing into something she’d always felt had been written in the stars.

Aidan’s eyes had glittered with something more delicious and thrilling than any of the courses they’d eaten. Bella pushed aside the fact that she would only be in Polcarrow for a month. Why shouldn’t she enjoy being reunited with him? Yes, Cornwall was far from her Hertfordshire home but it was hardly the other side of the world. Before they could discuss what would happen next, Georgie had gently reminded them that it was closing time before escorting them to the door once all the other diners had left. Aidan left a generous tip to apologise for almost outstaying their welcome.

Anticipation tingled through them as they walked hand in hand to Aidan’s car. They drove in a contented silence through the dark country lanes, winding their way back to reality. Bella stifled a yawn. All too soon they were pulling off the main road, slowly making their way down the sloped streets of the village, where she imagined everyone else was tucked up in bed. In a village so concerned with everyone else’s business, it thrilled her to think no one knew about her date with Aidan. At least not yet.

Aidan pulled up outside the pub. There was a pause when anything could've happened, but nothing did. Bella sank into herself as Aidan got out of the car. He was opening the passenger door for her before she realised what he was doing. After the warmth of Aidan's heated seats, it was a chilly reality to step out onto Polcarrow seafront. She shivered, he locked the car, one lingering look, as if weighing up the consequences of what could happen next.

'Come on, I'll walk you home.' Aidan offered his arm, not his hand, and Bella, ever so slightly disappointed, slipped her arm through his.

The waves were a gentle lullaby as they walked through the December darkness. The tail end of the year, built for hibernating and winding down, for reflection and preparation for a new beginning. Bella pulled her coat collar tighter, wishing she had a scarf so they could linger outside listening to the sounds of the sea through the blackness of the night. Out to sea, Bella made out a bank of clouds gathered like a ghostly galleon, lit by the waning moon.

'Look.' She pointed. 'Jago's ship.'

Aidan smiled softly. 'Yes, maybe. It's a nice idea. Watching on the horizon for Merrin, maybe?'

'Umm, yes, I like to think so.' She filed this away in the brain, not wanting Jago and Merrin's tragic love story to infiltrate whatever was brewing right now between her and Aidan.

Polcarrow was tiny so it wasn't long until they came to a stop outside Bella's cottage. The low lamp she'd left on to keep Mimi company permeated through the dark, like a little beacon of hope.

Bella turned to Aidan. 'Thank you, that was such a beautiful night. It was wonderful.'

Aidan's smile lit up his whole face. 'Yeah, it was for me too. Perfect.' He reached forwards and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, his eyes dropping briefly to her lips.

Every nerve in Bella's body was on fire as they took a step closer. His hand slipped from behind her ear, down to her chin, cupping her face. Bella's eyes closed, her heart racing with expectation, but the second his lips brushed hers, a mad scrabbling at the door and the sound of Mimi barking with excitement broke through the moment.

‘Oh my God, I’m so sorry.’ Bella let out a mortified laugh. ‘Mimi, hang on.’

Mimi kept barking, her little claws scratching at the door, as if she didn’t want to be left out for a moment longer. Thankfully, Aidan found the funny side in it.

‘It’s OK, I know you two come as a pair.’

‘I’d better settle her before she wakes the whole of Polcarrow,’ Bella said apologetically, her lips still burning with desire from the almost kiss.

‘See you tomorrow for Lola’s grand unveiling?’ Aidan asked.

Bella was disappointed to see he’d taken a step back. ‘Yes, definitely, I’ll look forward to it.’ She pulled her keys from her pocket and slipped the right one into the lock. ‘Goodnight.’

Just as she turned the key, Aidan leaned forwards and dropped a kiss on the corner of her mouth. Before Bella could react, he’d moved away, making his way backwards along harbour row, blowing kisses in her direction. Laughing, Bella made as if to grab them out of the air. Plans to wait until he was out of sight were spoilt by Mimi barking.

‘All right, baby, I’m home,’ Bella said as she stepped inside the golden-lit comfort of the cottage, bending down to snuggle Mimi, ‘I should know, shouldn’t I, that the first kiss is always interrupted. Come on, let’s get to bed.’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Eighteen

*Bella,*

*Hope you're having a wonderful, creative time down in Cornwall. From your social media it looks as if you're having a blast. I have good news. Your editor LOVED your synopsis and opening chapters and really believes it could be your best book yet. The publisher totally understands the situation you've been in, and we all wish you'd let us know sooner that you were struggling. Anyway, they're happy to push publication back, give you a two-month extension. We all believe in this book, Bella, and hope you do too! Anyway, let me know if you want to jump on a call, keep us updated,*

*Bethan*

‘Wow,’ Bella exhaled in disbelief and read the email again just to double-check it was true. ‘Best book yet, yikes, like I need that pressure,’ Bella said to Mimi. It was the morning after her date with Aidan. Her brain, and heart, were so full they were both fit to burst. The email had been sent the previous evening when Bella had been out with Aidan. She’d let the news settle, arrange a call with Bethan later.

Mimi attempted to lick Bella’s face, yesterday’s sulking having evaporated with the dawn, although Bella wasn’t sure all was forgiven. After interrupting their kiss, Mimi had simply retreated back into her little bed and snuggled back down, leaving Bella to head to bed, her mind whirring with tantalising what-ifs.

What would’ve happened if he had kissed her? Would it have been one singular searing kiss goodnight? Would she have then watched him head towards the pub craving more? Or would the kiss have undone everything and she’d have tugged Aidan by his coat collar through the door and hauled him upstairs? Would Mimi even have let him get that far? What did she even want?

Coming to Polcarrow had only been meant as a way of trying to get over her writer's block, and to escape the realities of life if she was completely honest, but Bella hadn't expected to actually find some inspiration, or romance of her own and certainly not with someone who had previously seared a hole in her heart. Her brain felt like it was about to explode with how much had changed in such a short space of time, seemingly for the better. The book, Aidan, Polcarrow, the encouragement from Bethan and her editor, Bella wasn't sure she trusted it all. Fragile as sand, too easy for it to slip through her fingers.

Could she have a Christmas fling with Aidan? Or could it be something more? Did she want to risk her heart again? Would she be able to step away from him when they seemed to be drawn together like magnets? There was something poetic about finding each other again after so long. Bella wasn't known for making sensible decisions when it came to her heart. Or at least she hadn't been before Max. Max had been a big dose of sensible, a neatly packaged box that had felt like the right thing at the time. Aidan was fireworks, uncertainty and possibility all bundled into one.

'What do you think? Shall I just go for it with Aidan? Why am I asking you, Mims? You're his biggest fan. You know you're going to have to share him, right, and it might only be for Christmas. Do you think you could do that?'

Mimi looked at her as if to say, *Who are you trying to convince?*

Bella held out the crust of her toast for Mimi. 'Good girl, shall we go and see what Lola's put in her window?'

As they got ready to head out, Bella knew that both she and Mimi were not so secretly hoping to encounter Aidan. Bella hesitated over applying makeup before deciding not to bother. After all, she hadn't been wearing any the other mornings he'd seen her.

Wrapped up against the chill winter air, they made their way outside, following their usual route across the road, along the harbour wall. Bella inhaled and exhaled the salty sea air, watching the way the sun tried to struggle through the thin clouds, as Mimi sniffed and marked her territory. The sea was calm, boats haphazard in the small harbour, the cry of a gull circling in the air, and the sun, where it managed to sneak a finger of light through, illuminated a patch of sand, the crest of a wave. Bella felt it lodge in her heart. Love. She loved it here. The simplicity of life, of being almost

forever away from the rest of the world. Another possibility wormed its way into her mind. Could she stay in Polcarrow?

Not wanting to allow the thought to become too hopeful, or too permanent, Bella tugged Mimi away and they made their way over to Lola's café where a small group of people were waiting for the big reveal, and more importantly, for the café to open so they could get their coffee fix.

Bella stopped beside Alf so that Mimi and Scruff could say hello to each other.

'I don't think he's too keen on her,' Alf laughed as Scruff lay down and ignored Mimi's attempts to befriend him.

'Her trouble is she doesn't know how to play it cool, do you, Mims? Come here, baby, I don't want anyone to step on you.' Bella swept Mimi up into her arms as more people arrived, including Effie and Jake from the bookshop, again in their matching dry robes.

'I'm dying for my post-swim hot chocolate,' Effie said, rubbing her hands together.

'You've been for a swim?' Bella's eyes almost popped out of her head. 'Isn't it freezing?'

'Yep, but that's part of the fun.' Effie beamed. 'It's exhilarating, good for the heart and soul.'

'At least that's what she says, secretly I'm not convinced.' Jake pulled Effie into him.

'You should try it,' Effie said to Bella. 'Oh no, don't make that face. Have a paddle at least. I'm organising a Boxing Day swim. I'm hoping it'll be more than me and Jake. Aidan, are you joining us?'

Bella froze. All her senses switched to high alert at the sound of his name. Mimi reacted first, squirming and barking in her arms, desperate to say hello to Aidan.

'Hey, good morning.' His voice was warm and low, curling around Bella as he came over and scratched Mimi under the chin.

Bella momentarily thought she'd dissolve. Turning, she realised they were almost as close as they'd been when he dropped her off the night before. His hair was damp from the shower, his unshaven face making him look roguish. The sight of him made Bella forget how to use words so she mumbled something unintelligible in place of a greeting. From the way Alf

chuckled and Effie and Jake exchanged a knowing look, Bella suspected she'd been rumbled, that her attraction to Aidan was as obvious as Mimi's.

Aidan didn't move away. Bella had to stop herself from leaning into the warmth of him. All those years she'd wondered if she'd imagined the sparks between them, if she'd embellished it. Reassuring to know that what she'd remembered was real. That despite her friends telling her the romance wouldn't have lasted, she had proof that everything between them was as strong as it was when they'd first met.

She caught his eye, so many unspoken words swelled between them, as well as the memory of that unspent kiss. However, before they could say anything, Lola opened the café door and stepped outside.

'Everyone ready?'

'Yes!' the villagers chorused with a few people chiming in about needing their coffee. Sue got everyone to quieten down ready for the big reveal. Aidan shifted closer making Bella think he'd have taken her hand if she hadn't been holding Mimi.

Lola popped back inside and everyone began the countdown. On one Lola lifted the blind to reveal an enormous mince pie standing on a plinth. Snowflakes had also been sprayed on the glass. A round of applause went up as Lola came back outside.

'I didn't want to spoil the view, so I've also decorated inside,' she explained. 'It's perishing out here, come on, Freya is poised ready to serve and I've made some complimentary mini mince pies to go with your drinks.'

The crowd parted to let Alf in first but Aidan put a hand on Bella's elbow, holding her back.

'I had a really nice time last night,' he said in a low voice so that his words were meant only for her.

'Me too, it was lovely, thank you.' Bella knew she was twinkling at him, she couldn't help it.

'If only we hadn't been interrupted by this one.' Aidan smiled, giving Mimi a scratch under the chin.

Bella's heart picked up pace. 'I had words with her this morning, told her she needs to learn to share.'

Aidan laughed. 'Would you like to do it again?'

'The dinner or the almost-kiss?'

‘Both, but next time I’m hoping it won’t be an almost-kiss.’

Bella was glad he had hold of her elbow, otherwise she reckoned she would’ve dissolved into a puddle on the pavement. The way he was looking at her, as if she was everything, ignited the embers that were smouldering between them into a fully blown fire. Bella wanted nothing more than to let it engulf her.

‘Mocha?’ he asked. ‘Then maybe we can take Mimi for a walk?’

‘Sounds perfect.’

Aidan stepped back and Bella felt a rush of cold air fill the space where he’d been. As they made their way towards the back of the queue for the café, Sue tapped Bella on the shoulder and waved her clipboard hopefully in her direction.

‘Still have a couple of days left. You’re the only house on harbour row not signed up.’

Bella glanced at Sue, then at Aidan, who was trying to smother his laughter at Sue’s relentlessness. Bella didn’t know if it was having Aidan by her side, or her new-found resolution to rediscover the joy of Christmas, but she found herself saying, ‘OK, go on, sign me up.’

Sue beamed triumphantly as she wrote Bella’s name against her list. ‘I knew we’d wear you down. Right, just need to fill two more spots.’

They watched Sue scurry off down the line in her attempt to recruit.

‘What have I done?’ Bella groaned.

Aidan laughed. ‘I’d say Sue can be pretty persuasive, but I think Polcarrow has worked its magic on you.’

Bella softened under his reassuring tone. ‘Not just Polcarrow.’

The implication fizzed between them. Aidan reached for her hand that was not holding Mimi and wrapped his fingers around hers. He didn’t let go. Lola’s satisfied smile when they reached the front of the queue was almost as smug as Sue’s.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Nineteen

Saturday, the day of the Festive Festival rolled around. Bella found herself standing in front of the fridge reading through the itinerary that was fixed to the door. Starting at midday with the Christmas Tree festival in the church, Father Christmas and the local school choir and finishing with the Lobster Pot Tree light switch on. It wasn't on the programme but the word on the village grapevine was that everyone would then descend on the pub and get rather merry on Steve's legendary mulled wine.

'Have you tried this mulled wine?' Bella had asked Aidan when they had taken Mimi for a walk the previous day.

Aidan had shaken his head. 'No, it's not usually my thing but we can try it together. It's notorious apparently. Are you coming to the festival?'

Bella had liked the way he didn't just assume she was going. 'I don't know. I guess everyone will be there and I might look like a right Scrooge if I stay away.'

'Ha! Yes, Sue will probably come and drag you along. This is actually my first Christmas in Polcarrow,' he admitted. 'I only used to come in the summer for a couple of weeks. It's nice to see it in a different season. Dad's looking forward to later.'

Bella had caught his eye and nodded, hoping that a super-strength mulled wine would be the catalyst that would finally make them kiss. There had been no further attempts since the night of the dinner and if it hadn't been for Aidan taking her hand when they walked Mimi, Bella would've started to think he'd gone off her.

However, all this yearning and dreaming of Aidan kissing her had only added fuel to her creative fire. Bella was pleased she'd managed her best writing week for over a year. Eight thousand words over three days. She

was exhausted, but exhilarated, enjoying the way that her characters finally felt real to her. Bella could still only find her spark in the pub though. It was as if the ghosts were guiding her.

The past few days Aidan and Bella had fallen into a routine of meeting to walk Mimi, then grabbing a coffee together. Bella managed to hide her annoyance that Mimi was willing to follow Aidan onto the beach, but not her. They'd then part ways and Bella would turn up in the pub when it opened, set up camp in the corner booth and write. The best part of this wasn't just that the words were finally flowing, but that Aidan occasionally slipped out of the kitchen with something new he wanted her to try. From warming soups to fresh bread, to an indulgent chocolate fondant that he was struggling to make melty enough. Not that Bella was complaining since she'd managed to try three different versions of it and found nothing wrong with them.

That morning, Bella was wondering if after her walk she could sneak into the pub early, settle down and write. She took her cup of tea and made her way into the front room. Peering out the window, she saw a hive of activity along the harbour. Everyone in Polcarrow seemed to be out and about, heading to the church to decorate their trees, taking the kids to their weekend activities, walking dogs. She'd never get out without someone intercepting her. Lola hurried along the seafront with a stack of boxes balanced in her arms. Mince pies, Bella guessed, turning her nose up, wondering how she'd manage to dodge them all day.

'Right, Mims, looks like I'm going to have to try and get some words down here, doesn't it?' Bella exhaled. 'I can do this. I used to do it all the time, didn't I, baby? Write anywhere.'

After pulling her laptop out of her bag, Bella set herself up on the kitchen table. Once the screen was on, she opened her document and sat down, before getting up again. She couldn't write without a coffee, which also demanded a treat of a chocolate biscuit or two.

Coffee made, biscuits nibbled, Bella put on her headphones and selected a calming instrumental playlist to get herself in the zone. Right, it was new chapter time. She knew exactly what was going to happen – her modern couple were about to have their meet-cute which included a misunderstanding about a parking space. She'd been thinking about it

whilst brushing her teeth that morning, hashing out the dialogue as she scrubbed. It had been sparky and witty and full of simmering tension.

Bella typed a few sentences, describing the pink cottage her heroine was pulling up outside, lush hanging baskets, a glorious late-summer sun. Her fingers plodded over the keyboard as if they'd forgotten how to work. Bella's skin prickled as she wrote, each word feeling uncomfortable and clunky.

'Push through,' she murmured to herself, 'you can't edit an empty page. Just write five hundred words then you can have another biscuit. Not you, Mimi.' The dog's ears had pricked up at the word 'biscuit.'

As she wrote, Bella knew that her imagination was slipping perilously close to having her hero embody Aidan. Well, if that's what it took to get the words down, she wouldn't complain. She could change his personality a bit in the edits. Anyway, most of her romantic heroes tended to be of the dark hair and blue eyes persuasion. So what if she was losing her own heart to someone very similar.

The words began to flow a little easier, maybe not quite full of all the old magic, but she was putting one letter in front of another, plodding up the novel-writing hill, pleased to be making slow steady progress on the difficult upward climb. Her characters' terse exchange didn't come out quite as she'd imagined, but Bella managed to get the words down. Anyway, she always preferred going back over dialogue, making it more realistic.

After an hour, and two more chocolate biscuits, Bella reached the end of the scene and sat back with satisfaction. Scooping Mimi up, she scrolled through the pages to show her. 'Look, Mims, I've done it. Yes, I know you can't read it but I've done it, baby.'

Mimi let out a little bark, squirming to get down. Bella backed up her file. Standing up, she stretched her arms above her head and yawned. She was stiff from sitting. 'I should take up yoga again,' she said as she circled her shoulders, her eyes catching the clock. Almost midday. 'Do you want to go and see what this Festive Festival is? Or do you think it's a bit early? Everyone else is probably there already, don't you think? It still baffles me how one village loves Christmas so much.'

Mimi gave her a look that was the equivalent of a shrug. Bella tipped a little bit of food into her bowl. 'If I'm going out, I'd better get changed.'

Bella stowed her laptop away and went upstairs to get ready. What should she wear to a festive festival? All her Christmas jumpers had been flung into a bin liner and taken to the nearest charity shop back in January. Bella rifled through the wardrobe, turning over items in varying shades of black. It had always amused everyone that the goth girl had a wide variety of Christmas jumpers, the more lurid, the better. The best she could come up with today was a burgundy polo-neck. Bella pulled it on along with her black jeans and clipped half her hair away from her face. A little bit of makeup and she was as ready as she'd ever be.

Mimi was in her usual spot by the front door. 'Sorry I don't have a Christmas jumper for you, darling, but is this red one OK?' Mimi allowed Bella to pull the jumper on and started to scratch at the door, desperate to be let out, whilst Bella hurried to put on her boots and coat before stepping outside.

It was perishing. Even under all her layers, Bella shivered. 'Come on, Mimi,' she gave her lead a tug, 'it's too cold for sniffing.' When the dog didn't move, Bella tried the magic words, 'Aidan will be there.'

Mimi's ears pricked up and she started to trot along the seafront, pulling Bella along with her keenness.

'No, we're not going there yet.' Bella steered her away from the pub, past the lobster pot tree which now had a gleaming mermaid balanced on its top, towards the church.

Bella paused outside. The door pushed open as someone left, 'Simply Having a Wonderful Christmas Time' filtering out, catching Bella's subconscious with a memory she'd rather keep suppressed. Last year's party flashed before her in a rush of pink, white and silver. Everyone had cooed over the theme. Bella had been so pleased with the flamingo tree topper that Max had pronounced ridiculous. How they'd laughed at the topper. How secretly pleased she was that their friends were siding with her over it.

It had almost been time to start eating but Bella realised she had forgotten the crackers. As everyone mingled, sipping full glasses, Bella, tipsy and high with happiness, had picked her way through everyone, cranberry spritz in hand. The crackers were in the spare room. You couldn't have a Christmas party without naff jokes and paper hats, she'd told everyone, to nods of agreement.

Swallowing, she recalled how happy she'd been as she made her way upstairs to the spare room, where the coats had been flung over the bed. The crackers were on top of the wardrobe. It happened in a flash, the turning on of the light, the discovery of Max and Loz kissing in the corner as if their lives depended on it. Their eyes blinking with shock, colour draining from their faces as they realised they'd been caught. Bella would never forget the look on Max's face, the guilt, the anger, the surprise, all contorting his handsome features. The way Loz had sneaked away like a snake.

Bella didn't remember much after that, only the recriminations, the desperately weak explanations, the scattering of guests, the bottom falling out of her world as Paul McCartney sang about having a wonderful Christmas time.

Mimi barked, bringing her back to the present, to Polcarrow on a cold December Saturday, a lifetime and half a country away from everything that had happened. Bella picked Mimi up and snuggled her in tightly. 'How am I going to make new Christmas memories if I chicken out? Or should that be turkey out?' Mimi practically rolled her eyes at the bad joke. 'You ready? Shall we go in? OK, let's do this.'

Bella pushed open the church door and froze for the second time in as many minutes. 'Wow, look at that, Mimi,' she gasped as she took in the interior of the church. Christmas trees decorated by local groups lined the walls, fairy lights sparkled white, gold and rainbow colours, catching the tinsel, making it shine in all shades of magenta, gold and silver. The underlying scent of damp stone, candles and coffee, combined with the bright decorations, transported Bella back to the joy-filled Christmas grottos she'd loved as a child.

Christmas had always been her favourite season. Maybe it was the magic, all wrapped up in the presents that appeared under the tree, or the school Christingle services, the parties in classrooms, crisps, cupcakes and a special school disco. December handed over to frivolity and expectation rather than work. Stepping into Polcarrow's small church was like stepping back in time. Her heart stirred and she wiped away a nostalgic tear.

Bella glanced around, wondering where to start, when Tristan appeared at her elbow, wearing a reindeer Christmas jumper and looking very pleased with the turnout.

‘It’s our second festive festival,’ he explained, ‘Sue’s idea, as you can imagine. I think we might just be better than last year’s. What do you think?’

Bella pulled Mimi tight against her. ‘I think it’s enchanting.’ As she spoke, she realised she was being honest. ‘Reminds me of being a kid.’

Tristan smiled. ‘Yes, if there’s one time of the year when we can all reconnect with our inner child, then Christmas should be it. I heard Sue managed to twist your arm into taking part in her advent window.’

‘Yes.’ Bella hesitated. Tristan’s kind gaze meant she found herself elaborating. ‘I didn’t have a very good Christmas last year. I’d come away to escape it,’ she laughed, ‘and look.’

Tristan smiled. ‘Some people say Polcarrow is magic. It gives you exactly what you didn’t realise you needed. A lot of people have found solace here, a chance to rebuild their lives, myself included.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. I was moved here after I’d burnt out in my previous parish. Working in a city had many challenges, not that Polcarrow doesn’t. I spend a fair bit of my time playing referee between various committee members, but it’s been refreshing. If I hadn’t have come here, I’d have never met Lola and the rest is history. Now, go and see what you think of the trees. Vote for your favourite at the end. People have really upped their game this year.’

‘Thank you, I will. Come on, Mims, shall we have a look?’ Bella bid farewell to Tristan and joined the slow amble around the church. It didn’t escape her that everyone was wearing Christmas jumpers. The commitment to the cause made her feel underdressed. Maybe she could order one online just in case? It didn’t take much to imagine Sue trying to get the whole village wearing Christmas jumpers in unison.

The trees were all decorated by various local groups ranging from the Scouts to the WI and the local school, all in a Christmas movie theme. Bella felt she should give her vote for the controversial *Die Hard* tree, obviously someone felt very strongly about it being a Christmas movie. That was until she shuffled past the Grinch tree and before she came face to face with the next one featuring Gonzo and Rizzo the Rat in full Victorian regalia. The addition of Michael Cane as Scrooge on the top like a fairy caused Bella’s final bit of festive frostiness to melt.

‘Look, Mimi, *Muppet Christmas Carol*, our favourite,’ she whispered to the dog who gave a bark of agreement. ‘That’s our vote sorted,’ she said as they moved on, making their way down the right-hand side of the church.

‘So, what do you think?’ Alf asked as she came to a stop by Santa’s Grotto. The old man was dressed like an elf and Scruff had a pair of reindeer ears on. They were wearing Christmas jumpers. The whole scene was too adorable for words.

‘Alf! What are you doing?’

He signalled to his outfit. ‘Santa’s elf. Apparently there’s no age limit.’

‘You make a fantastic elf! I love your matching jumpers.’

Alf rolled his eyes. ‘Thanks, but I meant the trees. What do you think of them? Very creative some people.’

‘Oh! They’re magical. Really. So inventive. This reminds me of school bazaars when I was a kid. Tombola, lucky dip, a visit to Father Christmas. I used to do it all. Think I might be too old for Father Christmas now.’

‘You’re never too old. Look at me, a ninety-year-old elf! I think there’s a tombola in the church hall if you fancy a go. Never know what you might win.’

‘Probably a can of beans.’ Bella rolled her eyes. ‘I never got the good prizes. Seeing you all dressed up makes me regret binning all my Christmas jumpers. I feel like Scrooge in this get-up.’

Alf regarded her. ‘It doesn’t matter what you’re wearing. You’re here, that’s what counts. Why don’t you just put some tinsel around our neck like a scarf? Anyway, I didn’t have a Christmas jumper until last year. Lola made us these. Smashing, aren’t they?’

‘I have jumper envy,’ Bella told him admiring the matching knits. ‘So does Mimi.’ Sensing a crowd starting to gather behind her, Bella said, ‘I think I’d better move on. See you later.’

As she made her way past the rest of the trees, Bella yet again took stock of how hiding away in the cottage would have been another point to Max. She briefly wondered what the friendship group was doing this year now that she wasn’t there as the driving force behind the party. Bella had always gone to town, selecting a theme and making sure everything, from the food to the drink, complemented it. She hoped they were feeling the massive festive-shaped hole in their lives.

Yet Bella realised she didn't really miss them. They'd always been more Max's friends than hers. Mates from university with their shared jokes and coming-of-age stories. Bella always felt they thought she was a bit odd with her gothic tendencies and love of historical romances, like an exotic creature they didn't quite know what to do with. It was only now, months on from the split, and miles from the scene of the crime, that Bella realised she felt lighter, more herself, that she wasn't trying to smooth out her edges or make herself more palatable.

Bella completed her voting form and slipped it into the box. Turning to leave she saw a larger tree, undecorated except for an array of labels dangling from its branches. 'A gratitude tree', she read on the sign and proceeded to turn over some of the cards, but it almost felt like prying to read what other villagers, young and old, were thankful for.

'What did you vote for?' A low rumble sounded in her ear.

The voice went right into her heart and gave it a squeeze. Mimi yapped with delight and squirmed, trying to break free of Bella's arms. Bella blinked up at Aidan. Even in an elf-print Christmas jumper he was utterly gorgeous. 'Vote for?'

'The trees.'

'Oh. Easy. *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. It's never Christmas until you've cried over a frog puppet dying in my opinion.'

Aidan laughed. 'Really? I've never watched it.'

'What? You've never watched *The Muppet Christmas Carol*? How? I mean, it's the best! OK, we have to change this. You're coming round and we're watching it.'

'Sure, I'd be up for that. Sounds like a . . . date.'

They studied each other as the rest of Polcarrow buzzed around the church. Bella stepped closer. 'Is this what we're doing? Dating?'

Aidan gave a shrug. 'I like to think so.'

Bella pressed her lips together in an attempt to contain all the happiness that was bubbling up inside her. Instead, she tried to burst the bubble. 'But I'm leaving at Christmas.'

Aidan took her hand. 'I know. I don't want to think about that right now, I just want to enjoy this.' He signalled between them. 'But I also know you like it here and as they say, Polcarrow can be magic.'

Bella's mouth opened, then closed. They were standing in the middle of a Christmas tree festival, she fancied him like mad, and there was super-strength mulled wine on the horizon. This, she realised, was not the time to be reminding them both of her reality. That her life was back in Hitchin. But what life was that? Living in her sister's loft conversion, trying to avoid Max and his friends. Could she move to Polcarrow? Give Aidan a try? It seemed crazy but also wonderfully possible.

'OK, let's see what happens,' was all she said, picking up one of the card tags to distract herself. 'What are you grateful for?'

'I've already done mine.' He reached out and turned a tag over. 'Have a look.'

Reaching forwards, Bella read the words, 'second chances'. Her eyes caught with his, a smile of pure happiness spread across his face. It took all her willpower not to lean across and kiss it right off his lips. Max had never looked at her like that, as if she was everything he'd ever wanted and more. Bella picked up her pen and scrawled something on her tag.

'"New beginnings",' Aidan said. 'I like that one.'

'Me too.' Bella linked her fingers through his. 'Time for a coffee? Apparently, there's a tombola in the hall and there's a can of beans with my name on it.'

Aidan laughed. 'I'm not one to stand between a woman and her beans. I can spare a few minutes, still got to finish prep for later. Come on, I definitely need some caffeine.'

Hand in hand, they made their way out of the church not caring who might be looking, gossiping or speculating. Bella decided it was time to throw caution to the winds and embrace whatever this festive season was going to throw at her. If that was Aidan in a Christmas jumper, then she was hardly going to complain.

## Chapter Twenty

Despite her initial reservations, Bella ended up enjoying the Festive Festival. She even managed to win some nice bubble bath, rather than a tin of beans, on the tombola. Everyone had been welcoming, friendly and Mimi had loved being fussed by both adults and kids. With every exchange, Bella's frayed edges began to knit into the fabric of the community. The possibility of staying there long term, of seeing what could develop with Aidan began to take root. But was it just a holiday dream? Romance author living by the sea.

Bella popped home in the middle of the afternoon for a sit down. Aidan was prepping for that evening and had assured her he didn't need any help. Her humbug heart thawed by the jollity of the festival, Bella made herself a hot chocolate and headed into the living room. Settling onto the sofa, she found herself reaching for the Polcarrow book club pick of the month. Maybe it was time to try a Christmas romance?

She took in the gorgeous deep blue cover, the title a swirl of gold foil, an illustration of a hopeful couple in the centre. In the past she'd always cracked open her holiday romances the second the calendar flipped over to the first of November after stocking up on all the latest releases and then inhaling them as if her life depended on it. Bella had just opened the first page when her phone rang. With a sigh, she reached for it, planning on silencing it, but then she saw Nicki's name.

'Hiya, how are you?' Bella answered. 'Everything all right?' Nicki was a prolific texter, she very rarely called. 'The girls?'

'Currently being pumped full of sugar at a birthday party. I'm hoping they bounce it off on the bouncy castle. Why do you sound so startled?'

'You never call,' Bella reminded her.

‘So?’ There was a shrug in her voice. ‘Maybe I wanted to catch up and see how you’re getting on. Your texts have been evasive.’

‘Ah. Yes. I’ve been writing.’

A heavy silence followed this statement. Nicki was one of the only people who knew the depth and despair of Bella’s writer’s block. Bella could sense the hope down the line.

‘It’s different this time,’ Bella admitted, ‘I think coming here was a good idea.’

‘I see, that’s wonderful.’ Nicki managed to keep her voice measured, as if she didn’t want to jinx it.

‘I’ve just been to their festive festival,’ Bella blurted out quickly to change the subject.

‘A what?’

‘Like a church bazaar, Christmas tree festival, festive things. You know like the ones we used to go to in the school hall as kids. Someone dressed as Santa, a tombola, home-made cakes, the lot, it’s like a blast from the past. There’s a light switch on later.’

‘Oh my God, I remember those! You cried when you realised Santa was the headmaster.’

‘Well you shouldn’t have pointed that out!’ Bella protested. ‘Or blamed me when you stole all the crispy cakes.’

‘If I recall you were my partner in crime there,’ Nicki reminded her before venturing on with, ‘I thought you’d sworn off Christmas things.’

Bella made a non-committal sound. ‘It’s hard when the village is sort of Christmas mad, it’s got under my skin. I’m the only person not wearing a Christmas jumper today.’

‘You seriously didn’t keep any?’ Nicki laughed, Bella’s collection of gaudy jumpers had been legendary.

Bella laughed. ‘No! But if you go to the local charity shops they might be selling them second hand this year. I really miss the one with the cross-eyed reindeer. It’s actually . . . really nice.’ She paused before saying, ‘I realised I can’t let Max steal something else I loved from me, and it was time to reclaim it from him.’

Nicki’s voice swelled with emotion. ‘Oh Bella, I never thought you’d get your spark back. He was a bit of a toerag. How’s the rest of the village?’

Bella hesitated before deciding to continue without mentioning Aidan, she didn't fancy the interrogation, or concern. 'It's like something out of a book, I kid you not. Everyone is really friendly, or really nosey, or both. I've been welcomed. I really like it here.' *If I could stay, I would*, she added silently to herself before changing the subject, 'Anyway, you never call without reason, so what's up?'

'Christmas, actually. Although you becoming Mrs Claus again makes this so much easier. When are you coming home? The girls keep asking if Auntie Bella and Mimi will be here. Mum and Dad are coming; it'll be a full house. They miss you. We all miss you. And it's the girls' birthday on the twenty-third of course. The one thing they keep asking for is you, Bella.'

Guilt twinged in Bella's heart. 'I miss you all too, and I'm sorry about not being in touch. I'll do better. Of course I'll come home for their birthdays. What if we keep it a surprise? I'll put a bow on my head or something.'

Nicki laughed. 'I can always count on you to be fun auntie! That sounds perfect. I'll have to get your room ready by stealth.' From somewhere in the background came the sound of the two girls arguing. 'Ugh, better go, fight to break up, see you soon, love you.'

'Love you too.' As Bella hung up, homesickness twinged in her chest. Reaching for Mimi, she gave the dog a consolatory cuddle.

The light had faded whilst Bella had been on the phone, the clock hands moving towards the five o'clock light switch on. 'Come on, Mim's, let's see what this tree looks like all lit up.'

They squeezed back into their winter layers and joined the throng of villagers making their way towards the lobster pot tree. Bella tucked Mimi under her arm so that she didn't get stepped on. A school choir was singing and a table was set up with hot mulled juice and more mince pies. Bella lingered at the back. With everyone from the village cosying up to each other, their familiarity made her feel like the stranger she actually was.

Bella shuffled around a bit, eyes searching for a familiar face, but everyone was busy chatting to their friends and families and she didn't want to intrude. Effie and Jake were bundled up with their loved ones, Alf was sitting on a chair at the front like the village king, Scruff at his feet. Freya

was having what looked like a very intense conversation with a long-haired man dressed in black.

Just as the feeling of being an outsider started to deflate her, Bella saw Aidan rush out of the pub door, hastily buttoning his coat. His eyes skimmed the crowd, until he found her.

‘Bella, you’re here.’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘Couldn’t find my gloves, it’s freezing out here after being in the kitchen. Come on, let’s get a bit closer.’ He steered her by the elbow past the refreshment stall. The women running it caught their togetherness and instantly their heads went together, voices hushed with speculation.

‘Looks like we’ve caused a mini stir.’

Aidan glanced over his shoulder and laughed. ‘Yes. Come on, let’s give them something more to talk about,’ and he pulled her closer, looping one arm around her waist and offering the other hand to Mimi, who licked his fingers enthusiastically. ‘She can probably smell the sausages on me. Just about got them in on time.’

‘How’s it going? You look a bit flustered.’

‘Well, it’s going,’ he sighed. ‘I underestimated how long it would take for me to peel all the parsnips for the soup. Should’ve started on Wednesday!’

‘You should’ve said, I could’ve helped. Even I can peel a parsnip.’

‘I might take you up on that. I’ve offered to do food night next Saturday after we’ve unveiled our pub window display. Agreed to it before the grand parsnip peeling.’

‘How many people?’

‘Only the whole village. Probably.’ He grinned. ‘It’s fine, it’s a chance to show just what I can do, what the pub can be.’

Before Bella could respond, Tristan’s voice came over a loud speaker and the villagers fell silent.

‘Hello, everyone! Thank you for coming to the second Festive Festival. Many thanks to Sue and the village committee for making the event even better than last year, which I didn’t think was possible.’ Tristan led everyone in a round of applause. ‘Also thanks to my wife, Lola, for somehow managing to bake even more mince pies than last year.’ Another round of applause and cheers. ‘So, if each year is bigger and better, I can’t wait to see what next year will be like!’

‘I already have ideas!’ Sue called out, which resulted in a mixture of groans and laughter.

‘Without further ado, shall we get this tree lit and then we can all go and warm up in the pub? I think Steve has made his mulled wine even stronger this year, if that’s even possible.’ When the cheers and laughter died down, Tristan turned to Alf. ‘You ready to do the honours?’

Alf pulled himself up off the chair and took the microphone. ‘I don’t think you need any more speeches, you’ve all heard everything I’ve got to say a dozen times or more. But here we are. Another Christmas. Every year I think it might be my last but if Sue has big plans for next year, then I’m planning on sticking around a bit longer.’ Alf pressed the switch.

Bella gasped in awe as the lobster pot tree flickered into life. Rustic and beautiful, it was unlike anything she’d ever seen before. The lights twinkled against the dark evening sky as if someone had managed to catch the stars in a net and bring them down to earth.

‘It’s wonderful, isn’t it?’ Aidan’s voice was like a caress against her cheek.

‘Amazing. Can you hold Mimi, I want to take a photo.’ Bella passed the dog over to him. Fishing her phone from her pocket, Bella made her way to the front of the crowd. She snapped a few photos and sent them to Nicki. Bella drank in the tree, transfixed by the way the fishing paraphernalia sparkled like jewels rather than discarded harbour equipment.

The crowds began to disperse making Bella aware that Aidan needed to get back to the kitchen. Turning around, her heart caught at the sight of Aidan cradling Mimi in his arms. Mimi looked as if all her Christmases had come at once but to Bella, Aidan looked as if he was her whole world. She swallowed. This was too quick, too easy. Life changing and earth shattering.

Bella lifted her phone. Aidan and Mimi bathed in fairy lights. A smile lit up his face as Bella took a photo, capturing the perfect moment of possibility. Slipping her phone back into her pocket, Bella stepped forwards, extracting a squirming Mimi from his arms.

‘I think I need to try some of this mulled wine I keep hearing about,’ she said.

Aidan took her hand and led her towards the pub. ‘It should come with a hazard sign,’ he said as he pushed open the door.

They stepped away from their private moment into the golden warmth of a whole community gathered in the cosy pub. The fire roared in the hearth so Bella quickly stripped off her hat and scarf. A delicious aroma wafted from the kitchen. Whatever Aidan had left in the oven smelled divine. Bella's stomach rumbled. Aidan gave her elbow a squeeze and leaned in.

'Are you OK if I leave you? I better check on things.'

Bella nodded. 'Sure, I'll be fine.'

There was a moment when they both lingered. A moment where it would have been so natural to kiss each other goodbye. Bella sighed as Aidan made his way through the crowded pub, shaking hands and exchanging quick greetings with the regulars, completely at home in his surroundings. Would she ever feel like that?

Deciding the best way to chase away the dip in her mood, Bella headed towards the bar where Steve was pouring out steaming glasses of mulled wine.

'Here you go. Try that.' He passed Bella a glass.

The scent of Christmas wafted up her nose, all spiced fruit and red wine. Bella took a tentative sip. She nodded her appreciation before taking a bigger swig. She winced as the alcohol hit her tongue. 'Woah, that's something!'

Steve laughed. 'Plenty more where it came from. Enjoy yourself. What can I get you? The usual?' He turned to serve the next punter.

Bella held her glass away from Mimi. 'This isn't for you, I'm afraid. Come on, let's find somewhere to perch.' Her eyes scanned the busy pub, looking for somewhere to slot herself in. She caught Freya waving her over and made a beeline for the friendly barista.

'God, you're being brave.' Freya nodded at the glass of mulled wine, raising her gin and tonic.

'It is pretty brutal—' Bella took another sip '—but I sort of like it. Cheers.'

'I'm opening the gallery early tomorrow,' Freya explained as they chinked their glasses, 'so I don't want a sore head. You must come, mustn't she, Angelo?' Freya turned to the man Bella has seen her with on the seafront. 'You haven't met yet have you? I'm sure you'll get on like a house on fire. This is Angelo, my partner, a very reclusive artist. Angelo, this is

Bella, a writer who's turned out not to be as reclusive as we first thought, if the rumour mill is anything to go by.'

Bella laughed. 'Pleased to meet you. What is the rumour mill saying?'

'That you're being very friendly with our new chef. I wouldn't worry about it. They love a bit of gossip. One of the reasons why Angelo tries to stay away.'

'Tries, but fails,' he said, pushing his wild mane of hair off his face, his arm curling protectively around Freya, tugging her against him as if she was the most precious thing in his world. 'It can't be that bad because I decided to settle here. It's much more peaceful than London. I met Freya. Bought a house, set up a gallery, and now, well . . .' he paused ' . . . we're ready for whatever happens next.'

Freya practically sparkled back at him.

Sensing an unspoken subtext happening between them, Bella changed the subject. 'So, this gallery. Are you both artists?'

'Yes,' Freya replied enthusiastically. 'I'm here because I failed my art degree, had a messy breakup that made me homeless, so Lola offered me a place to work and stay. Then Angelo rather rudely turned up and spoilt my plan never to get involved with a man again. Anyway, I digress. I paint. Sunsets, sunrises, seascapes, all local. Angelo sculpts. We also display some of Jake's photography and are open to anyone else who wishes to display or sell their work.'

'Wow, that sounds amazing. I'll come along.'

'Great! As it's so close to Christmas we'll also be selling some local crafts, get a bit of shopping done early? Is it early? Probably not.' Freya laughed. 'I haven't done any shopping yet, have you?'

They fell into easy conversation about Christmas, family traditions, what their plans were and about the village advent windows. Angelo went to the bar and returned with another round of drinks. The first drink had gone down way too easily, so Bella resolved to sip this one. Someone had brought a guitar along and a group of men started to sing Christmas songs in the style of sea shanties.

Just before everyone got a bit too merry, Aidan started to bring out the food, laying it out on a buffet table – baskets of freshly made bread, two tureens of the soup followed by the pigs in blankets.

‘About time, I’m starving.’ Freya shot out. ‘Leave Mimi with Angelo, you can’t carry her and a bowl of soup.’

Angelo gamely took Mimi from her hands. ‘Oh, she’s a friendly one,’ he said as Mimi tried to lick his face.

‘She’s a bit of a tart, I think,’ Bella laughed. ‘She likes the gentlemen. I’ll warn Aidan he has competition.’

Bella ladled out a bowl of the steaming soup, grabbed some bread and a couple of the sausages and made her way back to the table. Everything tasted even better than it had the first time around. Mimi managed to get a few morsels off almost everyone. Somehow a third mulled wine found its way to Bella and she was singing along to the carols by the time Aidan brought out the mulled apple crumble.

‘I think I might have had enough mulled things, but I know that crumble is to die for,’ she said, causing Freya to raise an eyebrow. ‘I was in here one day during the testing process and tried it, that’s all.’

They stacked up the soup bowls and deposited them back onto the buffet table. Bella wondered how Aidan could possibly tidy everything up by himself. The third mulled wine suggested it would be a good idea to stay and help him.

‘How’s it going?’ Aidan asked as he gave Bella a generous dollop of crumble.

‘Well! That mulled wine is strong.’

‘How many have you had?’

‘Three.’

‘Hmm. Let me know when and I’ll walk you home.’

‘Pft, it’s only along the seafront, it’s not far,’ she protested.

‘I’d feel better about it.’ He passed her the bowl of crumble. ‘Custard?’

‘Of course.’ She swayed slightly as she watched him pour custard over her crumble. ‘I’ll stay and help you.’

‘You don’t need to do that.’ He passed the bowl back to her.

‘I don’t mind, I like to be useful.’ Bella thought she might be slurring. ‘Don’t worry, I won’t have any more mulled wine.’

She made her way back to their table and tucked into her generous portion of crumble. She swooned, it was even better than before. Mentally, she added Aidan’s cooking to the list of reasons she was gathering to support the notion of relocating to Polcarrow.

The dessert wasn't just going down well with Bella. The other customers were complimenting the chef and sighing enthusiastically over the dishes. Bella moved onto a soft drink and began to feel the blurred edges of herself reconfigure. Freya and Angelo exchanged a communicative glance before standing up and gathering their coats.

'It's been a busy day, so we'll be off. See you tomorrow?'

'Yes, goodnight.' Bella watched as Angelo steered Freya out of the bar. Mimi curled up on her lap and managed to snooze despite the noise. Bella sank back against the banquette and commenced with her favourite hobby – people watching. As she sipped her drink, she realised the feeling that had settled in her soul was contentment. She was happy in a way she couldn't remember being for a long time. The sea air, the community and the mulled wine really had worked their magic.

As the evening rolled on, people began to leave, and in their wake a multitude of bowls and plates on the tables. Knowing Aidan had been busy all afternoon, Bella stuck to her promise. She moved Mimi onto the bench and set about picking up the dirty plates and stacking them on the near-empty buffet table.

'Bella, you really didn't need to do that,' Aidan said when he came out of the kitchen, but he looked touched by her effort.

She shrugged. 'Two pairs of hands are better than one. Where do you want these?' she asked as she followed him into the kitchen.

'Stack as many as you can in the dishwasher,' he instructed.

'Just checking you're not one of those people who have very tight rules and regulations about dishwasher stacking, are you?'

Aidan laughed. 'No, as long as it gets clean, what does it matter? Do you?'

'Nope,' Bella said as she began to put the plates in, 'my ex did though. Sometimes I used to stack it in the most unhinged way imaginable just to wind him up.'

'Did it work?'

Bella thought about it. 'You know what? I'm not sure. He was a bit of a huffer. Would just huff and puff if he didn't like anything, never really properly complained. Why do people get hung up on stuff like this? It doesn't really matter if the task gets done, does it? What?' She leaned back against the counter.

Amusement was spread across Aidan's face. 'Just you. I mean, how many glasses of mulled wine did you have?' he asked, taking a step closer, a wolfish gleam in his eye.

'Three but I'm almost sober now,' she insisted. 'Why?'

Aidan took another step forwards. The air between them shifted, suddenly charged with expectation. If Bella hadn't been one hundred per cent sober before, she definitely was now.

'Why, Aidan?' she asked, her eyes skimming over his face as he came to a halt before her. Tips of toes touching. Her stomach turned to liquid as he slid his hand up her jaw.

'Because I really want to do this.' His lips brushed against hers. The gentle touch igniting all her nerves. 'But not if you're drunk.'

Bella kissed the words off his lips. The taste of him was more potent than the mulled wine. 'Not drunk,' she managed as their bodies pressed together, the kiss deepening. Kissing Aidan was everything Bella had remembered, wanted and more. Bella added Aidan's knee-weakening kisses to her pros of moving to Polcarrow list.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-One

Bella buzzed as she wandered around the little gallery situated in the outbuildings behind Lola's café. Her lips still tingled from Aidan's kisses the night before. Steve had raised a knowing eyebrow when they'd emerged from the kitchen, all flustered and eyes sparkling. Aidan had walked her home but Mimi's impatience to be out of the cold curtailed anything more than a cursory kiss goodnight. Bella had briefly thought about inviting him in but a bigger part of her wanted to take things slowly, enjoy peeling back every layer, one by one.

Aidan had said he'd meet her at the gallery at midday, so Bella had spent the morning trying to write, before giving up and taking Mimi out for a walk, ending with a takeaway mocha and a mooch around the art space. On her way out of Lola's, Effie had caught her.

'Bella! Have you got a couple of minutes? I wanted to ask you about the author talk. I have a date in mind and hope it suits you.'

'You better say yes,' Jake interjected, 'she's already planned it. Flyers and all!'

Bella laughed. Buoyed up on coffee and the memory of Aidan's kisses, she replied, 'Sure, when?' She felt like she was trying to convince herself.

'I was thinking this Saturday.'

'Saturday?' Bella gulped. Effie looked so hopeful that she found herself agreeing. 'Sure, Saturday it is!'

Effie clapped her hands together in delight. 'It'll be fantastic, honestly. I'll let you get going.'

Bella watched as Jake linked his arm through Effie's and they made their way into the bookshop. Effie's enthusiasm was enough to plaster over all of Bella's nerves at putting herself back out there. Before she could

panic, she steered Mimi around the back of the café and through the whitewashed courtyard to the gallery. Freya greeted them as they entered and encouraged them to take their time and ask any questions.

It had been a long time since Bella had indulged in anything artistic other than trying to bash out her next book, so it was refreshing to see what other people were creating. She stopped in front of one of Freya's dreamy seascapes. The blues tinged with a vibrant pink sunrise, the colours running together as if the waves themselves had merged the lines. It was stunning.

Bella peeled her eyes away from the composition to look at the price tag. Not unreasonable but she could hardly justify the expense. Not that investing in art ever needed justification but a low-level melancholy settled in as Bella realised she had nowhere to hang the painting. Polcarrow was still only temporary, despite Aidan working his charms and her daydreams. So was Nicki's loft conversion. Bella hadn't realised how much she enjoyed having her own space back until she came to Cornwall.

Could this painting be the foundation stone of her new beginning? Buy a painting, find somewhere to hang it. She still needed to sort out the financial side of the house she'd owned with Max. She'd been too distraught at the beginning to do anything about it, then she'd fallen into survival mode and it had been a struggle to just get through the days. Now, standing in a gallery in Polcarrow, contemplating buying a painting, Bella realised she was healed, ready to commit to that new beginning. She'd give Max until after Christmas. Then she'd contact him about her share of the house. It was time she reclaimed her future.

Bella wandered around, looking at the rest of the work. Providing a nice contrast to Freya's candyfloss shades were a set of Jake's photos in stark black and white. Cornwall stripped back to monochrome.

'They're great, aren't they?'

Bella turned to see Freya standing at her elbow, wrapped in a long jumper and brightly coloured scarf, her dark hair piled on top of her head. She looked effortlessly bohemian.

'The photos? Yes. Especially next to your paintings. I love that one, honestly, it's so beautiful, I just wish I had somewhere to hang it.' Bella indicated the painting she'd been admiring.

'It's one of my favourites. No two sunrises are the same, so they stay unique. I'm looking forward to a proper winter sunrise, all reds and purples.'

Also, I don't have to get up as early to see them!'

'Do you paint in real time?'

Freya nodded. 'I try to. I did when I came here. But sunrises are so fleeting I do end up taking photos. Hey, I hope you don't mind me saying, but I heard you had a bit of writer's block. I can completely relate. I failed an art master's degree before I came here. Never thought I'd paint again, and well, look at this.' A satisfied smile spread across her face as she signalled around the room. 'It might be small but it's perfect for me.'

'You've done really well. I know how hard it is for anyone in the creative industries. Polcarrow is being good for me too. Everyone keeps telling me about its magic.'

Freya laughed. 'I'm not sure how much I believe that, but maybe there's something to it. You should come up to Bayview House one day. It's the art deco one at the top of the hill. Angelo bought it and we're doing it up. Well, he's doing the heavy lifting, I'm choosing paint samples. It works.' She gave a little shrug. 'So, I know a bit about what it's like to move here. How is it going?'

'Well, I'm only here until Christmas . . .'

'But you'd like it to be for longer?' Freya asked.

'I'm starting to think so.'

Freya smiled. 'This place sort of steals your heart. It's not just the place though, is it? Oh no, you don't have to answer if you don't want to, but I think we've all noticed you've become very friendly with Aidan. He seems like a good guy.'

'He is.' Bella beamed. 'You know, it's weird, but we met before.' She went on to explain the festival and phone number mix-up.

'Oh my gosh,' Freya gasped, 'Lola was right! A ghost from your past! She's not going to believe this!' Seeing Bella's face blanch, Freya rushed to reassure her. 'Don't worry, I won't say anything. She loves to be right, mostly because she's never wrong. I hope it goes well with Aidan. You look perfect together.'

As if on cue, the gallery door opened and Aidan stepped in looking absolutely devastating. He spotted the takeaway cup in Bella's hand and held up his two coffees.

'I see you already have one!' He made his way over. There was an awkward moment when neither quite knew how to greet the other. Freya

didn't bat an eyelid when Aidan leaned in and kissed Bella, softly on the lips, a greeting, a prelude to more.

'It's OK, I'm a writer, I can never be too caffeinated.' Bella grinned. 'I've finished this one anyway.'

'In that case, great timing.' He passed the coffee over to Bella. 'Freya, good morning, did you want anything? Sorry, I was a bit distracted.'

'Hmm, I can tell!' She laughed. 'No, I'm good, Angelo's coming down in a bit. I'll leave you guys to it, let me know if you need any help.'

'Will do,' Bella said.

'Which one's your favourite?' Aidan asked. 'The exhibits change regularly so I don't think I've seen the same thing twice.'

Taking his hand, Bella pulled him over to Freya's painting. 'This one. Look at it, I love it. I want to tuck it under my arm and walk away with it. But I have nowhere to hang it and feel like I can't justify the price. But look at it, it's perfect, like a dream.' She sighed.

'It is beautiful,' Aidan agreed.

Bella turned to find Aidan studying her rather than the painting. 'Maybe you should ask Father Christmas?'

Laughter exploded out of Bella. 'Maybe.' Instead, she'd consult her bank account or come back and ask Freya if she could leave a deposit.

They meandered around the gallery hand in hand, commenting on the work, slipping smiles to each other, enjoying the easy way they'd become a couple. Bella allowed her imagination a brief dalliance of hanging Freya's painting in a home she shared with Aidan, where they'd look at it every day and remember the beginning of their second chance.

Aidan had moved over to Jake's photos. 'He's good. I'm going to ask him to take some photos to promote the pub. I'm trying to convince Dad to give it a makeover.'

'What? You can't get rid of all that rustic charm!'

'Rustic charm? Stuck in the nineteen eighties more like it.'

'What if you clean Jago's ghost out?'

Aidan raised an eyebrow. 'Let's not have this conversation. I don't think you can paint over a ghost.'

'Maybe he'll be annoyed and disrupt everything,' Bella pointed out, wanting to defend Jago, despite knowing Aidan didn't believe in him.

‘If he’s been stuck there for, what, two hundred years then I’m sure he’ll appreciate a change of decor.’ Aidan steered her around the room. ‘I don’t want to argue with you about a ghost. I want to enjoy our Sunday together.’

‘Oh, we’re spending Sunday together, are we?’

Panic briefly washed over Aidan’s face. ‘Oh God, you are free, aren’t you? I just assumed.’

Enjoying watching him squirm, Bella turned to Mimi. ‘Are we free, darling? Do you want to spend the day with Aidan? Actually, don’t answer that, we already know you’d say yes.’

‘Are you saying yes, Bella?’

Bella waited a split second before replying, ‘Of course I am. What are we doing?’

‘Driving out along the coast a bit. Have a walk and there’s a pub I’ve heard does a cracking roast. Apparently, the Yorkshire puddings are as big as dinner plates.’

‘Stop it! You had me at roast, but those Yorkies . . . when do we leave?’ Bella played at tugging at his arm.

A smile spread like sunlight across Aidan’s face. ‘We can go now, if that’s OK?’

Bella swigged her second coffee. ‘Fine by me. Lead on!’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Aidan drove them out of Polcarrow along the coast, stopping in another village almost identical in its quaintness. Aidan managed to tempt Mimi onto the beach but she remained unimpressed by the whole experience. In the end they took it in turns carrying her as they strolled along the shoreline, the sea a constant soothing rhythm. Bella found it almost impossible to believe that the hustle and bustle of city life was happening just up the motorway.

The pub Aidan had booked them into was nestled along a bend in the harbour as if in the crook of the arm. He pushed open the door and the cosy ambiance of the pub instantly enveloped them. Bella glanced around. It was decorated in a simple, stripped-back modern but rustic style. Once they'd been shown to their table, thankfully near the roaring fire, and Mimi had been settled with water and complimentary dog biscuits, Bella turned to Aidan.

'Is this the vibe you're after?'

He nodded. 'Yes. A bit modern but without losing the charm. The Shipwreck is in prime position, and with the bookshop and Lola's I really believe it's time we upped our game. I'm happy to get stuck in myself, it's just about getting Dad on side.'

The waiter brought their drinks over and took their food orders. Bella sat back in her chair, enjoying the lazy Sunday afternoon vibes.

'What is holding him back?'

'I don't know. I think the pub has been like that for as long as he's owned it. I know he's worried what the villagers might think. They have opinions on everything. Yeah, I know, you've seen it, they like to have a

say. All I want to do is freshen it up, see if I can set up a business that'll help Dad too.'

'You need that fish pie to go viral.'

Aidan laughed. 'We need to get the influencers through the door first. I think that's what puts Dad off, puts most of the locals off. They don't want to feel like a Cornish theme park. Apparently, people were sceptical about Lola's when she opened.'

'Really? But everyone is in there all the time!'

'She won them round.' Aidan took a sip of his drink.

Bella reached out and took his hand. 'I'm sure you will too.'

'Enough about me. Did Effie twist your arm into doing an author talk?'

'I couldn't say no. Effie is so sweet, it'd be like kicking a puppy. Saturday afternoon. It's a bit short notice but she is one hundred per cent sure she'll be able to fill the shop three times over. I didn't know there were that many timeslip romance lovers in the area. Will you come?' Her throat tightened with expectation. Max had never come to her events, well, not after the first one. Claimed he was proud, displayed all her books, never read them, never spoke of them. 'Only if you want to that is. No pressure.'

'Bella, I'd love to, honestly. Let me know the time and I'll squeeze it in even around all the fish-pie making.'

'Oh gosh! Your gourmet night! Honestly, I totally understand if you'll be busy.'

Aidan fixed her with a look that brokered no arguments. 'I'm coming, Bella. I can peel the potatoes the day before.'

'Thanks, you don't know how much that means to me. Max, well, he tried, but he wasn't that supportive.'

'I don't think you've mentioned one redeeming feature about this Max. Why on earth did you end up with him?'

Bella paused and considered this. 'I . . . don't know. He was very charming. Shouldn't trust a charmer. Good looking, successful, all the things some of my friends were searching for on the apps and I just met him in the pub one day. But I don't want to talk about him, and I'm sure you don't really want to hear about him either.'

Aidan gave a little shrug. 'Sort of true. But I am curious.' He propped his chin onto his steepled hands, his gaze intense as he asked, 'So what got you into writing romance?'

‘Honestly? Robin Hood. I was obsessed with the Disney version. That fox.’ Bella fanned herself.

‘First the Muppets, now a cartoon fox, I’m learning some interesting things about you, Bella Fox. Appropriate name.’

Bella laughed. ‘I was six! My sister Nicki had a crush on him too! Anyway, I used to pretend I was Maid Marian. All that yearning and derring-do. Then I discovered King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and I was even more hooked! The chivalry! Who doesn’t like a man in armour?’

‘When I went up to secondary school, I still loved history but not as openly. It wasn’t as cool, but I still wondered what it would be like to have a romance with one of these fictionalised men and the story writing grew from there. I tried time travel to begin with but that was awful, honestly. When I started to really pay attention to my psychic senses, that’s when I discovered timeslip, the best of both worlds. A bit of a modern heroine, a mystery from the past.’

Bella’s flow was interrupted by the waiter bringing over their roast dinners, the aromas causing Mimi to perk up from where she’d been snoozing in front of the fire.

‘Wow!’ Bella picked up the enormous Yorkshire pudding and held it near her head. ‘You weren’t lying. Take a photo.’

Aidan snapped a few before slipping his phone back into his pocket. ‘This is immense.’

‘But it’s been ages since I had a roast. Well, since I was at Nicki’s to be fair,’ she said, spearing a roasted carrot.

Aidan was sifting through the layers of food to find his roast beef. ‘I think we’ll have to roll home,’ he commented. ‘Anyway, you were saying.’

‘Oh yeah, my writing? Dinner is more important but anyway, I just kept writing through university as an escape from an array of drearier and drearier jobs I had until finally, after years of rejection, I got my lucky break. But that’s only the beginning, the first rung of the ladder. Hey, this is good, I’ve not spoken about it for ages, it’s like a warm-up for my talk. You know what, if I tell you it all now then you won’t need to come on Saturday.’

Aidan lifted up a perfectly crispy roast potato. ‘Look at that! True, I guess, but I’m enjoying the exclusive.’

‘Hmm . . . well, maybe I’ve said as much as I want to, I mean, you know the rest. I’ve published books and I’m here trying to enjoy my dinner. Oh OK, Mimi, here you go.’ Bella slipped her a sliver of beef. ‘How did you get into cooking?’

‘Honestly? Mum was a terrible cook to start with. Saw food as fuel rather than something to be enjoyed. Sad, I know. When we did Food Tech at school I realised I enjoyed it, that I had a knack for it. I was the only boy doing it for GCSE.’

‘Really? I bet the girls loved that!’

A smile cracked across his face. ‘And the teacher, Miss McNulty. Actually, I might have liked her a bit. She really encouraged me. Things at home weren’t great, Mum had a string of boyfriends, each more rubbish than the next. My relationship with Dad was fractured. Cooking gave me something to concentrate on, you know? Reading the recipe, following the steps. I found it calming and I ended up with something tasty to eat. Mum was more than happy to hand over the kitchen to me.’

‘So, win-win, I guess?’

‘Win-win indeed. Went on to catering college, just kept cooking. I think Dad’s place is a chance for me to try and set myself up. Take the next step. Something a bit more serious than the burritos. A chance to leave everything bad that happened in the past.’

‘How does he feel about that?’

‘He’s all right with it. We discussed it all before I came down here. I was very honest, laid my plans out, told him my intentions, cooked a few dishes. I think he saw the pound signs.’ Aidan gave a hollow laugh.

‘I’m sure he’s pleased to have you here.’

Aidan shrugged. ‘Maybe, yeah, I think so but there’s so much to go through, to patch up and neither of us really want to face it. He’s very easy-going. Mum has always been prickly, so I’m having to unpick some of the things I was told. Dad isn’t the scoundrel Mum painted him as, they were just ridiculously young and not suited. What’s your relationship with your parents like?’

Bella began to tackle her giant pudding. ‘It’s good. They’re both retired. Dote on my nieces, support me, worry about me. In fact I think everyone has been worried about me this past year!’

‘Is everything feeling a bit better now?’ Aidan asked carefully.

Bella indicated the huge pudding. ‘Yes, with this it is. Seriously though, yes, I actually feel happy for the first time in God knows how long.’ Dropping her voice, she leaned in as if it was a secret she’d discovered, that someone would overhear and take away. ‘Like proper happy, you know?’

Aidan nodded. ‘Me too. Properly happy, Bella. Maybe we both had to come to the end of the earth to find it?’

‘Oi, you, I’m meant to be the romance author! End of the earth, is that what Cornwall is?’

‘Well, it is very far away from everywhere else.’

‘But it’s the perfect place. Aidan, do you think that maybe this—’ she signalled between them ‘—is, like, meant to be?’

Aidan went so still and quiet, Bella inwardly cursed herself for overstepping the mark.

Reaching out, he took her hand. ‘You know what? After all this time, what else can it be?’

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Bella peered out from where she was waiting in the tiny bookshop kitchen. 'Is that everyone? Like, the whole village?'

'Pretty much.' Effie beamed at her. 'This must be my best turnout yet.'

'I wasn't expecting *everyone*,' Bella gulped. Author events were precarious. She'd struggled through talks to audiences of three, one of whom had just been trying to escape the rain, to taking part in panel discussions in auditoria of three hundred. Despite her nerves, the fact that many of the villagers had shown up, were sitting there holding her books, touched Bella.

'Are you ready?' asked Effie, keen to get started.

Bella checked her appearance in her pocket mirror, applied another layer of berry-red lipstick and exhaled. 'As ready as I'll ever be.'

'Great. I'll go out and introduce you. You'll be amazing. I'm really looking forward to hearing you speak too.' Effie gave her one final smile before bounding out of the kitchen. Bella listened as she warmed up the crowd.

'Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for taking time away from your Christmas shopping to come to our exclusive Bella Fox event. I'm thrilled that Bella has agreed to talk to us during her stay in Polcarrow. So, without further ado, let me introduce you to Bella Fox!'

A round of applause went up. Bella momentarily froze. No matter how many times she'd done author events, a last-minute bout of imposter syndrome always engulfed her. Pushing the grey fug of it away, Bella composed her face into what she hoped was a relaxed, welcoming smile and not a terrified grimace, and stepped out of the kitchen.

More applause. Bella scanned the audience. Alf was sitting at the front, Jake next to him, Sue on the other side. From her perch behind the counter, Effie gave Bella an enthusiastic double thumbs up. Bella mentally ticked off the villagers who were there, noted some unfamiliar faces as her eyes searched for the one person who would calm and centre her. Where was he?

Just as her heart began to sink, Aidan pushed open the door, threw an apologetic glance her way and slipped into a vacant chair at the back. 'Sorry, had a potato emergency.' His eyes met Bella's, instantly grounding her.

Everyone laughed. Bella's nerves settled as she took her place in one of the yellow armchairs. 'Oof, these are comfortable,' she said, sinking back into the cushions and stretching her legs out, 'anyway, I'm sure you all know that because I bet you've all had a sit in them. Good afternoon, thank you so much for coming. It's such an honour to be doing a talk in such a beautiful shop. This must be the most perfect bookshop, well, anywhere. Sea view, next to a bakery, it's like something out of a romance novel. Probably not one of mine, they tend to be a bit darker. Anyway, I'm Bella Fox, most of you probably know that, and I write timeslip romance.

'I can see that a lot of you have my books – that's amazing – so if you've read them, you'll understand what I write. For anyone who hasn't, timeslip are romance stories where the past and present collide, usually with a mystery that needs to be solved. It was my own love and fascination with the past that got me into this genre. Imagining myself transported back to eighteenth century Venice or bloodthirsty medieval England. I love the romance of knights in shining armour, young women who crave more than society wants to give them, but at the same time, modern life is just so much easier to write about. I couldn't decide whether to be modern or historical, so I chose a mix of both!'

Bella checked the audience's reaction. Everyone was listening. She had a tendency to waffle, and as usual, her prompt cards lay discarded in her lap. Aidan watched her with a mixture of pride and fascination, which melted her heart as much as her heroes did her heroines'. Relaxed, and in the flow of her talk, Bella warmed up as she began to explain where her love of stories came from.

'Escapism, mainly, you know, daydreaming is far more exciting than studying physics. I started writing as a teenager and never stopped. It was a

way of living all sorts of different lives. Also, I discovered I was good at it. Always made time for it alongside all my other work. I'd still be writing even if I wasn't published because I enjoy it so much, but that said, I'm not sure what other job I'd be doing!' Bella laughed.

'What did you do?' Sue asked.

'Office stuff mostly. Some café and bar work. I make ends meet now with a bit of proofreading and copy-editing. Sadly, writing alone doesn't pay all the bills and I'm still dreaming of that film production.' This led into a heated discussion about which actors would play which of her characters until Effie had to referee the discussion.

'What do you do for research?' Jake asked, steering the conversation onto safer ground.

'Travel, mostly. Read history books. I like to immerse myself in the setting I'm writing about. I usually go alone so I can hear myself think. I spent a wonderful week in Venice when I was researching *Venetian Blue*, hanging out in bars, chatting to gondoliers, watching glass making. That was probably my favourite trip, other than coming here of course!'

'So, you are writing about Cornwall then?' Sue asked.

Bella paused before going for the big reveal. 'Yes, I am. I'm not going to lie, when I came here, I was struggling with a really bad case of writer's block. I didn't know if I'd ever write again, but coming here, breathing in the sea air, meeting you all, well, it switched something back on inside my brain. The story I'd been struggling to write suddenly became a little more real. I think it's that research bit, you know, being able to touch, smell and taste the place. Everyone knows Cornwall is beautiful, picturesque, but coming here showed me the other sides of it. The rugged side, the battered by the waves side. Seeing that is what helped the book take shape.' Bella paused, her eyes skimming over the rapt audience. 'And meeting all of you, of course.'

'What is your favourite book? Which one means the most to you?' was Aidan's question. 'And why?'

'My books? Or other authors?'

'Both.'

'Ooh, that's a tough one.' Bella thought about the answer. 'I feel like this one, if I get it right will have huge significance to me, but *Venetian Blue* will always be my favourite. It's the one I wrote over and over, worked on,

poured my soul into, the one I crafted without deadlines, the characters who lived with me for years. Some of the magic goes a little with the deadlines, but I also think the more I write, the more I learn, the more my imagination sort of trains itself to think quicker. As for my favourite author and books, well . . .’ Bella trailed off. ‘My mind always goes blank at this point, like I’ve forgotten what a book is!

‘What do you all like?’ She turned the question back on the audience, who all very keenly called out their favourite books and authors, causing Effie to step in once again when the discussion between Sue and another villager started to get heated.

‘Wow, thanks for that, lots more to add to my to-be-read pile,’ Effie calmed the situation before turning back to Bella. ‘If you could be any of your main characters, who would you choose?’

‘Definitely Mia, I mean, getting to live in Venice and acquiring a prized antique glass necklace, who wouldn’t want that? Carlos is my favourite hero so far, too. He really gets Mia, he’s there for her and doesn’t criticise her judgements, and if you’ve read the book, we all know they can be pretty off at times!’

Pleased with the response, Effie nodded in agreement and Bella knew she couldn’t wait to discuss all her books in finer detail. Bella answered a few more questions about her writing process and speculated on what she’d be doing if she wasn’t a writer before settling back into the chair to do a reading, transporting the audience from winter in Polcarrow to a blistering Venetian summer. Bella loved the story-telling element of doing an author talk, the way the audience listened, all tuned in like at a school story time.

A round of applause went up as Bella finished her extract, leaving it on a cliffhanger, hoping anyone who didn’t already own the book would snap it up from the stacks Effie had procured in a bid to find out what happened next.

‘Any more questions? Anything anyone wants to add?’ When everyone shook their heads, Bella turned to Effie, who had come out from behind the counter.

‘Thank you, Bella, that was fascinating. I love hearing about where the stories I love come from. Jake, you have to take me to Venice now!’ Effie paused whilst everyone laughed. ‘Right, OK, so Bella will be here for a bit,

signing books, which will be perfect Christmas presents. Feel free to browse and mingle.'

Bella stood up and made her way to the counter, where Effie had set up a signing station. This was always her favourite part of an author event, meeting the readers afterwards, signing their books, chatting to them on a more personal level.

Alf shuffled over and slid a brand-new copy of *Venetian Blue* in front of her. 'Sorry, I didn't read it beforehand.'

'Oh, Alf, that doesn't matter,' Bella said as she signed the book.

'I enjoyed the talk. First a café, then a bookshop and a gallery and now we have an author. Polcarrow has definitely changed in all the years I've been here. For the better though, love.' Alf's eye twinkled as he paid for his book and made way for the line of customers behind him.

Bella signed books for almost everyone who had come to the talk as Effie happily rang them through the till. Outside, the light started to fade and most of the attendees began to depart. Only Aidan patiently lingered, eyes skimming the titles on the shelves. Bella extracted herself from behind the till and went over to him.

'Hey, you were amazing.' Holding his arms out, he enveloped her into a hug, pulling her close. 'I'm so proud of you. I didn't doubt you'd be great. Well done.' He dropped a kiss onto her head before pulling back to take her in.

'Thank you,' Bella said, touched to see the pride shining in his eyes.

'The book blew me away.'

'You read it?'

'Of course I did! Why do you sound so surprised?'

Because Max had never read her books, but this wasn't the place to say. 'I just, well, you've had so much on.'

Aidan took her hand. 'Confession, I've been listening to the audio version whilst I go for my runs, or peel potatoes, but I'd be honoured if you would sign this.' He pulled a copy of the book from his pocket.

Bella took it from him. Uncapping her pen, she paused. Anything she'd write felt either too trite or too over-emotional. How could she write a whole novel but get stumped when she had to write a dedication to the man she loved?

Loved. Bella snuck a glance at him. The feeling was intense, immense, unmistakable. Had she always loved him? Loved the memory, the image, the idea maybe. However, here was the real Aidan, his eyes bright, reflecting back all the big emotions that were still tucked away like treasure in a cave, waiting for the tide to rise between them, bringing them to the surface.

Bella scrawled something appropriate, but as she passed the book back to Aidan and watched him read it, she knew it was inadequate. So many words, so few she could say.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-Four

‘You really don’t need to help me,’ Aidan reassured Bella as they walked back to her cottage following the author event, ‘I have it all under control.’

Bella gave him a look that indicated how she felt about his assessment. ‘Aidan, you have a fully booked restaurant and just you to serve everyone.’

‘Sue’s daughter and her friend are waitressing,’ he told her.

‘Waitressing, yes, but you need to serve everyone almost at the same time. You’ve got impressive cooking skills, so I don’t doubt you can do that, but it’s a lot, Aidan.’

They paused outside Bella’s cottage. Sensing their arrival, Mimi began to bark and scratch at the other side of the door. Aidan held Bella’s gaze in a stalemate before giving in.

‘I guess you’re right, an extra pair of hands would be helpful,’ he conceded. ‘Thank you.’ He sealed the deal with a quick kiss.

Bella’s momentary melt against him was curtailed by another impatient bark from Mimi. ‘Let me just check on her, get her settled and I’ll follow you.’

Aidan checked his watch. ‘It’s fine. Anyway, you’re not going to stop me seeing my favourite girl, are you?’

‘Oi.’ Bella playfully swatted him. ‘Don’t let her hear you say that.’ She unlocked the door and pushed it open. Mimi didn’t know what to do with herself at finding both Bella and Aidan on the other side. She leaped around in happy circles, yapping and pawing at Aidan, who bent down to receive her slobbery attentions.

With a smile on her face, Bella watched them, imagining that this could be their everyday life. Coming home together, Mimi’s adorable excitement, the cosy companionship of brewing the tea or opening a bottle of wine,

deciding what to have for dinner, arguing about who would cook. Bella hadn't realised how much she'd missed that part of being in a relationship. The past year she had been focused on healing, putting herself back together, packing up the past and not looking to the future.

'I can't come in this.' Bella signalled to her burgundy dress. 'What should I wear?'

'Something loose that's easy to move in. I'll find you some chef's gear.'

'Ooh, do I get one of those hats, you know, the mushroomy ones.' She mimed the shape above her head.

Aidan laughed. 'Sadly, no.'

'Humph, that's the only reason I'm volunteering.' Bella pouted before heading upstairs to change into some comfy leggings and a top before brushing her long hair back into a ponytail and removing her jewellery. She was back downstairs in a matter of minutes.

'Ready,' she announced. 'I'll just settle Mimi. Hey, baby, I've got to go and help Aidan, sorry, it's not somewhere you can come. I know, honey, I know, but I've got some extra-special treats for you, yes I have, come on.' Bella made her way into the kitchen and filled up Mimi's food and water bowls. 'You be a good girl and I'll see you soon.'

Mimi turned her attention to the food and whilst she was snaffling, Bella threw on her coat, grabbed her bag and bundled Aidan out of the door.

'I love how you talk to her,' Aidan said as he linked his fingers through Bella's, 'like she's a tiny human.'

Bella laughed. 'Some days I wonder what it would be like if she could talk back.'

'I've not known Mimi long but I imagine she'd have strong opinions.'

'Definitely,' Bella agreed as they made their way towards the pub. 'Woah, what are they?' She stopped in her tracks. On either side of the pub doorway bobbed an inflatable snowman and Santa. It was a distinct departure from the carefully curated windows the villagers had been creating and enjoying so far.

'Don't.' Aidan rubbed his forehead. 'Dad's idea for the festive window. You can always count on him to lower the tone. It's fun but not quite the vibe I wanted for tonight. I couldn't come up with anything better, and it is his pub, I suppose. They did render Sue speechless though.'

‘Well, that’s something I wouldn’t think possible.’ Bella watched the figures swaying in the breeze. ‘I don’t know, I kind of like them, like two bouncers jostling.’

Aidan laughed. ‘Let’s hope they keep the riff-raff out and don’t get blown away by a strong gust.’ He pushed open the pub door and led Bella inside.

Christmas music was playing and tinsel had been hung from the beams. The homely feeling was like being wrapped in a hug. Some of the tables were occupied, the fire crackled in the hearth. Bella couldn’t help but wonder if Aidan’s plans to modernise might destroy the welcoming feeling the pub exuded.

Steve greeted them from behind the bar. ‘Evening, Bella, what can I get you? A mulled wine?’

‘Maybe later, Dad, she’s here to help me, not get drunk,’ Aidan said.

‘Oh, are you? I told him he was taking on too much,’ Steve confided, ‘we’re fully booked. Got some critics in or something.’

Bella turned to Aidan. ‘You didn’t tell me that, now I’m nervous!’

‘Not as nervous as me,’ Aidan confessed. ‘We’re just going to pretend it’s a normal service. Anyway, they’re from local papers or food bloggers, nothing super fancy.’

Bella and Steve exchanged a look. They both knew how important it was to Aidan that the night ran smoothly. It wasn’t just the future of the pub that rested on it, but Aidan’s reputation.

‘Right, I’ll let you get on,’ Steve said. ‘I’ll keep some mulled wine back for you, Bella.’

‘I’ll look forward to it, I think,’ she said as she followed Aidan towards the kitchen. The interior gleamed, cleaned down after the prep work had taken place. ‘What do you want me to do?’

‘You need to get changed first,’ Aidan said, leading her into a small room off the kitchen and rifling through some boxes. He pulled out some chef’s whites and handed them to her. ‘You go first.’

Bella washed her hands before slipping into the small cubicle and pulling the uniform on. Laughing, she emerged, holding out her hands which were covered by the long sleeves of the jacket. ‘I think it might be a bit big!’

‘Come here.’ Aidan stepped over to her and slowly began to fold the sleeves back, rolling them up above her wrists. First her right hand, then the left. When he’d finished the moment hung between them. Aidan broke it with a gentle kiss, distracting them both from the task at hand.

‘Right, we need to concentrate,’ Aidan said, pulling away, ‘focus. Sorry, Bella, you’re a very nice distraction though.’

‘I can be your reward later,’ she said before cringing. ‘That was far too cheesy.’

Aidan swallowed at the thought of it. ‘More cheesy than a big pile of Stilton but also, I can never resist a cheese board.’

The insinuation hung between them, potent with possibility, full of humour. Aidan smirked.

‘OK, did we just have that conversation?’ Bella winced.

‘Uh-huh, no more cheese puns, on with the cooking.’

‘Yes, chef!’ Bella gave a salute.

Aidan groaned. ‘Don’t. Why on earth did I think this would be a good idea?’ he muttered to himself as he started to get various pans out of the cupboards. His eyes flitted to the clock. ‘Excellent, we have enough time. Bella, can you be on potato piping duty?’

‘Potato piping sounds difficult,’ she admitted.

‘Doesn’t matter, we’re going for rustic. Actually, change of plan, could you put the fish pie filling in the dishes and I’ll do the potatoes?’

‘Sounds like a better plan,’ Bella said. ‘So what’s on the menu?’

‘I’ve kept it simple. The fish pie because it appears to have become my signature dish. Served with a winter salad. I’ve also got a macaroni cheese. Starters are arancini. For dessert I’ve gone for the spiced winter crumble.’

Bella swooned. ‘I’m practically drooling. I hope there’s some left over.’

‘I tend to over cater, but after tonight you might not want to see another fish pie for a long time,’ he warned.

‘Hmm, that’s a risk I’m willing to take. Come on, let’s get going!’

Aidan smacked a kiss on her cheek and almost growled in her ear, ‘Yes. chef.’

## Chapter Twenty-Five

From the moment the first order came in, to when the last dish was sent out, service was frenzied. Bella lost count of how many fish pies she helped plate up, or how many scraped-clean plates she loaded into the dishwasher. However, through the frenzy, Aidan remained calm, completely in control of his kitchen domain. If Bella had had any doubt about falling in love with him before now, those doubts were banished. Seeing him ruling over his kingdom with efficiency and control only cracked her heart open more.

‘That’s the last one,’ said Mattie, Sue’s daughter, who was working as waitress for the night, as she placed a stack of bowls on the counter.

‘You’ve been brilliant,’ Aidan said, giving her shoulder a squeeze. ‘I’ll make sure you and Lottie get your fair share of the tips.’

Mattie nodded. Bella thought the teenager looked exhausted. Mattie began to fiddle with the tie on her apron whilst waiting to see if there were any more instructions, her eyes on the dirty crockery.

‘Don’t worry, Bella and I have it under control, you can go. Thank you so much, we couldn’t have done it without you. Tell Lottie she can get going too.’

Mattie smiled shyly. ‘Thank you. See you later.’

They watched her leave and as the kitchen door swung open they briefly heard the happy hubbub of the pub; Christmas music, chatter, laughter, the sound of satisfied customers. The door swung shut, closing Aidan and Bella inside the gleaming cavern of the kitchen.

Bella turned to him. ‘Well, I think that was a success. There’s not a crumb left!’

Aidan crossed over to her and bundled her into a hug, pulling her tight against him. ‘And I couldn’t have done it without you. Honestly, Bella, I

thought I could but I didn't think I'd be this popular.'

Bella pulled back, pushing a stray curl away from his damp forehead. His eyes gleamed with exhilaration. 'You were fantastic, Aidan. Watching you work, it was, well, it was hot,' she admitted with a laugh.

Aidan threw his head back in amusement. 'It was definitely hot, but probably not in the way you're implying!' He kissed her quickly before stepping back, pulling his jacket away from him and giving it a bit of a waft. 'Right, we need to clean up here. I can do it if you want to get home to Mimi.'

'She'll be fine, she'll just be sleeping. I can't leave you now, not for the worst bit.' She indicated the bowls and plates. 'If I get started on these, then you can clean the kitchen? Then we'll be done in less time.'

Aidan dropped a kiss on her forehead. 'Only if you're sure.'

'One hundred per cent.' She kissed him back.

They set about it in companionable silence, the tiredness creeping in now the adrenaline of service was over. Bella moved the plates and bowls over to the large sink and set about giving them a rinse before loading them into the dishwasher, packing it as carefully as possible to maximise the space. It made her briefly think of Max and his particularities about household chores. She wiped the thought away like a smear of sauce and turned the dishwasher on.

Stretching out her tired arms and sore back, Bella watched Aidan as he took his time cleaning down the surfaces, wiping and polishing them with reverence. It was obvious how much he cared about this little pub at the end of the world, with its tired decor and creaky floors, how much he wanted to make it a success. Bella hoped his passion and the clean plates would be reflected in the reviews.

Aidan glanced up, catching her watching him. He straightened up. 'You've done more than enough. Get changed and have a well-earned glass of wine. I'll be out in a bit.'

'Only if you're sure.'

Aidan nodded. 'I am. Go and enjoy yourself, you've earned it.'

Bella ducked into the little changing room and stripped off her kitchen clothes, before pulling on her own, transforming herself back into her usual self. Not sure what to do with the soiled whites, she folded them and left them in a little pile on the bench before heading back into the kitchen.

Aidan was cleaning down the stove. Bella noticed he hardly had a splash of food on him.

‘Right, I’m ready, see you in a bit.’ Bella made her way into the pub. A few of the customers had gone and there was that winding down of the night feeling.

‘Think that went well.’ Steve beamed as Bella hopped onto a bar stool in front of him. ‘There were a lot of compliments to the chef and I saw a lot of empty plates. I’m proud of him, you know.’

‘Hmm, he did well. Maybe you should tell him that?’

‘I will,’ Steve said softly. ‘What can I get you?’

‘Glass of red, please.’ Bella watched as he poured a large glass, the ruby liquid glistening in the light. Steve set it before her. Bella raised it to her lips and took a long sip, sighing as the alcohol reached her extremities and began to relax her body. She hadn’t realised how tense she’d been in the kitchen until now.

‘Can I leave this here? Nature calls,’ Bella said as she hopped off the stool. Steve nodded and placed the glass back behind the bar.

She made her way through the bar, past the roaring fire and into the corridor that led to the toilets. Typically, they were freezing after the snugness of the pub.

Bella washed her hands and stepped back into the corridor, leaning back against the wall, suddenly craving a moment of calm, of aloneness. Closing her eyes, she tipped her head back against the wall, allowing her heart rate to settle, the excitement of the evening to dissipate. Her limbs were suddenly overcome with tiredness. Maybe she should just go home, get some sleep. Aidan would understand.

Bella shivered as a draught of cold air hit her. Turning towards the direction it had come from, she noticed that the door at the end of the corridor was ajar. It had never been left open before, so Bella made her way towards it. As she went to pull it shut, the sound of the waves echoed through the gap. Her imagination pinged onto high alert. Glancing around, she checked no one was behind her. Knowing she’d never get a better opportunity to stand where she believed Merrin had in her final moments, Bella ignored the ‘no entry’ sign and pushed the door open, stepping outside onto the rocky outcrop at the side of the pub, which faced away from the village. It was normally off limits.

The moon flickered like a warning through the scudding night-time clouds, illuminating the rocks. To her left was the fenced-off beer garden and beyond that the flickering lights of the village. Bella picked her way unsteadily over the slimy rocks. So, this was what it would have been like for Merrin as she waited for Jago, perched on her rocky outcrop, keeping sentinel through the night. It wasn't, Bella decided, something for the faint hearted. Although she admired the young woman's determination, Bella realised how dangerous it was.

A large wave hit, sending Bella scuttling backwards. As she tried to beat a hasty retreat, she lost her footing, slipping down on the hard surface, her ankle twisting beneath her. Her cry of agony was swept away by the wind.

Swearing under her breath, Bella tried to stand, but her ankle gave way beneath her. 'Oh God, Bells, what have you done? You idiot. Come on.' Turning over onto her hands and knees, she started to crawl towards the door, only for a loud clang to freeze her on the spot.

'What? No!' The door had slammed shut. Bella scrabbled at it but there was no handle, no purchase.

'Shit,' she cursed herself, the reality of what had happened seeping over her. 'How am I going to explain to anyone why I came out here?'

Bella knocked at the door, the metal dense against her frozen knuckles. She banged again and again. 'Ugh. Help! Help!' she called, but her voice was whipped away by the wind. She carried on knocking. 'Surely someone will need the loo,' she muttered to herself, her teeth starting to chatter. 'Aidan can't spend hours cleaning his kitchen, can he? And Steve will send out a search party.'

Patting her pockets revealed that she had left her phone in her coat in the kitchen. Bella swore again and gave the door a huge thump, mustering all her strength trying to break it down.

However, as the minutes rolled past and the rain began to increase, Bella started to panic. Was this what it had been like for Merrin? Trapped? One ill-timed wave? Gosh, this was taking method writing to the limit. At least it would be an interesting story to tell at the launch, she thought. If she wasn't also swept out to sea, that was. Of all the things she'd done in the name of research, or in pursuit of paranormal activity, this had to take the prize for being the stupidest.

As the sea lapped at the rocks, foamy fingers creeping up the crevices as if to grab her, pull her under, Bella realised she needed a practical plan otherwise she'd likely catch her death out in the cold and rain. Well, maybe that was a bit dramatic, but surely not impossible. OK, so maybe a bad chill, which would equally as awful. Glancing around, she focused on the outline of the beer garden fence. Surely, there'd be a way back through there.

Freezing cold, exhausted and terrified, Bella hauled herself up, wincing as she put weight on her bad foot. Swearing under her breath, she hopped and hobbled over to the beer garden fence, gripping onto it for dear life. Of course there wasn't a gate on this side, no one was meant to come out onto the rocks. Well, there was only one thing for it.

Balancing on her good foot, Bella inelegantly scrambled and hoisted herself up over the fence, falling with a thud onto the other side.

'Right, Bells, well done, let's hope there's a door or an unlocked gate.' She scoped the layout as she caught her breath.

Bella pulled herself up, pushing her wet hair off her face, teeth chattering, and limped around the garden until she found the door that connected it to the pub. Sagging against the door, Bella winced as her ankle throbbed. She pushed at the door once, but it didn't budge. She rattled the handle but still nothing. Bella swore under her breath and banged her fist against the door, punctuating the knocks with kicks from her good foot. She wasn't sure her shouts could be heard.

Suddenly the door gave way and she half staggered, half tumbled into an outstretched pair of arms. Warmth and relief flooded through her.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

‘Bella! Bella!’

Strong arms pulled her through the door and the wind died down. She became aware of lying on a cold stone floor, someone shaking her. Bella’s vision swam until Aidan’s concerned face came into focus.

‘Oh God, Bella, what on earth? Are you all right?’ He bundled her to him, crushing her against his chest. Bella clung to him in relief. ‘Can you walk?’

Bella tried to stand but collapsed against Aidan when her ankle gave way. She sucked in a breath. ‘I might need some help.’

Her legs wobbled as Aidan hoisted her up, arm around her waist, holding her against him as they made their way back into the light and warmth of the pub.

‘There you are!’ Steve rushed out from behind the bar. ‘We wondered where you’d got to.’

Bella glanced between them. ‘How long was I gone?’ she asked as Aidan pulled a blanket around her.

‘About twenty minutes,’ Aidan said, casting a glance at his dad.

Bella picked up the blistering tension between them.

Steve looked sheepish as he admitted, ‘I got talking to someone about Jago and didn’t realise the time until Aidan came out. Why were you out there?’

Bella glanced between Aidan and Steve, embarrassment rushing to the surface of her face. ‘I don’t want you to laugh. It’s silly.’

Aidan knelt down before her, rubbing her cold hands between his. ‘No, it’s not.’

Bella studied him as she contemplated what to tell him. Took in the caring expression on his face, the way he looked at her as if she was his whole world. Reaching out, she touched his cheek, watched as he melted against her, as compliant as a cat. She knew whatever she told him next would change the way he saw her. She threw a glance at Steve as he brought over a steaming cup of tea.

‘It was Merrin,’ she explained, her voice small, her body arching backwards as if expecting a reprimanding blow. ‘I went to the loo. When I came out, I saw the door was open and didn’t think it’d do any harm to have a look out, see what she would’ve done when waiting for Jago. I didn’t think it’d slam shut! I’m not that stupid!’

Aidan swallowed back his anger. Bella watched as he composed his thoughts.

‘Well,’ Steve exhaled, ‘that is a tale. You know, I’ve always felt something in that corridor.’

‘Now is not the time.’ Aidan’s voice was firm, final as he stood up and began to pace. ‘All this . . . this . . . silliness about ghosts! Ugh. The pair of you.’

Bella and Steve stared at him as he wrestled with his anger. Sensing Aidan was about to tell her off, she retreated into herself as memories of Max’s scorn at her paranormal fascination began to surface. Bella clamped her hands together, braced for impact.

‘We need a handle on that door. Outside. We can’t have this happen again.’

‘The door is always bolted,’ Steve pointed out. ‘We never open it.’

‘Then . . . how?’ Aidan threw his arms up, his eyes flaring, leaping like flames between Steve and Bella. ‘No. Neither of you answer that! I don’t believe in ghosts.’ His anger propelled him away from them. ‘It was not a ghost!’ he hurled at them.

Bella glanced to Steve, who smiled kindly back at her. ‘He’s just upset, you mean a lot to him,’ he said quietly. ‘OK, so maybe I went out for a cheeky smoke, I sometimes like to do what you did, stand out there, where the smugglers landed.’

Bella nodded and not knowing what to say, or do, sipped her drink, the warmth from the mug bringing her fingertips back to life, the liquid defrosting her bones. Aidan came back over, his anger dissipated.

The tension dropped from his shoulders as he put his emotions away. 'You're soaking wet, Bella, you'd better come upstairs and change into something dry.'

Bella put her mug down. 'I need to go home to Mimi.' Standing up, the blanket fell from her shoulders and instantly the chill set in again. She winced as she tried to put weight on her ankle.

'I'll walk you back.' Aidan stormed off, heading into the kitchen, returning with both their coats. He helped Bella into hers before wrapping the blanket back around her shoulders. 'Are you sure you're OK to go home?'

Bella rolled her eyes. 'It's the twenty-first century, not the eighteenth, I'm not likely to take myself to bed and die of consumption.'

'I'm not taking that chance,' Aidan said, pulling Bella to him. 'See you later, Dad.'

Bella allowed Aidan to guide her out through the empty pub, back into the cold night. Clinging onto each other, they made hobbling progress along the seafront. The wind battered them as Aidan hurried them along the harbour, keeping Bella tucked against him like something precious. She could sense his annoyance wrestling with his concern. The moon cut a swathe through the sea, a beacon guiding them home. Polcarrow was silent around them, tucked up in winter slumber, the residents cosy, waiting for morning.

Mimi sensed their return. There was the usual scrabbling at the door, her barks shrill through the night as if to wake the entire village. Bella fumbled with her keys until Aidan took them off her, slipping the right one into the lock. Mimi bounded over to them, tail wagging, leaping at their legs. Bella tried to bend down but it was too painful to put all her weight on her ankle. Sinking onto the stairs, Aidan picked Mimi up and placed her onto Bella's lap. The gesture seemed to indicate a truce that Bella was grateful to grasp.

Suddenly, the ordeal rushed back to her in a swirl of emotion and Bella gulped down a sob. Sitting down next to her, Aidan pulled them both into an embrace, his hand stroking her back, her hair, whispering soothing words, calming her down, bringing her back to the present.

Eventually, Bella's heart rate slowed, Mimi wriggled out of her arms and padded back to her little bed where she snuggled down and promptly

went to sleep. Wiping the tears from her face, Bella watched her until her gaze was dragged to Aidan.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘You don’t have to stay.’

Aidan was silent for a long time, the shadows shifting across his face, obscuring his feelings as he figured them out. ‘Bella, I’m so sorry.’ He took her hands in his and pushed his lips together, glancing down at their entwined fingers.

Bella’s heart lurched. She steeled herself. Knowing how he felt about the ghosts, she wouldn’t blame him if he backed off. ‘It’s OK—’ she began only to be cut off.

‘No, it’s not. I shouldn’t have shouted at you, but I was terrified. Angry too, but not just at you, how could Dad not have noticed you’d been gone for that long? And leaving the door open! What if it’d been a child? And the pub wasn’t busy. I shouldn’t have shouted. I know accidents happen, but the ghosts, but . . .’ He choked back the words as his mind spiralled to the worst-case scenario.

His arms came around her, pulling her close as if to mould her into him. Bella clung onto him.

‘My mind went into overdrive. You could’ve been swept out to sea. We’d never have found you.’ He swallowed back his emotions.

Bella pressed her lips together to keep in the torrent she was feeling inside. ‘It’s OK,’ she said, ‘none of that happened. I’m here and so are you. I promise I won’t do anything that stupid ever again. OK? It scared me too.’

‘OK.’ Aidan kissed her forehead before tucking her in against him. ‘You’re still shaking, Bella, we better get you warmed up. What about a bath?’

Although it was inching close to midnight and exhaustion rippled through her body, Bella nodded. ‘That sounds perfect.’

Aidan removed his coat and shoes. ‘Upstairs?’

‘Yes, at the front.’

‘I’ll run it whilst you take off those wet things and put your dressing gown on or something. I don’t want you catching any more of a chill.’

Aidan went upstairs. Bella listened as he turned the taps on. Carefully, she unwound the blanket, draping it over the radiator before removing her coat and hanging it on a peg. Her damp clothes clung to her. Upstairs, she removed them, her skin pale and clammy in the moonlight. Wrapping her

fluffy dressing gown around her, she padded into the bathroom. Leaning against the door frame she watched as Aidan swirled vanilla-scented bubble bath into the running water. The warmth wafted from the tub towards her. She ached to get in, to sink under the water.

‘All done,’ Aidan said, standing up and admiring his work. ‘I’ll wait downstairs.’

Bella placed a hand on his arm. ‘No, get a chair and sit outside the door, talk to me. Tell me anything. I don’t want to lie there thinking of Merrin, or how close I came to slipping over those rocks.’

Aidan hesitated as if contemplating protesting, but something softened in him. ‘OK, you get in, pull the door to, and I’ll be outside whenever you’re ready.’

Bella kissed him. ‘Will you stay the night?’

Aidan paused. ‘If that’s what you want.’

Bella nodded. She wanted that tonight and every night after.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Pale tendrils of dawn coaxed Bella from her slumber the following morning. The new day breaking pale pink on the horizon roused her as gently as a kiss. As she gained consciousness, Bella became aware of the weight and warmth of Aidan snuggled up behind her. A contented smile spread across her lips as she burrowed under the duvet, all toasty.

Aidan had sat outside the bathroom as she soaked in the warm water answering her questions about his cooking, talking her through his favourite dishes to cook, the best meals he'd eaten. Bella had been relieved that he'd agreed to stay the night. She'd been more rattled by the experience than she wanted to admit, even to herself.

The heady combination of the bath, the comedown from helping in the kitchen, all mixed up with the adrenaline of her near-death experience, although she was aware that was a very dramatic way of putting it, had sent her into a deep sleep. Thankfully, a dreamless one. However, now she was awake, her mind began to whirr. Imagining Merrin perched out in the dark waiting for Jago, feeling the ferocity of the stormy sea for herself.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a trail of kisses along her jaw. Bella opened her eyes to see Aidan, all tousle-haired, his eyes smudged with sleep. She kissed him back, almost clinging on to him for dear life. It was only the combined sound of Mimi barking and Bella's stomach rumbling that pushed them apart.

'Breakfast?' Aidan asked.

'I never say no to breakfast.' Bella smiled sleepily, pushing back the duvet.

Aidan draped it back across her. 'No, you stay there. I'll let Mimi out and bring it up.'

‘I need to go to the shops,’ she excused.

Aidan kissed her. ‘I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to rustle something up.’

Bella lifted her eyebrows. ‘Well, I’ll hold you to that.’

She watched as he threw back his side of the covers, pulled on his clothes from the previous day and made his way downstairs. Bella limped into the bathroom to freshen herself up. Her ankle was tender but not as painful as the previous night. As she headed back to bed, she heard Aidan talking to Mimi, smelled the comforting scent of toast being made. Her stomach rumbled again. They hadn’t had a chance to eat anything the previous night.

Bella looked out of the window. Outside, the morning was muted as if struggling to rise, to pull itself towards the ending of the year. The pink petals of dawn had vanished leaving the sea dark and slick. Hearing footsteps on the stairs, she tucked herself back up in bed.

Aidan emerged from the hallway balancing a tray on one hand, Mimi prancing at his heels. Bella swooned back against the pillows as the aroma of coffee hit her nostrils. Mimi leaped onto the bed, did her usual circling to find the best spot, before curling herself up like a croissant and going back to sleep.

‘You were right,’ Aidan said as he set the tray down on the bed, ‘you do need to go food shopping.’

Despite this, he’d managed to whip up a feast of porridge studded with glistening berries, sprinkled with seeds and drizzled with honey. There was a plate of buttered toast, which Bella reached for, almost cramming the slice into her mouth whole in her need for sustenance. Aidan watched her with awe.

‘I’ve never seen anyone devour toast like that in my life.’

Bella shrugged. ‘You’ve never rescued someone from a ghost before, either, so I think it’s fair to say I’m bringing all new experiences to your door.’

Laughing, Aidan poured coffee from the cafetière and passed the cup to her. Bella added sugar and milk and took a long drink before setting it down on her bedside table ready to attack the porridge.

‘How do you make it so creamy?’ She sighed.

‘Cook it slowly on the hob, not the microwave. Don’t tell me you use the microwave?’

‘Guilty,’ Bella mumbled around another delicious mouthful. ‘I will never use the microwave again. Or, you can just come round every morning and make this for me.’

Aidan smiled around his own spoonful. ‘You know how I feel about you staying here in Cornwall so I can make breakfast every day.’

It was as if someone had blotted out the sun on their breakfast picnic. Bella swallowed. ‘I’d love to stay in Polcarrow, you know I would, but it’s not that easy. Although, I mean, I guess I have nothing to go back to. Leave it with me.’ She sealed her suggestion with a kiss.

As much as she had been dreaming of relocating to Polcarrow, Aidan actually asking her to stay, stirred a level of commitment inside her she wasn’t fully ready for. They may have been swept along by the excitement of reconnecting, but she didn’t want to base any of her decisions on a man ever again. If she stayed in Polcarrow, it had to be because her heart wanted her to.

Yet as she lounged beside Aidan, eating breakfast, feeding Mimi the crusts, she knew the best way of figuring out if he was her reason, her season or her lifetime would be to stay in Polcarrow, to let the story unfold in a way she couldn’t predict. Could this be her everyday life? Waking to the dawn stretching across the sea, morning coffee in bed, Aidan, her writing? It seemed almost too perfect, too idyllic. Could she trust putting all her eggs in this basket? Shouldn’t she keep a few back for herself?

Her eyes slid over to Aidan, looking as delicious as the breakfast he’d brought her. Bella knew she had to give this the best chance she could. Sliding her hand across the sheets, she linked her fingers through his, pulling him towards her, kissing him slowly. As she did so, all her senses switched to high alert, the feeling of being alive pulsed through her. This moment was a gift and she was going to enjoy unwrapping it.

‘So,’ Bella asked, ‘what would me living here look like?’

Aidan lay back and thought about it. ‘Like this. You, me and Mimi, morning walks, coffees, taking time to get to know each other. I don’t think this is long enough, Bella. After last time I always told myself if I met someone I connected like that with again, I’d take every opportunity to make sure I gave it my best shot. And that’s what I’m offering you. How does that sound?’

Bella curled up against him. ‘Wonderful. Terrifying. Perfect. This has been so unexpected.’

‘Good or bad unexpected?’

‘Oh definitely good, but it’s like my whole life has gone off script.’

As they turned to each other Bella wondered if it was time to change the plot of her life, not just her novel. But unpicking the strands to rewrite them felt daunting. Instead, she snuggled closer to Aidan and listened as he began to plan out their future. A perfect fantasy. But could it become a reality?

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bella didn't know if it was the way the forecast for snow was making everyone giddy, or the fairy lights twinkling merrily from every house in the village, or the copious amount of hot chocolates she was drinking, but her frozen heart had thawed and Christmas spirit had managed to spread through her body. She found herself continuing to turn up at every window reveal, eagerly waiting to see what the homeowner had created, enjoying everything from a basic Christmas tree by Alf to a full-blown glass painted display of the three kings by Angelo and Freya on their living room windows. It started to make her think of her own display. Bella was almost surprised to discover she was looking forward to taking part.

The fact that she turned up hand in hand with Aidan sent smiles rippling through the village. Polcarrow loved a bit of romance. Aidan was open about their togetherness, unabashed by any village speculation, his hand linked with hers, his eyes shining with happiness. Being with him was so easy, as if they were two lost jigsaw pieces that slotted together, finishing off an incomplete picture. Bella just hoped staying in Polcarrow beyond Christmas would be as easy as Aidan believed it would be. Perhaps she needed to stop overthinking and just roll with whatever life threw her way. After all, her mad dash to Cornwall had proven fruitful in more ways than one.

The only blot on the perfect landscape was that since the incident in the pub with Merrin's ghost, Bella had been too shaken up to write. Settling herself down in the corner booth and tapping into the spirit of the pub had lost its sense of excitement. Bella couldn't figure out if Merrin had meant to cause her harm, or if it had just been some mad coincidence. Steve had

reassured her that the handle on the outside of the door had been fixed and the inside padlocked. She was grateful for his care and concern.

However, with the extension to her deadline and the full-on festivities, Bella wasn't worried about not writing. She'd been pretty productive since she'd arrived, spending hours of the day tapping away at her keyboard, burning the midnight oil as she plotted, redrafted and speculated. Now she found herself slowly plodding through the sticky middle of the manuscript. The initial thrill of a new idea gave way to watching the word count steadily increase.

Instead, she turned her attention towards her own Christmas preparations, which included a rather stressful shopping trip with Aidan, where they'd sought refuge in a seafood restaurant he loved. The fresh flaky fish and glass of wine had been a balm after the crowds.

'I used to be one of those annoying people who started their shopping in October,' she confessed over the winter berry pannacotta they were sharing, 'cards written by the end of November, gifts all wrapped. A proper Little Miss Christmas.'

'Did you enjoy it?' Aidan sipped his coffee, pushing the last bite of dessert across to Bella.

She spooned it into her mouth and sighed. 'Delicious. I thought I did, but now, maybe not so much. Being in Polcarrow, seeing how Sue runs the community, the rustic joy. It's made me think I just bought into the commercialism of the season.'

'How so?'

'Different colour scheme every year. Last year was pink and white.' Bella cringed, 'I think the loft is still full of all the different boxes of decorations I bought. Silly isn't it. Really, it's about the people. I see that now.'

Aidan considered his next question. 'What are you doing for Christmas?'

Bella put the spoon down and sat back. 'I have to go home. My nieces' birthday is the twenty-third. I've never missed it.' Seeing the disappointment in his eyes, she offered, 'I can be back for New Year, how about that?' As she said it, she realised she loved the idea of returning to Polcarrow.

Aidan smiled. 'Sounds good. Honestly, Bella, I understand.'

‘We can have a delayed, second Christmas,’ she suggested. ‘Aidan, I know you want me to stay here, and honestly, most of the time I can’t imagine living anywhere else now, but so much of my life is back in Hitchin. I will need to go back and sort all the legal stuff out with Max. I don’t even know if Lola will allow me to keep renting her cottage.’

Aidan took her hand. ‘I’m sure she will, or you can move in with us.’

‘What? You, your dad and the ghosts?’ Bella deflected away from the enormity of his suggestion.

Aidan rolled his eyes.

‘Aidan, look at me. I know you think the ghosts are silly but this is something real to me. I can’t work out if you’re supporting or humouring me, and I can’t make a decision about us until I know the truth. Do we really know each other well enough to even talk about living together?’

The truth of her words settled upon him. Bella watched as he digested them.

‘I guess you’re right. I’ve got a bit carried away. I’m sorry I’ve been weird about the ghost stuff, I just have trouble taking it seriously, and maybe it does freak me out a bit, OK?’

‘Ah, so that’s it? You could live with me in the cottage. Only if you want your own space, you know, from the ghosts. I can’t promise that I won’t go hunting for others once I’ve finished Merrin and Jago’s story though.’

Aidan laughed before his face grew serious. ‘I know it’s only been a few weeks, Bella, but this feels right, doesn’t it?’

The hint of insecurity touched Bella. ‘Of course it does. We’ll find a way to make this work, Aidan. I want that more than anything, but we might have to move at my speed if that’s OK? Everything that happened with Max rattled me. I gave up so much of me to fit into his life and I don’t want to do that again.’

‘I understand. It’s fine. We can move at whatever speed you like—’ he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles ‘—of course, after all, I hope we have all the time in the world.’

Bella fizzed with the insinuation and possibility. She may have bought a house with Max, planned out a future with him but things had never felt quite so right. Yes, they’d fitted together nicely, complemented each other, but the depth had been missing. A relationship constructed of the carefully

curated decor and finishing touches, but without the foundations to hold it together. Aidan was as firm as the Cornish rocks and felt as much home as the village of Polcarrow did.

In theory, Bella loved the idea of a book club, but in reality, someone else prescribing her next read to her felt counterintuitive to the joy of reading. Plus, with her own book-buying habit slightly out of control, and her to-be-read pile teetering with proofs she was asked to give quotes for, she was time strapped to read everything she really wanted to.

However, for the Polcarrow Christmas Book Club, Effie had chosen an adorable snow-filled cosy romance, the sort Bella had no trouble tucking herself under a blanket with to devour alongside a hot chocolate. Her writer's block had bled into her desire to read. The past year had been strewn with half-abandoned novels, not just her own, but ones written by others. She'd played it safe, returning to much-loved favourites, heading back to the safety of Middle Earth or transporting herself to glittering Regency balls.

Polcarrow seemed to have worked its magic not only on her own writing but on her reading slump. She'd spent an entire evening ensconced on her sofa, Mimi curled up at her feet, engrossed in the beautifully simple, but completely addictive romance Effie had selected. Happy tears had pricked in Bella's eyes as she reached the hard won happy-ever-after. Clutching the book to her chest, she'd lain back and sighed, 'Mimi, this is why I write.'

So, it was no hardship to wrap herself up warmly on Wednesday night and head out to Lola's café to discuss all things romance. As Bella made her way along the seafront, the air nipped at her cheeks, that promise of snow icy in the air. Nicki had been texting her for several days, trying to get her to bring her journey forward, panicking about gridlocked roads and snowdrifts. Bella dismissed the warnings. People were always wishing for a white Christmas, but it rarely happened. She'd be fine. Anyway, there were trains.

Really, she wondered as she pushed open the café door, would it be such a hardship to get stuck in Polcarrow for Christmas? The enveloping warmth of the café and the friendly faces that greeted her told her that no, it would not.

‘No Aidan?’ Lola asked from where she was setting up a table with mince pies and chocolate brownies.

Bella considered pretending she didn’t know what Lola was talking about but she and Aidan been inseparable since their night in the pub. ‘He’s not read the book,’ she excused, ‘actually, he’s meeting friends for a sort of Christmas get-together tonight.’

‘See I told you you’d find what you were looking for here, I’m never wrong. If you want to extend your stay in the cottage, you only have to ask.’ Lola beamed.

Bella floundered for a response. Lola really was a mind-reader. ‘Sure. Yeah. I will.’ Exhaling, she unwound her scarf and glanced around, looking for somewhere to sit. Alf patted the spare chair beside him, so she headed over.

‘I see Mimi hasn’t read the book either,’ Alf said, ‘wasn’t Scruff’s cup of tea. Now, tell me, how’s your book coming along? I heard you got stuck outside the pub.’

‘How did you hear that?’

Alf shrugged. ‘Nothing’s secret here. Steve told me. You all right though?’

‘Yes, I am now, but it was scary at the time. I slipped and twisted my ankle.’ Bella hesitated, unsure how much to tell him about the spooky presence, instead she filled him in on her progress on her own book. ‘I’m sort of a third of the way in. The historical part was going really well, I need to figure out how to end it so I’m turning my attention to the modern story, but I’m finding that slightly less interesting. Which isn’t good. If I don’t like it, how will my readers?’

Before Alf could respond Sue stood up and banged the table with her glasses’ case to get everyone’s attention.

‘I thought it was Effie’s book club,’ Bella whispered. Effie was sitting at the table beside Sue, Jake at her side, looking relieved not to have to do any public speaking.

Alf rolled his eyes. ‘It’s supposed to be. If you haven’t already realised, Sue has a habit of taking over.’

‘Thank you all for coming out on such a cold night. Let’s welcome Bella to the group.’ There was a round of applause. ‘We’ve never had a writer join us before! Anyway, before we start we have a few

announcements. There's tea and filter coffee plus some Christmas treats available. Please feel free to swap tables, chat amongst yourselves, but I have compiled some questions.' Sue held some sheets of typed paper aloft which resulted in groans. 'Oi! It's only to keep you all on track. I'll pass you over to Lola who has an announcement.'

'Thanks, Sue.' Lola stood up. 'Now, as some of you remember, last year I held a ritual on the beach for the solstice. I wanted to let you know that I'll be doing it again this year but bigger and better. I'm going to play a little bit with the rules and have it on the Saturday, yes, I know that's not technically the solstice but I wanted to make more of an event of it. Then you can indulge in as much mulled wine as you can stomach and not have to worry about going to work with a sore head, how does that sound?'

A chorus of agreements went up.

'Your sort of thing, Bella?' Alf asked.

'Totally!' She grinned. 'I can't wait. I love all that sort of stuff. Are you going?'

'Oh yes. You know, some people haven't liked the changes the likes of Lola have brought into the village, but I only think it does us all good. I'm ninety, you know, still learning new things. Never read a romance until this year, now I love them.' Alf picked up the book. 'Tell me, what did you think of the hero?'

'Well,' Bella began, 'and this is hard for me because I can see how the writer created him, but as a reader, I liked him. It was adorable when he saved the day by dressing up as the snowman for the village fete even though it completely went against all his principles and he knew his mates would laugh, but I guess that's what people do for love and he really loved Emily even though she had no idea until the end.'

Alf considered her answer. 'I liked the snowman bit. Do you think these books are reflective of real life?'

Bella studied the cover. A girl moves back to a small town and is reunited with a childhood crush, changing both their lives. Isn't that what had happened to her in Polcarrow? Living her own Hallmark romance? How would the happy-ever-after work out?

'You know what, Alf? Sometimes I think they are.'

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Coming up with the concept, and collecting the props for her window display, reunited Bella with the same festive vibes as when she'd spent months planning out her Christmas home decor. She'd loved the thrill of choosing a colour or theme, sourcing the perfect decorations, putting it all together whilst Max was at work. The look of delight and surprise on his face when he'd come home had always made it worth it.

The living room window in her Polcarrow cottage was only small so she didn't have a huge amount of space to work with, however, this made the task less daunting. Bella felt the tiny space was reflective of the tentative way she was stepping back into Christmas. There was a bit of pressure to make it exceptional as Bella had managed to be allotted the same day as the carol service and had chosen to do her reveal that evening.

The whole advent calendar was in its final week. It had really brought the close community even more together and captured Bella's heart. Sue's plan was for everyone to walk around the village on Christmas Eve, taking in the spectacle in one go, ending up at the pub. People would then vote on their favourite display and the winner would be announced. Bella wasn't interested in winning a prize, but after her initial reluctance to get involved, she was pleased to be taking part, even if she hadn't told anyone that she wouldn't be here on Christmas Eve.

Bella didn't want to examine how that fact made her feel. Nicki had worn her down with her messages, which when they went unanswered, had turned into phone calls. Nicki had eventually got Bella to commit to returning on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, so she'd be back in time for Flo and Bea's birthdays on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and Christmas. Although Nicki had made it quite clear that

she'd prefer for Bella to be home already, she was fretting about the constant news coverage that the country was in for a white Christmas, especially with the north already battling snowdrifts.

As Bella set up her window, she watched the sea rolling across the harbour. The air the past couple of days had been bitter as she'd combed the beach for driftwood and shells. So cold, it had felt as if it would shatter. The impending snow was all most people could talk about, although it was usually too warm for anything significant to settle. Bella couldn't help but wonder if being snowed in in Polcarrow would be preferable to going home.

Sue had given residents the option to reveal their displays in the morning or in the evening. Although the businesses had mostly chosen the beginning of the day, residents, busy with work and school runs, had mainly opted for the evenings. Bella had been the same. Not because she was particularly busy but because her window theme would work best at night. The fact that she still hadn't managed to write, that her fingers froze in fear above the keyboard, was something she was in denial about.

Bella set up her window. She'd found some battery-operated candles and was making a wreath out of twigs, driftwood and shells to sit on her window ledge, the candles interspersed with them. Aidan was outside gesturing his guidance as Bella moved her props about. With a grin and a double thumbs up, he indicated that it was complete.

Pulling on her coat and boots, Bella ducked outside to check out her handiwork. 'You don't think it's too simple, do you?'

'No, it's a lot better than an inflatable Santa. It's gentle. I like it. What's it about?'

'Hope. The candles are a beacon in the dark, showing that no matter how dark it gets, there's always a light on somewhere.'

Aidan pulled her to him. 'That's beautiful. Very symbolic. I think Sue will love it.'

'I hope so. Come on, your hands are freezing, let's get a cup of tea to warm up.'

Aidan's eyes blazed. 'A cup of tea you say?' His tone insinuating something else.

'I'm too nervous for that!' Bella playfully swatted him away as they traipsed back into the warmth of the house.

‘You have nothing to be nervous about,’ Aidan said as they headed into the kitchen to indulge in cups of tea and generous slices of chocolate log.

Of course, Aidan had been right. Bella had nothing to worry about. Residents of Polcarrow gathered outside her tiny borrowed fisherman’s cottage on their way to the carol service, all bundled up against the cold and full of expectation. Candles twinkled softly and invitingly. Although her window wasn’t spectacular, Bella was pleased with it. They’d placed an old sheet over the window to conceal the surprise.

‘Bella, thank you for doing window eighteen, when I started this I had no idea the village would be so receptive, but I’m so enjoying seeing all of your efforts,’ Sue said, ‘so, tell us a bit about your window.’

‘I’ve gone for simple. I came here for a change of scene with no idea if it would work out. I’ve found so much friendship and community here that it reminded me no matter what happens, there’s always a light in the darkness. That’s what my window is about.’ She gave a little nod to Aidan, who pulled away the sheet like a magician, unveiling the candles glowing golden through the darkness.

A round of applause went up. Bella heard murmurs of how nice the window was, how soft.

‘Isn’t that lovely,’ Sue commended, ‘and with a very touching message. Are you coming to the carol service?’

‘Thank you. Yes, we are. See you there in a bit.’

Bella exhaled with relief as Aidan made his way over, the sheet neatly folded over his arm. ‘I told you they’d like it.’

Taking the sheet from him, Bella said, ‘I’ll just go and settle Mimi, then we can get going to the carol service.’

Inside she made sure Mimi had enough water and food and that her bed was tucked up near her preferred location of the radiator. Once satisfied Mimi would be OK, Bella grabbed her bag and headed back outside where Aidan was talking to a couple of villagers. She slipped her arm through his and they made their way towards the church.

‘You are really getting stuck in!’ Tristan remarked as he greeted them in the doorway. Although his eyes strayed to their linked arms, he had the grace not to say anything, his blessing came in the form of a warm smile.

‘Warning, my singing is terrible,’ Aidan said as he ushered Bella into a pew.

‘Oh, so is mine, so we’ll be in good company. Never understood why they wrote carols so high, I mean, what mere mortal can reach the notes in “O Come all Ye Faithful”? Falalala,’ Bella trilled, which only earned her a disapproving glance from the woman in the pew in front. ‘Oops, well, I’ll get worse than that when I start to sing!’

Tucked up against Aidan, Bella watched the villagers pour into the church, wondering how many of them attended every Sunday or who only rolled in for the fun, festive bits. ‘I love a carol service, it makes me feel like I’m doing my bit for the true spirit of Christmas,’ she told him, ‘But they usually make me a bit emotional.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, it’s all that divine stuff, the idea that all this happened those thousands of years ago. Even if it isn’t true as a history, it’s amazing for the stories to have lasted this long and had such an impact.’

‘Do you believe it?’

Bella paused, taking in the trees from the Christmas tree festival twinkling in all their brightly coloured glory, the hushed reverence of the congregation, the smell of polished wood and candle wax. ‘I don’t know,’ she admitted, ‘it’s nice to think there’s someone out there. Amazing that all this has endured.’ She signalled around the church. ‘We can’t be alone. That feels even weirder. What about you?’

Aidan fiddled with the hem of his coat. ‘I don’t know. But it is nice to think there’s more to everything than just us.’ His eyes glinted as he linked his fingers through Bella’s, pulling her closer.

Before either could say anything else, a hush descended and the hairs on Bella’s neck pricked up as the choir began to sing ‘Once in Royal David’s City’.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty

*What time do you think you'll be back? I'm trying to finalise timings for the twins' party and want you there.*

Bella's brow furrowed as she read Nicki's message. She typed back:

*I'm not sure yet. It's a long drive. I'm planning on leaving early though.*

*OK! Can't you leave sooner? All this talk of snow has me worried, I don't want you driving in it. Or getting stuck in Cornwall. The girls would be devastated!*

Determined not to be guilt tripped, Bella tossed her phone onto the pillow next to her and got out of bed, pushing back her curtains to greet the day. Saturday, the day of Lola's winter solstice event. A shiver of happy anticipation rushed down Bella's spine. There was something magical about the shortest day, the dark centre of winter, the drawing in of the shadows. Gentle and ancient amongst all the gaudy modern celebrations.

Heading downstairs, Bella found Mimi bobbing about by the back door so let her out. As Mimi hurried into the frosty garden, Bella flicked on the kettle and turned on the radio. The presenter was talking about heavy snowfall that had blanketed the north of the country overnight. Just in time for the school holidays. As Bella made her tea she imagined the kids gleefully opening the curtains, unearthing sledges and building snowmen. Having the time of their lives whilst parents fretted about last minute changes to their plans.

Mimi barked to be let in.

'No snow out there, is there? Do you think we'll get snow here? You're a dog, of course you don't know!' Bella laughed as she scratched Mimi

under her chin before filling up her breakfast bowl.

Settling down with her own tea and toast, Bella listened to the radio, Christmas pop songs interspersed with weather warnings and forecasts. Would it be so bad to be snowed in down in Polcarrow? Nicki would probably never forgive her. Tugging her laptop across the table, Bella fired it up and headed straight to the online news and weather. So far there was a sprinkle of snow in Hertfordshire, as if Santa's elves had dusted the ground with sugar. Nothing to get too worried about, she could sit tight for another couple of days.

To cover all bases, Bella checked the trains, her eyes almost popping out of her head at the exorbitant costs of last-minute fares, imagining overcrowded surfaces, arguments about travellers sitting in the wrong seats, the sheer stress of having to shift across the country in the name of tradition.

‘Why do we do this to ourselves, Mims?’ Bella asked. ‘Do you think Auntie Nicki will be really cross if I didn’t make it back? Admit it, you’re the same, you’d sort of like to stay here too, wouldn’t you?’

Mimi gave her a look before turning back to her water bowl. Nicki wouldn’t be angry, she’d be disappointed, which would be infinitely worse. Plus, the twins. Bella’s heart panged. They would be upset. Bella had never missed their birthday. She’d wait and see what the weather did overnight. There was no way she was going to sacrifice winter solstice on the beach just to sit in a tailback on the motorway.

After finishing her toast, Bella closed down the browser and opened up her book document. Before the incident at the pub, everything had been going so well, her fingers had been flying over the keyboard, her imagination soaring so far ahead she could hardly keep up. Words had spilled from her, ideas had crowded themselves into her brain so quickly she’d struggled to get it all down. Her notebooks were filled with bleary midnight scrawls and her laptop held a Word document with a very promising word count.

A word count that had remained exactly where it was for the past few days. It wasn’t long, she reminded herself, she’d had other books she’d written on and off, she wouldn’t normally worry about missing a week in the run-up to Christmas. In fact, it had previously been a regular occurrence for her. Storytelling replaced with shopping-list making, sorting out any

last-minute gifts, and catching up with friends. A week was nothing. But after the writer's block, this time the break made her anxious.

Or at least it was normally nothing. Bella had come to fear the block returning that had followed her all year. Her arrival in Polcarrow had been a breath of fresh air, a clean start, the excitement of which had made the words flow, spurred on by her agent and editor. It had been fun to set herself up in the pub, watching and waiting for the ghosts of Jago and Merrin.

Now, every time Bella sat down at her laptop that same freeze came over her, the chill of that cold night fusing her bones, her brain. The words buffered up against it, refusing to come out.

She'd tried every trick in her defeating writer's block arsenal. Long walks along the coast. Instead of Merrin and Jago, all she could think of was Aidan. If she wasn't thinking about him, then he was accompanying her, interrupting her solitude with talk of the future. Bella didn't mind the distraction, and she wondered if that was part of the problem. That she was so easily distracted. It made her wonder if she'd truly conquered the block that had inspired her impulsive flight to Polcarrow, or if she'd just been running from mundanity to excitement, from a broken heart to a repatched one.

Bella didn't like to think it, but she was starting to wonder if Polcarrow was really the solution or if it had just been a sticking plaster over a deeper wound. Maybe it really was time to come clean and admit she was struggling. Perhaps even a bit burnt out. It didn't help that between Aidan's hopes for the future and Nicki's planning for Christmas that Bella felt torn in two directions.

Exhaling away the thought, Bella stood up and made herself another cup of tea. As the kettle boiled, she watched through the window as tiny flakes began to fall. Just a hint like fairy dust. It didn't settle but was there long enough to remind her that there was still time to get out before the roads were blocked. A wry smile spread across her lips as Bella wondered if this was physical or metaphorical. Or both.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-One

‘Are you ready?’

Bella made her way into the front room whilst winding her scarf around her neck to find Aidan playing with Mimi. Her heart melted at the sight of him rolling on the floor with the dog. ‘I could ask you the same thing.’

Aidan straightened up. Mimi looked most put out to have her fun curtailed. ‘Yep, all good. See you later, Mimi.’ He gave her a wave and blew a kiss as he joined Bella in the hallway.

‘Oh my gosh, I feel like the third wheel with you two,’ Bella rolled her eyes as she pulled her gloves on.

Aidan leaned forwards, his voice low as he said, ‘Don’t tell her, but you’re still my favourite.’

Before Bella could respond, Aidan kissed her, slowly and sensually. Bella sighed against him, deepening the kiss before pulling back. ‘Later. We have a bonfire to get to!’

Bella held the door open for them to step outside, before pulling it shut and locking it. She shivered. ‘Wow, I didn’t think it could get any colder. Did you see the snow earlier?’

‘Snow?’ Aidan gave her a curious look as they made their way along the harbour front hand in hand.

‘It didn’t settle,’ Bella told him, ‘but there were some flakes this morning. Not a huge amount but enough to be a warning, maybe, or a sign or something.’

Aidan pulled her closer. ‘I can’t deny the idea of you getting snowed in here over Christmas is on my wish list.’

‘Hmm, mine too, but you can face the wrath of Nicki. She’s wound up with the double whammy of the twins’ birthday and Christmas and keeps

trying to get me to move my journey forward.'

'But we don't control the weather!'

Bella raised an eyebrow at him. 'Try telling Nicki that.'

'I thought you two were close.'

'We are. She was a massive help when Max and I split, but I was starting to feel like I'd outstayed my welcome. To begin with I think she thought I should've overlooked Max's cheating as a minor indiscretion.'

'Really? Why?'

Bella shrugged. 'No idea of any of it. But we had a nice big house and Nicki is aspirational in the nice big house kind of way. However, because he cheated she can't tell me to forgive him, that would be morally wrong, and insane. It's just a vibe I get, like I somehow messed up my big chance.'

'Wow!' Aidan exhaled. 'I mean . . . what do I say to that?'

Bella pulled him to a halt, tucking herself up against him. 'Nothing, and we don't give it another thought. Nicki will guilt trip me if I miss my nieces' birthday, but I don't want to think about that – I love the winter solstice, so I want to enjoy this.'

Aidan kissed her forehead. 'We will enjoy it. Apparently, Lola started the solstice ritual last year so I've never been before.'

'Ooh, so it's new for both of us, that feels . . . perfect.' Bella smiled up at him. 'Come on, I can hear people on the beach and I don't want to miss out!' Grabbing his hand, she pulled him along the seafront.

'Dad's bringing the mulled wine.'

Bella shuddered. 'I might skip that. Then again, it's so cold, it might do the trick. Do you think it's going to properly snow? I mean, like snowman making, snowball fight sort of snow?'

'Snowball fights on the beach would be fun. It's cold enough but we rarely get proper snow this far south, but I guess there is a first time for everything,' Aidan chuckled. 'Might spoil Effie's Boxing Day swim.'

'Oh, I don't think anything will spoil that,' Bella said. 'Are you going in?'

'Me?! No! I'm not mad! You tempted?'

'Well, not if you're not,' Bella spluttered.

'How about we make a deal?' Aidan slowed to a stop.

'Oh God, I'm not sure I'm going to like this,' Bella groaned as she turned to him. 'Go on, hit me with it.'

‘If you stay here for Christmas, I’ll do the Boxing Day swim.’

‘What? Really? Seriously?’

Aidan’s eyes glinted with amusement as he nodded. ‘I mean it. I’ll do the swim.’

Bella took him in, this gorgeous man who was constantly surprising her. ‘That is definitely worth risking the wrath of Nicki for.’

‘So, you’ll do it with me?’ Aidan pulled her against him.

‘Aidan, I’m going back home for Christmas, but, if I get snowed in . . . well . . .’ Bella squirmed. ‘If I freeze to death at least I won’t have to face Nicki. But you will!’ Laughing she pulled away from him. ‘Come on, I can’t believe it’s taken us this long to walk along the front, you keep distracting me!’

‘Me, distracting you? That’s not what I see,’ Aidan said, chasing after her.

As Bella ran the last few paces towards the steps down to the beach, she wondered why she didn’t just pick up the phone, tell Nicki that she wasn’t coming home, that she wanted to spend Christmas curled up with Aidan, eating chocolate oranges and going for ridiculous swims in the freezing sea. She wanted to tell her sister that she was finally happy. Happy in a way she’d never believed she’d be. Happy in a way all the bestsellers, the big house and fancy car had never made her. But the duty of home called, plus there really wasn’t anything that warmed her heart more than the happiness on Bea and Flo’s faces when they saw their Auntie Bella.

Aidan reached her, took her hand, drinking her in. Bella knew she was happy because she had finally found true love. Not just in this devastatingly gorgeous man, but in herself, her life. She wanted to bundle the sensation into her arms, trap it somewhere it would always sparkle, but never escape, like a snow globe of contentment, forever raining down on her.

Then why did she always feel a twinge of unease about committing to Polcarrow? To Aidan? Aidan was turning out to be everything she’d imagined he’d be, not to mention everything she’d ever written into her own heroes or dreamed about true love. Aidan and Polcarrow were the perfect combination, but she’d done it before, gathered up all her belongings for a charming smile and stacks of promises. Bella had tipped her life into the boxes Max had provided and somehow parts of her had been stacked away until she’d almost forgotten who she was. The worst part

was that she'd done so happily, believing she was creating the future she craved. It would be so easy to stay in Polcarrow for Aidan but she knew she needed to truly want to stay for herself. As she watched other villagers head onto the beach, she hoped she'd find her answer tonight.

Hand in hand, Bella and Aidan made their way down onto the beach, the damp sand shifting beneath their feet as they made their way over to the bonfire. Bella scanned the crowd. It looked like the whole of Polcarrow was gathered.

'Hello.' Lola beamed as they approached, wrapping them both in a quick, tight hug. 'Thanks for joining us. Have you ever done anything like this before?'

'I don't know. What does it involve?' Aidan asked.

'We'll all gather around the fire, I'll say a few words, we thank the Universe for the blessings we've had this year, write down some intentions for the coming year, or wishes you want to come true. Personally, I prefer that, the solstice is magic in my opinion. Then we'll do a short meditation. Then party on the beach, or for as long as we can stand the cold. How does that sound?'

'Wonderful.' Bella grinned. 'I love this sort of stuff. I used to do my own little rituals.' She didn't clarify that was before she'd softened her edges to slide into Max's carefully curated life.

'Right,' said Aidan, 'that all sounds . . . great.'

'Take a seat, got plenty of blankets, cuddle up.' Lola sent them off with a wink.

Bella and Aidan made their way closer to the bonfire, the heat a welcome relief from the cold. They both nodded and waved to familiar faces, but both of them subconsciously stayed a little way back, as if they wanted to keep the magic of the night to themselves. Bella curled herself against Aidan, who pulled her closer in an effort to keep her warm.

There was something calming, almost hypnotic about watching the orange flames leap against the dark sky. Bella always found fire soothing, the pop and crackle of the wood as it dissolved, the heat that emanated from the logs, the primal gathering of a bonfire. She sensed the connection to her ancestors as she watched the fire.

Her reverie was broken by Lola ushering them all closer. 'I think this is all we're getting, come on, sit down, snuggle up, the closer, the warmer.'

Yes, that's right. I invite you to take your place around the fire.'

Aidan sat down next to Jake, pulling Bella down beside him. She exchanged a greeting with the woman next to her, someone she'd seen on her walks with Mimi but she didn't know her name. Bella linked her fingers through Aidan's. A hush fell over the gathering as everyone turned expectantly to Lola.

Lola picked up a small shamanic drum and rapped it three times. Silence descended over the beach. 'Welcome,' she spoke, 'thank you for coming. Tonight is about gathering as a community, about pausing in the mad run-up to Christmas. I want you to take some time to really inhale and exhale, to be present in this moment. It's my gift to you, a moment of calm before everything descends into last-minute chaos.'

Bella's heart rate slowed as if to match the languid lap of the tide. Her limbs grew heavy as she focused on her breathing, her body starting to relax as Lola explained what would happen next.

'I'm sending around some pens and pieces of paper. Take two pieces, a pen and pass it on. When everyone is equipped, we'll commence.'

The box was passed around and everyone took the materials they needed. Bella smoothed out her paper across her knee. She'd never taken part in a solstice ritual with others before. Hers had always been solitary. Lighting candles, sage-ing her space, doing a quiet meditation away from everyone else's energy.

'Wonderful,' Lola said as the box made its way back to her. 'I want you all to write down three things you're really grateful for this year. Don't think too hard about it, it's not a test, there's no wrong or right.'

Bella glanced at Aidan, catching his eye, before they both turned back to their papers. Although they kept them close to their bodies, neither of them needed to sneak a peek to know the other's name flowed from the pen. Other than Aidan, what was Bella grateful for? Her mind stumbled. New beginnings perhaps. But was this a new beginning? 'Taking a leap of faith', she wrote instead. 'Love', she followed it with, hastily folding up her paper lest Aidan see the four letter word that was captive in her heart written in her hand.

Lola waited patiently until everyone had finished writing. 'Perfect. Now I invite you to toss your paper into the fire to release that gratitude.'

Everyone hesitated, no one wanted to go first. Impulsively, Bella reached forwards and flicked her paper into the fire, watching as the edges caught, curling and disintegrating. Aidan followed.

Once all the papers were in the fire, Lola instructed, 'On the second piece of paper I want you to write three things you wish to bring into your life next year. Big or small. Personally, I'm asking for a new mixer.'

A smattering of laughter went up as Lola took the pressure off the attendees. Bella stared down at her blank piece of paper, her mind whirring and panicking. What did she want? Lola had told them not to overthink it, but that was almost impossible. Aidan. Bella wanted Aidan, that was all she knew. She wrote his name. Was it enough? What did she need to get him? Courage. Bella scrawled that down. Courage to speak her truth, to commit herself to it.

That left one last wish. Her creativity was the obvious choice. She wanted its failsafe, like an old familiar, always there, watching her back, guiding her way. However, she couldn't help but wonder if she should ask for something more, something bigger than herself. Guidance was what she needed the most. 'The right path', she wrote, full of ambiguity and potential. She folded her paper up, over and over, into a tight little package. Lifting it to her lips, Bella gave it a kiss for luck.

'Now, I want you to hold those intentions in the palm of your hands. Hold it tight and close your eyes. We're going to do a little meditation. I'll guide you into it with my drum, when you hear the drum for a second time, the meditation will be over and you can release your wishes into the fire.'

Bella closed her eyes. Lola banged the drum three times. Bella felt her heart settle down somewhere deep, as if leaning back into the safety of her soul. Together they would guide her. Her breath slowed, her ears attuned to the flames as they devoured the logs, the gratitude the villages had stacked into it. The sea rocked her like a lullaby. Bella's limbs were leaden, she swayed slightly, melting against Aidan's shoulder, her mind drifting off, far away from Polcarrow. Far away from everything that had been troubling her.

All too soon the three deep bangs on the drum brought Bella back to the present. Opening her eyes, she peered blearily around, sleepily taking in her companions.

'Hey.' Aidan's voice was a soft caress.

‘Hey,’ she replied as if seeing him for the first time. Her answer to everything. She curled her fingers through his, her body still heavy from the meditation and let out a contented sigh, followed by a yawn.

‘That’s what I like to hear,’ Lola announced, ‘you must’ve gone very deep. Anyone else?’

Murmurs travelled around the gathering. Bella imagined everyone like little moles finding their way out of the dark.

‘I invite you to hand over your wishes to the fire, one by one. You can say anything you want as you let it go, either silently, or out loud. I’ll start.’ Lola stepped forwards and dropped her paper into the flames before bowing her head reverently.

Bella wanted to hold on to hers for as long as possible. She understood the power in these rituals, the potency behind the flames. Believed that in her hand was a piece of paper that contained three words that would forever alter her future. One by one, the villagers dropped their papers into the fire. Bella hung back until she was the last to surrender hers.

Unfurling her hand, Bella watched as her fingers loosened their grip, the paper tumbling into the fire, the flames engulfing it. Her mind was blank as she watched it burn, her future wishes turning to ash alongside her gratitude. Bella wondered what they would conjure together. As she did so, a sense of peace settled in her soul, a sense of rightness. Bella made her way back to Aidan, curled herself against him and tried to think no more about what was yet to come.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The bonfire crackled whilst everyone slowly emerged from their cocoon. Arms stretched heavenwards, yawns mingled with the waves, eyes blinked, refocused. Bella gave her shoulders a shake. She was renewed, centred. Aidan helped her up, her legs wobbly as a new-born foal as she took her first steps into whatever the future held. The hushed tones of the villagers breaking the silence spread around the circle. Discussions about going to the pub, comments on how calm they felt. Rather than stepping into the embrace of her new community, Bella wanted to be alone, to digest everything her subconscious had experienced.

‘Do you want to get out of here before anyone notices?’ Aidan asked.

Bella nodded. Somewhere she could hear Lola advising everyone on their post-ritual care. Bella was woozy enough without adding Steve’s mulled wine to the mix. Aidan dropped a kiss on her forehead and linking his fingers through hers, pulled her away from the gathering.

As they made their way across the beach, they caught Lola’s eyes. She gave them a nod, a knowing smile which felt like a blessing. Away from the bonfire the chill in the air nipped at their noses and ears, a reminder that snow was lingering like a promise somewhere in the stratosphere. Or was that a threat? Bella could no longer decide. She’d let the fates, and the weather, decide where she ended up for Christmas. Sneaking a glance at Aidan, she knew her heart wanted to stay here, but her mind continued to wage its challenge.

With almost everyone on the beach, stepping up onto harbour row it felt as if they had Polcarrow to themselves. Streetlamps cast orange puddles on the pavement and in front of the pub the lobster pot tree twinkled like a beacon. Bella imagined the carousing that would take place later in the pub,

inhibitions dulled by mulled wine, by the final countdown to Christmas. How different this year felt from the last. Bella couldn't help but reflect on the moment everything had changed, exactly a year ago, from pouring bubbles into her friends' glasses, to them all slipping out as she and Max tore their carefully constructed world apart.

Sneaking a glance at Aidan, Bella marvelled at how much could change in a year, at how unreal all this felt despite it being real life. Everything about Polcarrow, about Aidan was like a dream. Could a dream last forever? Why was she, the romance author, who penned dreams for a living, questioning this?

Pushing her thoughts, her doubts out of her mind, Bella hurried Aidan across the road, desperate to shut the door on everyone and everything. Fumbling with her keys, she sent up a prayer that Mimi would be fast asleep, that she was over her obsession with Aidan since he'd started to spend more time at the cottage. She just wanted to get inside, upstairs, no words or thoughts.

Bella opened the door slowly, pulling Aidan in behind her, moonlight following them in. They paused, ears pricked, Mimi didn't stir as they crept up the stairs, hearts racing. In her bedroom, Bella pulled Aidan close, inhaling the scent of sea air and bonfire tangled in his dark curls. There was a moment, a pause like the world was holding its breath, before Bella kissed him. Or did Aidan kiss her? It hardly mattered.

They were gentle at first, exploring, coats unbuttoned but still on but then the kiss deepened and the need for each other grew. They'd left the beach smudged together like the embers from the bonfire, but now each touch ignited the fire between them anew. Bella grasped onto Aidan as if grabbing her future in both hands.

Bella stirred early, the blue dark of the early morning filtering through the gap in the curtains, casting shadows across Aidan's still sleeping form. Bella watched him but did not wake him. She needed a moment to herself. Easing herself from the warmth of the duvet as quietly as a mouse, she picked up her dressing gown and phone. Tiptoeing downstairs, Bella felt like a stowaway in her own life.

Even Mimi picked up on her mistress's desire for quiet. Instead of her usual bark of delight, she merely tipped her head in the direction of the back

door. Bella let her out, closing the door behind her as Mimi snuffled around the garden. Waiting for the kettle to boil, Bella swiped at her phone screen, revealing multiple messages and missed calls from Nicki, even though it wasn't even half past seven in the morning.

Bella tapped out a quick reply, something non-committal to hold Nicki back. Tea brewing, Bella cut a slice of chocolate log, figuring out that with Christmas mere days away she might as well make a start on the unconventional breakfasts. She was savouring her last bite when her phone began to ring, the jingle of the tone intruding into the stillness of the morning.

Seeing Nicki's name flash up, knowing that if she didn't answer her sister would only persist, Bella accepted the video call.

'Why are you ignoring my messages?' Nicki demanded.

'Good morning to you too.' Bella rolled her eyes as she sat back.

'No need to be like that, Bells, I've been trying to get hold of you.'

'Nick, it's not even eight in the morning. It's Sunday. Nothing is that urgent, or is it?' Bella leaned forwards, dread flashing through her. 'Are Mum and Dad OK? The girls?'

Nicki paused, enjoying the panic on her sister's face before relinquishing that power. 'Mum and Dad are fine. They're due tomorrow. The girls, well, they're both excited and worried.'

'Why? What's happened?'

'Nothing,' she sighed. 'Bella, I'm sorry I've been short with you, but we'd all feel so much better if you just came home. Now. The weather forecast is getting worse. We woke up to snow this morning. The girls are out in it now. Although there's not really enough to make a snowman they insisted on trying. Here, look.' Nicki turned the phone around and Bella watched the blurry images of Bea and Flo, coats over their pyjamas, throwing snowballs at each other. Bella experienced a sudden pang to be there with them.

'They look so happy! We always wanted a white Christmas didn't we, Nik?'

'Hmm, yeah, I remember you asking for it every year. It's fun for the kids but less fun for us. Bella, we'd all feel happier if you just packed up now and came back. Or are you too busy enjoying your secret Cornish life?'

Is there some hunky fisherman or something keeping you there?' A searching glint flashed in Nicki's eyes.

'There's no hunky fisherman.' Bella was economical with the truth. Her face flushed as memories of the previous night with Aidan flashed through her mind. His skills extended way beyond the kitchen. 'I'll be home soon,' she placated.

'I could really do with your help,' Nicki said and for the first time Bella noticed how tired her sister looked. Bella had always been there to help with the twins' birthday parties; she'd loved being involved so much that Nicki had practically relinquished control to her the previous year. The princess theme had gone down a storm.

'I'm really worried about the snow. I've been having nightmares of you getting stuck somewhere or skidding off the road. I don't think you're taking this seriously.'

Bella peered out of the window to where Mimi was still sniffing in the undergrowth. There was a glitter of frost on the ground. 'No snow here. Look, apparently it hardly ever snows in Cornwall.'

'It's not Cornwall I'm worried about, Bells! It's the rest of the country! You know we always grind to a halt. Several feet of snow is forecast,' she panicked, 'and I want you back before it comes. Seriously, Bella, not only will the girls be heartbroken if you don't make it back, but I also don't want you travelling on the motorways with a red warning for snow. It's not safe.'

'Well, if it comes to that I'll have to stay here,' Bella ventured.

'Stay there? You can't stay there!'

'Why not, Nicki? It's Cornwall. It's perfectly nice.'

'But you'll be alone for Christmas.'

Bella hesitated and Nicki latched on to it.

'Oh my God, Bella, you don't want to come home do you?' Nicki spluttered.

'I didn't say that!'

'Then why have you been so evasive about what time you'll be back, why have I had to pin you down to committing to a day or a time? Why aren't you worried that half the country is covered in snow? You won't be alone, will you?'

'The villagers are very friendly,' Bella squirmed.

Nicki peered closer to the camera as if trying to detect Bella's omissions. 'Who is he, Bella?'

'No one you need to know about,' Bella sighed, 'Nicki, please, enough of the interrogation. I'm thirty-five years old. I can make a fair assessment of whether or not it's safe for me to travel. If I don't make it back, the girls will understand, surely? I'll make it up to them, honest! I'll see what it looks like tomorrow. I have things to do today. Leave it to fate.'

'I'm too angry to talk to you now, Bella.' Nicki spoke through gritted teeth. Her eyes flickered to a spot beyond Bella's shoulder.

Cold dread ran down Bella's spine.

'Looks like you've got company.' Nicki sniffed. 'Let me know when you leave.'

The screen went blank. At the door, Mimi yapped. Bella turned to see Aidan standing in the hallway, his eyes dark and blank. Shit. What had he heard?

Standing up, Bella opened the back door. Mimi bounded in, stopping in her tracks as she took in the suddenly frosty atmosphere between her two favourite people. Bella watched as she scurried into the living room.

'What did you hear?' Her voice was tight.

Aidan winced as he ran a hand through his hair. 'More than I should have.'

Silence fell like a wall between them. Bella scrabbled but failed to grab at an explanation.

'Nicki caught me off guard. She's like a Rottweiler. She won't let go of anything. She wants me to go home. Now. The snow.'

'Are you going?' Aidan said plainly.

With a sigh, Bella sank against the door frame. 'It's not that simple, Aidan. I planned to go tomorrow. I don't like the pressure to bring it forward. There might not be any more snow. I'm just going to leave it to fate, see what it's like tomorrow.'

'Fate?' Aidan scoffed. 'You're leaving your Christmas plans down to fate?'

'Erm, yes, well, what's wrong with that?'

Aidan ran his hands through his hair. 'Don't you see what's wrong with that? It's ridiculous, Bella. Fate?! Your sister and me deserve someone who is going to tell them where they are going to be, so they can make plans.'

Not this whimsical see how the snow is in the morning, leaving it to fate nonsense!’

Bella stared at him in disbelief. ‘What? Nonsense? Are you calling me nonsense?’

‘Not you, Bella, but this whole idea you’re just going to wake up tomorrow, see what the snow is like and then decide where you’re spending Christmas. Don’t your loved ones deserve better than that? But what do I know? I’m just no one apparently.’

Bella winced as she realised he’d heard that part of the conversation. ‘I was trying to protect you from Nicki’s interrogation. But you know what? You’ve known me like five minutes and think you can tell me how to deal with my loved ones? Why is everyone so worried about this snow? I’m not stupid, I’m not going to travel if it’s dangerous and I won’t be the only person who might get stuck, but I seem to be the only person other people are trying to pressure into travelling.’

‘I’m not trying to pressurise you into travelling, I’d love to spend Christmas with you. Sounds like your family would too, but you won’t commit to either of us. Just fate, see what happens. It’s been the same every time I’ve raised the subject about us continuing long term. See what happens, see what happens.’

‘But, Aidan, we have to see what happens. We’ve known each other four weeks or something like that. I said I’m coming back, what more do you want? Why does me waiting until tomorrow bother you so much? It means most likely we’ll spend Christmas together.’

‘Because, Bella, I can’t live with everything being a roll of the dice, or fate or whatever. And the ghost stuff, honestly, I know you went out of that back door searching for something spooky. I know you were scared but there was a part of you that thought it was fun. Don’t deny it, you’re impulsive and you have no responsibility over yourself.’

Bella stared at him and asked in a voice more chilled than the December air, ‘Aidan, do you really mean that? Is that what you really think of me?’

Aidan had the grace to look horrified. ‘Of course not. I’m sorry, Bella.’ He reached for her, but she snatched her hands away. ‘I’m just frustrated. I want you to choose for you, not wait for some divine intervention.’

‘Aidan, it’s snow. I’ve planned to go home tomorrow and I’m just waiting to see what the conditions are like in the morning,’ she reiterated

calmly.

Aidan's look pinned her to the spot. 'Where do you want to spend Christmas, Bella?'

'Honestly, I don't know. With them. I thought with you, but you think I'm impulsive and ridiculous,' she spat at him, memories of the way Max had looked at her, as if she was someone to be indulged rather than taken seriously. 'I thought you understood, Aidan, I thought you saw me properly. You came along to the solstice ritual last night. Was that humouring me? Don't answer that. You're just like the rest. Just like Max! You're nothing like I remembered or thought.'

Aidan winced. 'Bella, I take that back, a thousand times. I want to spend Christmas with you, but I wouldn't keep you from your family. It's not that that bothers me. It's you being unable to make up your mind. You didn't tell your sister about me, but I'm pretty sure she saw me anyway. You won't go home early for her, and you won't stay here with me. What is it, Bella? What are you waiting for?'

She felt stupid even as she said it. 'I was waiting for the snow to make my mind up for me.'

'Jesus Christ! Seriously? I didn't think you really meant that! Bella, this is real life, not one of your stories,' Aidan groaned with frustration before fixing her with a serious look. 'OK, Bella, here it is, all my cards on the table. I didn't mean to call you ridiculous or knock the spooky stuff. That was insensitive of me. I apologise. I'm asking you to please make your mind up as to what you want. I want you. Plain and simple. I want whatever this is between us, forever if possible. But I want to know that you want it too. This isn't about Christmas. I'm asking you to stay. I'm asking you to allow us to make something of this. But I don't know what you want. I don't want you waiting for fate to decide for both of us.'

'Well, sounds like I've got some things to reassess.' Bella crossed her arms defiantly across her chest. 'Looks like I don't know you as well as I thought I did!'

'Bella, please, let's not make this worse, I've said things I shouldn't have, I take them back. I don't want to argue, please. I'm just frustrated.'

'Aidan—'

'No,' he cut her off, 'not now, take some time to think. Take Christmas if needs be. Go home to your family. But if you can't give us your best shot,

then I ask you never to come back. I don't think I could get over you a second time.'

Time stopped as Bella watched Aidan gather his things, pull on his coat and shoes and silently let himself out. The world rushed back in again as she hurried for the door, pulling it open to see him storming back towards the pub, the morning sky a blaze of red, like an omen.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-Three

Bella collapsed back against the door. Mimi poked her head out from the living room.

‘What on earth has just happened?’ she said, sinking down to the floor. Mimi trotted over to her, leaping onto Bella’s lap and giving her face a lick. ‘Thanks, but I don’t think that’s going to fix things.’

With a sigh, Bella rested her head against the door. She contemplated running after Aidan, trying to explain or beg forgiveness but she had a horrible, niggling feeling that he was right. She did need to decide what she wanted.

Although she’d been enthusiastic about staying in Cornwall, could she stay if Aidan thought her interests in the occult were silly? Had she just been too swept away by the whole destiny of them finding each other to really see who he was? That first flush of attraction. *I want whatever this is between us, forever if possible*, echoed in her ears. His surety knocked the breath out of her. Aidan being for life, not just for Christmas sprang to mind. But did they know each other enough to start promising forever? How could he say that but also admit he was frustrated by the way she chose to live her life?

‘I’m so confused. What should I do? Take a chance on the snow?’ Bella asked as she stroked the little dog’s head before remembering the scorn Aidan had thrown at that idea. Admittedly, it was a bit of a stupid one. ‘The problem, Mims, is that my heart really wants to stay here, but my head knows I should go home and I don’t want to make the decision. Is Aidan right? Am I being silly? Come on, let’s try and tackle this practically. Breakfast for you, shower for me.’

Mimi bounded off Bella and into the kitchen, taking up position beside her bowls. Bella filled them before trudging upstairs. The state of the bedroom stopped her in her tracks, the sheets still rumpled. She didn't have the heart to change them, instead headed into the bathroom and did what she always did when she needed to think – ran a deep bubbly bath.

As she sunk under the scented foam, Bella tried to relax, but the whole act of lounging in the bath felt far too indulgent for how heavy her heart was. Bella closed her eyes but all she could see was the hurt on Aidan's face. Why hadn't she been honest with Nicki? Why hadn't she told her she'd met someone else? Was it really because she thought Nicki would disapprove? Perhaps a bit. Or was it because after everything fell apart with Max she was reluctant to give Aidan too much strength in the foundations of her new life. Moving to Cornwall for love was grand and romantic, she'd devour books about girls doing the same, hell, she'd even write books like that! But doing it for real?

Forever, though, he'd said forever. Which was terrifying and emboldening in one. Was she ready for forever? Their furious words meant that they had an awful lot to still figure out before they could decide if their lives could really fit together.

It had been a month. Was that enough time to base a whole life on? Bella had only just picked herself up from the Max fallout, she wasn't sure she had it in her to do the same should things fail with Aidan. Falling in love had never been in the plan. The thought of packing her car up and heading back to Hertfordshire if forever didn't materialise was excruciating. She could imagine Nicki rolling her eyes at her impulsiveness, basing her life on a holiday romance. Aidan had claimed he couldn't get over her a second time, and Bella wasn't sure she could either. Maybe they should just end things now.

Despite his outburst over her putting her trust in fate, the insinuation that she was being silly reminded her of all those times Max had tried to belittle her. As Bella lounged in the hot water, she turned this over in her mind. Deep down she knew that Aidan's frustration came from a place of care, not harm. Still, it was hard for Bella to untangle what she'd experienced with Max from what Aidan had said.

Aidan wasn't Max though. Max had always been a bit too flashy, and although Nicki adored him, her other friends had always insinuated that

they were an odd match. ‘Opposites attract’ had done some pretty heavy lifting during the years they were together. Max had been kind in his own way, he’d been driven but ultimately, they had worked because they had both kept their lives separate whilst believing they were building a future. Buying furniture and ticking off boxes.

Bella didn’t think she’d ever loved him in the deep soul reaching way you were supposed to love someone. Was Aidan love? Or was he a part mystery, part holiday romance all wrapped up in the twinkling lights of Christmas? All Bella knew was that she felt more herself around him than she ever had before. They clicked together as if their two halves made a whole. Forever in Cornwall was a beautiful idea, morning walks by the sea, coffee at Lola’s, weaving their lives together, darning in the loose ends, like a blanket of dreams. Bella swooned at the idea.

But could she really be with him? Wouldn’t she always have the niggles that Aidan didn’t support her love of the paranormal?

Had she ruined it by arguing back with him like a sulky teenager? Could you ruin it with a man who claimed he wanted forever? Actually, she didn’t want the answer to that. However, what Bella did need was a solid answer for Aidan. He’d asked her to go away and decide what she wanted. He deserved her truth and her commitment. With a sigh Bella resigned herself to the fact that she had an awful lot to think about and staying in Cornwall would just make it more difficult.

She got out of the bath, wrapped herself in towels and padded into the bedroom, straightening the sheets and getting herself ready for the day. Aidan’s shirt was crumpled on the floor. Picking it up, Bella held it to her face, inhaling the scent of him.

‘Stop being silly,’ she said as she folded it up and put it on top of the chest of drawers. ‘You’ve a lot to do. Right, let’s make a list.’ A list always focused her mind. Bella perched on the edge of her bed and wrote: ‘Take Mimi for a walk, wrap presents, pack, set alarm’. It all looked so final, a repackaging of a life she’d been so happy in.

Not wanting to dwell, Bella dressed in her warmest clothes and went back downstairs. Mimi was waiting by the door. ‘He’s not coming, Mims. We’re going home to Auntie Nicki for a few days. Yes, I know, Flo and Bea will be so happy to see you. Oh, don’t make that face, you like their fusses

really. Walkies?’ Bella held up the lead, Mimi pawed at it, keen to get out, away from the stifling atmosphere in the cottage.

Outside, the air was grey and brittle, a vicious wind blowing off the sea. The bleak midwinter, Bella thought glumly to herself as she battled to get Mimi to cross the road. Tugging her woolly hat tighter over her ears, Bella made her way along the harbour wall. Gulls circled hopefully, not deterred by the cold or lack of unsuspecting tourists. What would it be like to leave here and never come back? The thought was like ice down her spine.

‘We never did get you properly onto the beach, did we?’ Bella said sadly to Mimi as they loitered at the top of the steps. ‘Come on.’ Bella scooped her up into her arms. ‘I’m not missing out just because you don’t like it.’

Holding Mimi snug against her chest, Bella made her way down the stairs, her boots sinking into the soft sand. Slowly, she made her way to the shoreline, where the waves ferociously gobbled up the sand, their roar like a warning. Bella stared them down like a challenge. She stilled her breathing, until all she could hear was the beating of her heart and the crash of the sea. Bella closed her eyes until they became at one with each other.

Bella knew she had a duty to go home to her family, to explain to them what she’d found in Polcarrow, what she’d discovered in herself. She still had things at her sister’s, vacuum packed under the bed. There were still belongings stacked in Max’s attic. All these past pieces of her life strewn across the town she’d grown up in. That place no longer felt like home. To Bella the word ‘belonging’ conjured up morning mochas at Lola’s café, walking Mimi along the seafront, this view across the ocean, the light changing and shifting, revealing itself anew each morning. Belonging made her think of Aidan. But could they patch things up after that morning’s showdown?

Mimi let out a whimper of protest as Bella stepped closer to the swell, breathing in the briny scent, marvelling at the power of the waves. Jago and Merrin remained unfinished, their fates tied to Polcarrow as much as her own. Maybe she had to go home, to test the theory that her heart belonged in Cornwall. That this wasn’t just a holiday romance bundled up with wishful thinking. That she wasn’t just running away.

When Mimi squirmed again, Bella gave in and trudged back up the beach, past the little boats, strewn across the sand like children’s toys. Back

on the pavement, Bella set Mimi down. Mimi shook herself and gave Bella a look as if to say, *Don't ever do that again*, before they crossed over the road towards the warm comfort of Lola's café.

Pushing open the door, Bella was surprised to find it almost empty for a Sunday morning. The second Mimi caught a sniff of Scruff she started to bark excitedly. Scruff stirred, gave Mimi a singular glance, before putting his head back down on his paws and going back to sleep. Bella's pensive mood was at odds with the Christmas cheer created by the tinsel, festive music and the scent of mince pies being baked.

'You all right, love?' Lola asked.

Bella followed the sound of her voice and found the café owner sitting at the window seat with Alf, a pot of tea between them.

'No Aidan?' Alf asked.

Bella pushed her lips together and shook her head. Grabbing coffee and walking Mimi had become their regular morning routine, one Bella had grown used to and looked forward to. Now, without Aidan at her side, she was lost, untethered.

'Ah,' Lola said knowingly, standing up and offering Bella her seat. 'Mocha, isn't it?'

'Yes please,' Bella said as she sat down, unzipping her coat. 'Morning, Alf. You all right?'

'Never been better,' the old man said. 'How's this book of yours coming along?'

Bella let out a hollow laugh. 'Not as well as I'd like. I got stuck again. Maybe I got a bit distracted too. But I think this time it might be all right. There's always so much going on this time of year, makes it hard to think. Thanks,' she said as Lola placed the cup in front of her and took the seat between Bella and Alf.

'What's happened?' Lola asked gently, pushing a plate with a snowman cupcake on it towards Bella.

'Cute,' Bella said as she picked it up, 'almost a shame to eat him.' She took a bite anyway, if there was a morning to have a second helping of cake, then this was it. 'I guess you're going to tell me cake cures everything, aren't you?'

'But it does!' Lola protested.

Bella smiled at the sentiment. 'What made you come here?'

Lola and Alf exchanged a glance. 'I was called here. Simple as that. I was hurting after a relationship broke down. My grandmother had died. I found the word Polcarrow written in her recipe book. I couldn't get the name out of my head, so I came for a look.'

'What made you stay?'

'Love, if I'm being honest. Oh, not just with Tristan, but I love the place. It instantly felt like home. Also, I promised Alf I'd make him the best scones he'd ever tasted.'

'And she has, you know,' Alf confirmed.

'What about you, Bella?' Lola asked. 'What are you going to do?'

Bella glanced around the café, gentle Christmas music played, the sugary scent of baking soothing. Outside the winter morning was getting on with its own business. Bella took it all in as if it was to be the last time. Could she leave this place and never come back? No. She knew that. But she could only return if she could promise Aidan her share of forever.

Forever in Polcarrow. There seemed a million worse ways to spend a lifetime. Forever was an awfully big promise. One he'd been willing to stake everything on.

'I don't know,' she admitted.

'What's happened, Bella?' Lola asked gently.

To her dismay, Bella began to cry. 'Sorry. I don't know. Everything was perfect. This morning my sister rang. I told Nicki Aidan was no one. He heard. I just didn't want the interrogation to keep on going, it was bad enough as it was with her going on about getting home before the snow gets bad. Now he's mad. And I'm mad at him because he dismissed my thoughts about how fate directs our lives. Well, I can understand why, sort of. Aidan told me I need to decide what I want.' She left out his grand proclamation, instinctively knowing to keep his raw vulnerability to herself.

'What do you want?' Alf asked.

Bella shrugged. 'To stay here. I mean, if I can.' She was more than aware that Aidan would be expecting a more definitive response than a shrug, another hedging of her bets. Why was committing so hard?

'I'm sure that can be arranged,' Lola told her.

'Thank you. We both said some cruel things.'

'Wounds can heal,' Lola reminded her, 'I'm sure deep down neither of you meant them.'

Bella sipped her drink; she'd have to cling onto Lola's reassurance.

'So, what are you going to do?' Alf asked.

'Stop dithering,' Bella said as she sipped her drink. 'I'm going home tomorrow morning. My nieces' birthday is the twenty-third. They're twins. I'm going home for them and for Christmas, then I'm going to see what I really want. If this can really be my life.'

Lola gave her a long, knowing look and reaching into her pocket, pulled out her tarot cards. 'Shall we? I mean, when in doubt it's always good to have some backup.'

Bella hesitated before taking the cards. It felt wrong to use them now she knew Aidan's views on fate. Then again, she didn't want to change herself for anyone. If he wanted forever, then he needed to understand that she went looking for eternity through other means.

'You know, Aidan was mad that I was waiting to see if it snowed. I was waiting for the weather to decide my future. No wonder he's pissed off with me,' she said as she began to shuffle the cards. 'But I don't understand why he can't see it from my perspective. I thought he understood me.'

'He'll come around,' Lola said softly. 'Pass them back to me when you're done.'

Bella concentrated on shuffling the cards, wondering if they had any influence on her fate, or if it was truly all in her hands. She almost refused the reading as she handed the cards back to Lola, but the curious part of Bella was too intrigued.

Lola spread the cards out on the tabletop. 'Pick three.'

Bella hesitated before pulling out three cards and passing them to Lola. Leaning forwards, she watched, breath held, as Lola turned them over.

'Your heart knows the answer,' Lola said, turning over the first followed by the second, 'the goddess of nature will have her say. You have found your forever home.' She held up the third card before drawing a final one herself. 'Whatever you do next, you cannot mess this up.'

Bella took in the cards, the reassuring message settling in her heart, soothing her ragged nerves back into place. Her eyes met with Lola's, a smile spreading between them, the warmth radiating deep in her soul. Lola had been right before, leaving Bella with no doubts about today's message. She glanced out of the window, a stray beam of sun forced its way through

the cloud. A beacon of hope lighting the way. Bella not only knew she could leave, but that she'd always return.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Feeling slightly reassured by Lola's guidance and fortified by the coffee, Bella bid farewell and 'Merry Christmas' to Lola and Alf. Mimi attempted to say goodbye to Scruff, but the older dog was having none of it. Bella made her way next door where Effie was just opening the bookshop.

'Good morning,' Effie greeted her from behind the till, dressed in a snowman knit jumper, 'are you looking for some last-minute gifts? Let me know if you need any recommendations.'

'Erm . . . yes, I think so,' Bella said as her eyes roamed around the cute shop, 'something for my nieces,' she explained. 'I'm going home for Christmas.'

'Oh,' Effie said.

The word laden with so much surprise and disappointment that Bella had to turn away. Picking Mimi up, she made her way over to the kids' section and started to flick through the picture books on the shelves, all glorious bright colours. Flo wasn't much of a reader, but Bella knew from experience that whatever she got for Bea, her twin would want. She selected two stories with gorgeous unicorn illustrations and made her way over to the till, pausing beside a table stacked with holiday romances. Bella's hand hovered over a couple of novels and she hesitated, before picking them up.

'I've never been able to resist a romance with a nice cover,' she admitted as she placed the stack of books on the counter.

'Me too. Oh! This one is adorable. I cried happy tears at the end even though I knew what was going to happen. Think it might be one of my favourite books this year. These unicorn ones are popular too, the drawings are beautiful,' Effie enthused as she rang through the purchases, placing

them in a branded Books by the Sea bag. ‘Anything else?’ she asked after ringing up the total.

A display of Christmas cards caught her eye, all beautiful pictures of Cornwall. Bella spun the display around, studying the pictures until she came to one of the sun setting over a moody sea. ‘This please,’ she said as she placed it down. Effie added it to Bella’s total and she paid.

‘There you go.’ Effie held the bag out to her. ‘You said you’re going home for Christmas, I hope you have a lovely time, but will you be back? Sorry if that’s none of my business, it’s just, I thought . . .’

‘That’s OK, I thought the same—’ Bella gave her a sad smile ‘—but yes, I am hoping to come back.’

Effie sighed with relief. ‘That’s wonderful. I mean, Aidan was so miserable until you turned up. Well, maybe not miserable, but like he didn’t fit in here quite right. Since you turned up, I don’t know, it’s like you smoothed his edges.’ She let out a nervous laugh. ‘Listen to me, that sounds like something out of a novel. Anyway, sorry, it’s none of my business, but please have a lovely Christmas and I hope we see you again soon.’

The smile Bella gave her was warmer, infused with Effie’s infectious enthusiasm. ‘Thanks, Effie, I’m sure I’ll see you again soon. Anyway, where would be a more perfect place to launch my book than here?’ She signalled to the shop.

Effie’s eyes widened with delight. ‘Oh! Wow! I’d be so honoured! A book launch, here, I mean . . . sorry. I’m getting carried away.’

‘It’s fine,’ Bella laughed. ‘We’ll talk in the new year, have a lovely Christmas.’

Bella put Mimi down and led her out of the shop, closing the door behind her. Maybe organising a book launch was the carrot she needed to reach the finish line on this draft? Once Christmas was over, Bella knew she needed to rein in how she was spending her free time and go back to treating her writing how she always had, as the job it was. Coming to Cornwall had been a wonderful romantic notion that had filled her heart and her cup, but she knew she’d allowed the goings-on in the village to distract her. As fun as they had been.

Lighter of heart, and pocket, Bella walked Mimi back along harbour row, unable to ignore The Shipwreck Inn perched on the edge of the peninsula, looking as if an extra strong wave would send it tumbling into

the sea. She willed Aidan to come out, to take back his harsh words, but Bella knew it was up to her to fix things. What if she marched up to the pub door now? Let herself into the kitchen? Would he listen or just think she was continuing to be impulsive? Using fate for her own life was fine but not for someone else's. After Christmas, is what he had said, and Bella knew she owed that to him.

As she made her way along the harbour, the bitter wind stinging her eyes, she couldn't deny that the steps she was now taking, ones that were leading her closer to her family home, felt like a retreat. Like she was trying to find the footsteps in the ground that had led her here, trying to place her feet exactly in the imprints she had left. But they had been erased. Somehow over the past month, Bella had changed path without planning or realising. Now, going back felt like a duty she was forcing herself to perform.

Although her gut swirled with the notion that going home wasn't right, Bella knew she needed to make the journey. How could she seriously think about what she wanted from the village, Aidan, or in fact her whole life, if she stayed? Remaining in Polcarrow for Christmas would mean nothing, but returning for the new year would mean everything.

After letting herself back into the little cottage, Bella removed her boots, set down her purchases and headed into the kitchen. She flicked on the kettle. As it boiled, she gazed out of the window, willing the snow to come, even a few flakes, but it just remained bleak and grey. Scrolling through her phone she read the weather warnings. There was a message from Nicki asking for her estimated time of arrival, followed by a video of two very excited little girls. The most adorable blackmail Bella had ever received.

Cup of tea made, Bella trudged upstairs and pulled out her suitcase. She stared at its empty cavern before slowly filling it with only the essentials. She needed something to come home for. *Home*, it had slipped into her mind and her heart without her even intending it to. Polcarrow felt like home. Bella zipped up her case and sank onto the bed. Outside the day was waning, feebly slipping away into night. Not just any night, one of the dense, dark ones of midwinter, where it felt as if a shroud had been thrown over the world.

Hoisting her case off the bed, she hauled it downstairs and left it by the door ready for the morning. Gentle golden light permeated the darkness when Bella flicked on the lamps. Mimi was curled up in her bed next to the radiator, as at home in Polcarrow as she had been anywhere else.

‘Hey, Mimi, I know it’s hard,’ she said, crouching down to give the dog a stroke, ‘but we’ll be back. Maybe Scruff will miss you and be more friendly? Or maybe we’ll find some other dogs if you get more used to the sand? Hey, how does that sound?’

Mimi opened one eye making Bella wonder who she was trying to convince. Sitting back, Bella glanced around the borrowed room that had become so familiar. She was tired of thinking through everything. Yawning, she got up and went into the kitchen, opening and closing cupboard doors, searching for something to cook for dinner. The cupboards were almost bare.

‘Maybe it’s a good thing I’m going home,’ Bella remarked to herself as she took out some pasta, garlic, cheese and butter, ‘although I bet Aidan would’ve made a terrific Christmas dinner.’ She almost drooled at the thought.

Bella turned on the radio to try and kill the oppressive silence that had fallen over the cottage like it was already in mourning. She sang along to the music as she made her dinner, poured out the dregs of the red wine she’d opened a couple of nights back. Lola’s cottage had given her her own space, something she hadn’t had for years. She’d tried to create a home with Max, had contorted herself into Nicki’s life, but here she’d been able to spread her wings. Bella had remembered not only what it was like to live for herself, to love, but what it was to fly uninhibited.

Dinner over, the wine finished, there was nothing left to do but wait for morning. Bella set her alarm for six and then washed her dishes. Feeling like a spare part in her own life, she went around the cottage, tweaking and tidying until she fell onto the sofa. Tugging the blanket over her knees, she caught sight of the Books by the Sea bag. She pulled it over to her and picked out the books, then turned them over in her hands, flicked through the pages. There was something comforting about new books.

From between them fell the card she’d bought with the intention of leaving a message for Aidan. Picking up a pen, she opened up the card and studied the inside, her mind as blank as the space to write on.

‘What should I say, Mimi?’

Mimi gave what looked like a little shrug before padding over from her bed and curling up at Bella’s side. Bella tucked the blanket around her, so that only her little head poked out. Mimi closed her eyes with pleasure and settled down to sleep.

‘Much good you are.’ Bella rolled her eyes.

What on earth could she say? Bella chewed her lip. All those novels she’d written and now, when it mattered, her mind was blank, wiped clean. Surely, she should be able to come up with a wild declaration of love? Or a sweeping poetic apology? The more she thought about it, the more trite the sentiments felt.

Then it came to her, advice she’d been given as an overkeen undergraduate, clutching the novels of her favourite author, asking for advice, looking for the magic key that would unlock all her dreams.

*Keep it simple, keep it true.*

With renewed conviction Bella did just that. In her neatest handwriting she wrote the three words she wished she had been able to say. The three words she hoped would make up for everything. A declaration that went hand in hand with forever.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Bella's alarm punctured her sleep far earlier than she was ready for. Reaching out, she flicked it off. Six a.m. She'd not been up this early for months. Falling back into the pillows, she rubbed her face, as if to erase the feeling that she was doing the wrong thing. Her stomach gurgled. Bella chose to pretend it was hunger, not her intuition.

Flinging back the covers, she stuck one foot, then another out of the bed. Mimi stirred from where she'd been snuggled up. 'Hey, baby, you have to get up too. Yes, I know, I don't either,' she crooned as she stroked the dog's ears. 'Brace yourself, I'm turning on the light.'

Bella switched the lamp on; a soft golden glow filled the corner of the room. Bella yawned, stretched, then switched herself into operational mode. Her case was packed, the presents wrapped, all she needed to do was get herself, and Mimi, ready to go. She padded into the bathroom and had a quick shower, before dressing in her comfiest clothes, ready for the long drive ahead.

Downstairs, she made a cup of tea and a slice of toast, figuring it was best to get out and on the road early. She could stop at a service station, treat herself to a seasonal picnic from Marks & Spencer. Bella had mapped out her route, figured out where she could stop. Retracing her steps, going back to her family a whole different person.

Breakfast eaten, as Bella pulled Mimi's Christmas jumper on, her eye fell on the card she'd written for Aidan. One last task to do before she set off. Slipping it into her pocket, she turned to Mimi. 'I'm sorry, but you can't come this time. I don't want you waking everyone up. I know. I miss him too, darling.'

Before she could talk herself out of it, Bella let herself out of the cottage, into the stillness of a morning most people hadn't yet woken to. The darkness was absolute; dawn was still hours away. Bella couldn't help but feel she was sneaking out like a thief, Aidan's heart tucked in her swag bag.

As she walked towards the pub, Bella noticed that the ground twinkled with the lightest dusting of snow, as sharp and clear as crystals. Not enough to keep her here. Nicki had already commenced with issuing orders, putting Bella's name down against various festive tasks. All thoughts of lounging by the fire eating chocolate coins went out of the window. Maybe she could get out of doing the washing up by offering to play with the twins. The thought of Bea and Flo warmed her slightly. Their happy faces would make everything worth it.

Bella drew to a halt outside the locked doors of The Shipwreck Inn. Tilting her head back, she took in the building, its walls wonky with age. Reaching out, Bella placed her hand on the old wooden door. Closing her eyes, she tried to feel the energy that had pulsed in the bar, lingered in the corridor, Merrin and Jago trapped for eternity, unable to be reunited. Bella had failed them. She still couldn't figure out how to give them their happy-ever-after.

'I'm sorry guys, but I will be back, maybe we can try again,' she whispered, wondering who she was really addressing. The ghosts or Aidan.

Should she knock? No, it wasn't quite seven in the morning. Instead, she posted the card through the letterbox, listening as it hit the mat on the other side. Bella paused, there was nothing else she could do but hope they hadn't messed everything up. Forever, she reminded herself, but this only made her wonder why she was being foolish enough to play with the heart of a man who made such sweeping statements.

'Stop thinking,' she told herself as she walked away, 'even he told you to go home and figure it out. You've made your decision.' Still, she found herself looking out to the horizon, sniffing the air, hoping for something to ground her, unable to give herself the permission to do so.

Back at the cottage, Bella checked everything was locked and switched off, before loading up the car. She secured Mimi into her little seat, buckling her in before wrapping a blanket around her. Bella watched as

Mimi snuggled down. By the time she was in the driver's seat, Mimi was fast asleep.

'Such good company you're going to be.' Bella rolled her eyes as she turned on the ignition.

The car coming to life broke through the silence of the morning. Bella pulled away from the cottages and made her way back through the village, past the church and the rectory where she imagined Lola and Tristan stirring, ready for the pre-Christmas rush. She inched her way past the whitewashed cottages with their window displays still up, past Bayview House where Freya and Angelo had an enviable view of the village.

Bella paused at the entrance to the village – or exit in this case. Glancing both ways, she indicated and turned out onto the main road, taking her time as she drove along the narrow roads, even more disorientating in the darkness than when she'd arrived in daylight. The hedgerows felt like a maze that did not want to let her pass easily. Bella hated driving at night, so the darkness of the winter morning had her gripping her steering wheel as if her life depended on it.

'Why did I think this was a good idea?' Bella mumbled to herself through gritted teeth as an angry driver behind, fed up with her dawdling, rushed past her. 'All right for you,' she growled, 'you probably grew up on these roads. Calm, Bells, be calm, rushing doesn't get you anywhere quicker, you have all day.'

Composing herself, Bella continued, but on another corner, a car came out of nowhere, lights blinding, almost in the middle of the road. Bella swerved to avoid it, but the sudden movement caused her to lose control. Bella let out a shriek of surprise as the car skidded and hurtled towards the roadside hedge, only coming to a halt when it was embedded in the foliage. Heart racing, she switched off the engine.

'Sorry, Mimi, are you OK?'

Mimi stuck her head out of the blankets, a bit bewildered to be so rudely awakened, before licking Bella's shaking fingers.

'You're fine, that's great, now, let's see if I can drive myself out of this?' Adrenaline coursing through her, Bella fumbled to unclip her seat belt. She manged on the fourth attempt and hoisted herself out of the car. 'Oh no,' she groaned, as she realised the car was not only stuck in a hedge, but the front passenger side was half down a ditch.

Swearing, Bella kicked her tyre. What on earth was she going to do? Although the light was slowly returning, it was still mostly dark, she was miles from Polcarrow and her phone had limited signal. Getting back into the car, she turned to Mimi.

‘This is a disaster,’ she said, tears welling in her eyes. Bella swiped at her phone, at least she had a full battery, so she could call a breakdown service. After stating her details, she waited for the verdict.

‘I’m afraid it’s going to take a few hours to get someone to you. You’re quite remote, and as you can imagine we’re pretty busy.’ The operator gave the news in a kindly tone.

Bella didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. ‘Oh God! I was supposed to be going home for Christmas.’

‘Do you have someone who can pick you up?’

Bella glanced around her. She had no idea where she was. Could she call Aidan? She’d need to call Nicki. ‘I’m fine, I’ll wait it out, thanks. See you later.’

The call ended and silence fell back over the countryside. The night was starting to lift, a hint of red on the horizon like an angry eye. Bella leaned back against the car, listening to the stillness, the enforced pause in her plans. Could she walk back? Would it be wise to leave the car? She had no idea.

Just as she was mulling over what to do, a delivery van pulled up. ‘You all right, love?’ the driver leaned out and asked. ‘Do you need a hand?’

‘It’s fine, thanks, someone is on their way,’ she reassured him.

The driver didn’t look convinced but after a bit more reassuring, Bella watched as he headed off in the direction she’d come. As he disappeared around a bend in the road, she swore under her breath. Maybe he would’ve driven her back to Polcarrow?

‘Ah, Mims, we’ll never know,’ Bella said as she took shelter in the back seat of the car, away from the road, ignoring all advice to stay out of the vehicle. The wind was perishing. Pulling her phone from her pocket, Bella glanced at Nicki’s number. ‘Right, brace yourself, here we go.’

As Bella pressed the call button, a gentle flurry of snow began to drift from the sky. Tiny white flakes swirling gently in the cold air, melting the instant they met the car. Bella watched them, transfixed, as the phone rang.

‘Bella, what’s up? I’ve got Bea and Flo arguing about what birthday cake they want and it’s heading towards World War Three. You have left, haven’t you? The snow is starting to come down here, so I’d feel better if you were on your way.’

‘Well, I have but—’

‘What is it? Just come out with it, I can’t deal with any more drama today. The magician has just cancelled, and I have no idea how I’m going to entertain twenty six-year-olds,’ Nicki said wearily. The tiredness in her voice made Bella’s heart ache.

‘I’ve come off the road. I’m down a ditch. Breakdown is going to be a few hours. It’s starting to snow.’

‘Oh my God! What are you saying, Bells? A ditch? Are you OK?’ Nicki gasped.

‘I’m stuck.’ Laughter rose from Bella. ‘I’m stuck, Nicki. It’s snowing. I’m meant to stay here.’

‘Oh good grief, are you OK though?’

‘Yeah, I think so, just a bit shaken up. Breakdown recovery is on its way.’

‘Thank God,’ Nicki sighed. ‘Can you tell the girls? They’ve been going on about seeing you all morning. They’ll only worry if I say you’ve had an accident.’

‘Sure, pass them over.’

‘Bea! Flo! Your Auntie Bella is on the phone.’

Excited squealing echoed down the line as the girls wrestled to grab the phone. Nicki put it on speaker.

‘Auntie Bella, Auntie Bella, where are you? When will you be home?’ It was Bea, always the more jubilant of the two.

‘I’ve got a new pet rock to show you,’ Flo told her, ‘and I’ve been learning all about the duck-billed platypus.’

A smile spread across Bella’s face at the sound of their chatter, and a tear sprang to her eye. ‘Oh, Flo, I can’t wait to hear about the duck-billed platypus, but I’m afraid, baby, it’s going to have to wait a bit, you see I did something really silly. I drove off the road and now I’m stuck in a ditch. It’s going to take some time for someone to rescue me. My car might be broken too. I’m so sorry, but I might not be home for your birthday or Christmas.’ As she said the words, the tears began to flow. With all her emotions

churning, she hadn't realised just how much she really wanted to see the twins. Was it too late for a train?

As the snow began to settle like a covering of icing, Bella had to admit that it probably was. All she could do was wait for the breakdown service to arrive, and to head back to Polcarrow, tail between her legs, a lot of thoughts in her brain and a lot of love in her heart.

'Yes, I'll try and come for New Year if my car isn't poorly. Yes, we'll have a sleepover and we can have extra sprinkles on the ice cream and we won't tell Mummy.'

'I heard that!' Nicki called, which made the girls giggle. 'I think we'd better let Auntie Bella go now, she'll call you later when she's safe and warm.'

*Safe and warm*, the two words conjured up the roaring fire in the pub, snuggled up to Aidan, red wine and fish pie.

'You sure you're OK?' Nicki asked, 'I'm sorry I snapped, I just thought ...'

'That I was being flaky? I understand, you have a lot on, but I really did want to come home, it's just—'

'Fate has gotten in the way.'

'Yes,' Bella admitted.

'You are going to get somewhere safe and warm, aren't you? You can't sit for hours on the side of the road if it's snowing. What about Mimi?'

'She's fine.' Bella glanced around her. 'Yes, someone is on their way to get me.'

Satisfied, they said their farewells. Ending the call, Bella sat back. 'Well, Mims, maybe we should try walking back?'

Just as she said it a car pulled up behind her, flashing lights and beeping its horn.

'What the . . . ? Can't they see I'm stuck?'

Jumping out of the car, Bella started to shout, 'I'm down a ditch, either drive on or help me!'

The car did neither. Its engine stopped. As Bella made her way over to the driver's door, ready to give them a piece of her mind. It opened and a figure in a navy coat stepped out.

The door slammed. Bella's heart stuttered. Standing there, with the pale pink of dawn illuminating him, snow catching in his curls, was the one

person Bella would've sold her soul to see.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Chapter Thirty-Six

‘Aidan?’ Bella’s mouth dropped open, ‘what are you doing here?’

Concern was etched across his handsome face as he hurried over to her, his feet only stopping when he was a breath away from her. His coat was thrown over his running gear.

‘I was in the café when Lola’s delivery man came in, said he’d passed a car stuck down the side of the road. The description matched you and your car and well, here I am.’

Bella’s eyes searched his face as her brain rushed to catch up with her speeding heart. She reached her hand out but before she could pull it back, Aidan enclosed it in his, tugging her closer.

‘My God, Bella, you are frozen. This seems to be a theme, doesn’t it? Me rescuing you.’

‘Rescuing me?’ She raised an eyebrow, ‘I have a recovery man on his way. In well, about two hours.’

‘You would’ve frozen to death by then.’

‘Come on, don’t you think that’s a bit dramatic?’ As she asked, Bella realised her teeth were beginning to chatter. The temperature had dropped, snow was settling in his hair, on his shoulders. Bella brushed it away. ‘Look, snow.’

They watched as the flakes floated down around them, growing in size. Impulsively Bella poked out her tongue to catch one, causing Aidan to roar with laughter and bundle her closer.

‘Oh, Bella, I’ve been such an idiot.’ He sighed into her hair. ‘I should never have spoken to you the way I did yesterday. I shouldn’t have put pressure on you to stay. Of course, I understand why you might not want to tell them about me, about us, quite so soon. I was worried that if you left,

I'd never find you again and I've been searching for you everywhere these past five years.'

'You were looking for me even though you thought I'd ghosted you?' Bella pushed his hair off his forehead.

'Uh-huh, mad, I know, but I just couldn't believe someone I shared that spark of attraction with would do something so cruel. I vowed if I ever found you, I'd never let you go. Which, I admit now sounds presumptuous.' A smile cracked across his face like the dawn.

'Maybe a bit, but it's also a very romantic notion,' she replied, sliding her hands down over his shoulders, shuffling closer, trying to steal his warmth. 'Hey, you know what that is? What you believe?'

Aidan struggled with a smile. 'I have a feeling I'm not going to like this.'

'Fate,' Bella announced, 'destiny. Whatever you want to call it.'

Aidan threw his hands up in the air. 'You know what? I'm tired of fighting it. The snow came, it made your mind up for you, and although I'm sad you can't get home, I'm not overly mad that I get to keep you here. And yes, I admit, maybe I doubted fate or destiny or whatever it was because how could it have given me someone as wonderful as you all those years ago and just snatched you away.'

'But here I am.'

'Here you are.'

'I should've been honest with Nicki too. With both of you. Christmas was always going to be difficult for me this year but I didn't expect to fall back in love with it. Maybe I was worried that if I committed to going home the magic would die, hence me waiting for the snow.'

They both glanced up as the flakes fell between them, settling now like a softening blanket over the world.

'It doesn't seem such a ridiculous notion anymore,' he admitted, 'it has decided things for you.'

'Well, maybe, but it seems more like it was the car that sent me careening into a ditch but I suppose it's not too great a stretch of the imagination to think fate played a hand.' Bella smiled up at him. 'Also, there was someone's promise of forever, and when someone makes a promise like that it's hard to forget. It puts things into perspective a bit.'

'A bit?' Aidan teased.

‘Well, maybe more than a bit,’ Bella squirmed, ‘but is forever still on the cards? I mean, it’s a big promise but I’m willing to chance it.’

Aidan’s brow furrowed. ‘Well, that depends.’

‘On what?’ Bella leaned forwards, panicking that something had changed.

‘On this.’ Aidan pulled a card Bella recognised out of his pocket. ‘Is this a fair trade?’

‘Well, you need that to help fuel forever,’ she pointed out.

‘Say it, Bella,’ he breathed.

‘You first,’ she playfully counter-attacked.

Silence fell between them as they each took the other in, both their pasts and futures manifested real. Bella swallowed. Why was she playing around? What was she afraid of?

‘What does it say in the card, Bella?’ A light glinted in his eye, one that she was unable to resist.

Bella glanced around as the winter landscape, the sky tinged rose petal pink and snow falling gently. Cornwall rolled soft around them, the midwinter suddenly not as bleak as it had once felt. Bella’s eyes rested on Aidan’s, her heart picked up its pace.

‘Happy Christmas, Aidan. I meant every word,’ she said, taking a step closer towards him. ‘I love you. I think I always have. Your turn. Come on, don’t keep a girl waiting, my toes are going numb.’

A smile broke across his face. As he closed the gap between them, pulling her close, cupping her jaw in his hand, his gaze intense and he said, ‘I love you, Bella Fox, I think I always have too.’

His kiss was warm, life giving, sealing their fates, warming their hearts. As Bella deepened the kiss, a much-perturbed bark came from the front seat, forcing them apart.

‘Ah, I should’ve said, we come as a pair,’ Bella reminded him as she rescued Mimi.

The second Mimi saw Aidan she began to struggle free, desperate to get to him, until Bella had to pass the dog over to him.

‘Way to kill the moment, Mims,’ Bella groaned as Mimi licked Aidan’s face. ‘Think she loves you too.’

‘Oh, I was never in any doubt about that.’ Aidan winked, tucking Mimi under his arm and holding his other hand out to Bella. ‘Come on, let’s go

home.'

*Home*, Bella thought as they turned to head back towards Polcarrow, her car made safe and her belongings transported into Aidan's boot. As she took her place in the passenger seat, she cast a glance over at him. Six weeks ago Bella never would have guessed that running away would bring her everything she had ever wanted.

'You ready?' he asked.

'Born ready.' Bella grinned and placing her hand over his said, 'take me home, Aidan.'

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Epilogue

‘No, Aidan! No, it’s going to be freezing! You can’t make me!’ Bella shrieked as her bare toes came in contact with the sea early on Boxing Day.

Aidan was already stripped down to his swim shorts, his smile belying how cold he was. Bella took in his toned body. Around them the villagers milled on the beach in various states of undress and willingness to partake in Effie’s Boxing Day swim. Effie was far out into the sea, accompanied by Jake.

‘It’s not that cold once you’re in,’ Aidan said as he waded in past his ankles, the sea lapping at his legs, ‘it’s bracing. Come on.’ He held out his hand to her.

Bella glanced at it. That hand had never let her down. ‘All right, if you insist, but for once Mimi had the right idea about staying indoors,’ she grumbled as she shrugged off her outer layers, the cold air biting at her bare skin.

The snow had all gone by Christmas, nothing more than a flirtatious flurry. However, Bella had received videos of her nieces enthusiastically creating snow angels in their back garden. It seemed for now that all had been forgiven. If the weather improved Bella and Aidan were planning to head up for New Year.

Keeping her T-shirt on over her swimsuit, Bella reached out to Aidan, his hand closing around hers. Stepping forwards, she winced as the freezing sea swallowed her feet. She shuffled forwards a bit more until she was in as far as Aidan.

‘We don’t have to swim out as far as Effie has, do we?’

Aidan shook his head. ‘I think a dip will suffice.’

‘A quick one,’ Bella instructed as they waded forwards. ‘You’re right, once you’re in, it’s not too bad.’ The sea was up to their thighs now and it was Bella who turned to Aidan. ‘You ready?’

‘Born ready.’ He winked. ‘On the count of three?’

Bella nodded and together they counted down.

‘One.’

‘Two.’

‘Three!’

Splash! The sea came up to meet her. As Bella surfaced she didn’t know who had pulled who in, but as she caught her breath she had to admit there was something invigorating about a dip in the cold sea.

‘I might do this more often,’ Aidan said as he trod water.

‘Hmm, I think I’ll watch from the safety of the shore.’ But even as she said it, Bella wondered if, over time, she could acclimatise to swimming in the sea. Turning to face the beach, she waved back at Lola and Freya who were standing there bundled, waiting for Tristan and Angelo to surface. There were to be hot chocolates and chocolate chip shortbread in the café afterwards.

As Bella took in the sweep of the harbour, the shops and cottages facing it, she knew this was the perfect place for her to create a home and rebuild her author brand. Reaching out, she took Aidan’s hand with a smile, which he proceeded to kiss off.

‘I don’t know about you, but I think I’m ready to get out. Go and warm up somewhere.’

The insinuation itself warmed Bella, ‘you don’t need to ask me twice, come on.’

Hand in hand they swam for the shore, emerging onto the beach and right into the heart of the community they both knew was their forever.

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## Acknowledgements

Hello, welcome back to another Christmas in Polcarrow. Thank you, reader, for coming along to see what Sue got up to this year! If it's a return visit I hope the mince pies were plentiful and you managed to grab the sea view seat at Lola's. If this is your first trip to Polcarrow, I'd love for you to come back and see what the villagers are up to. The love you have all shown this little Cornish village warms my heart, so thank you for choosing to spend your time there. Readers really do make this all worthwhile.

Thank you to my wonderful agent, Saskia Leach, for your support and encouragement for all things Polcarrow. Your hard work has definitely helped grow the village into the place we all know and love.

Special thanks to Claire Johnson-Creek, my wonderful editor. It's been a joy to work with you to bring more Polcarrow to readers. Your enthusiasm for this little Cornish village is infectious, and I've enjoyed working with you on this book, and I'm looking forward to the next. Thank you to everyone at Zaffre for all your support, I'm very proud to be one of your authors.

Thank you, Joanna Kerr, for another gorgeous cover! You've captured the spirit of Bella, Aidan and Mimi perfectly.

I couldn't do this without the support of all my wonderful writing buddies, especially the Surrey Buddies, who are always there with support and humour, I value you all so much. Special mention to Alison Sherlock for helping with the plots and panic, and being a fantastic accountability partner, cheering this book across the deadline.

Thank you to Brown Books Luton for hosting a fabulous launch for *Hot Cross Buns*, and to Luton Libraries for your continued support. I feel

exceptionally lucky as an author to have two local enterprises that continue to champion me and my books.

Thanks to all my friends, extended family and colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire for your continued support and for buying and reading the books. Special mention to Carla, Essi, Helen, Liz, Laura, Sarah, Susan, Margaret and Desiree, for all the reading, cheering on and friendship.

Last but never least, thank you to my parents, John and Diana, for your continued love and support. Also, to Chris, Kristina, Amelia, Henry and especially Luna, the inspiration behind Mimi!

Looking forward to seeing you all next summer in Polcarrow!

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## About the Author

Jennifer Bibby is an author of warm and heartfelt community romances. Her debut novel was a contender for the 2022 RNA Joan Hessayon award and her third book, *Christmas at the Little Cornish Bakery*, was shortlisted for an RNA. A lifelong lover of stories, she enjoys exploring the everyday lives of modern women through literature. Jennifer is happiest by the sea and loves dinosaurs, travel, classy cocktails and medieval history.

Also by Jennifer Bibby

*The Cornish Hideaway*

*Christmas at the Little Cornish Bakery*

*Hot Cross Buns at the Little Cornish Bookshop*

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

**Return to Polcarrow next summer in . . .**

## **LOVE BLOOMS AT THE COSY CORNISH COTTAGE**

**Sometimes losing your way is the first step to putting down roots . . .**

When the country estate hotel that she works at closes, Ria heads to Cornwall for the summer, hoping to figure out what comes next. Nestled in a cottage on the cliffs above Polcarrow, with a garden bursting with flowers on her doorstep, her holiday seems idyllic. That is until she meets her landlord. Quiet, grumpy gardener Harrison prefers the company of his plants to people, and he's determined not to let anyone disturb the peaceful life he's built after a painful divorce. But Polcarrow has a way of bringing people together . . .

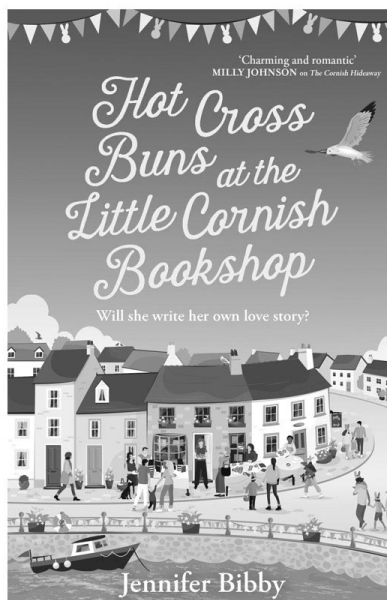
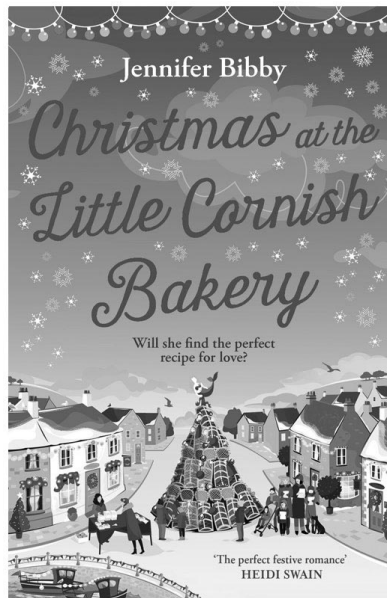
As the village bursts into colour and Ria gets stuck in helping to run Polcarrow in Bloom, an event where the community show off their gardens, a tentative friendship with Harrison also starts to blossom into something more. When a job opportunity in Polcarrow arises, Ria starts to dream of a future she never imagined. But when Harrison's ex-wife returns and Ria's dream job hangs in the balance, both must decide whether they are ready to take a chance on love.

**A feel-good Cornish romance full of sunshine, flowers, found family and second chances.**

**Coming June 2027. [Pre-order now.](#)**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Enjoyed *Christmas at the Cosy Cornish Inn*?  
Then you'll love Jennifer Bibby's other Cornish romances . . .



**Available now**

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)



**Loved this book?**  
**Join the Memory Lane Community**

A welcoming home for all readers who love heart-warming tales of family, romance and history.

Sign up to our newsletter via the QR code below for book recommendations, giveaways, deals and behind-the-scenes writing moments from your favourite authors.



<https://geni.us/memory-lane>

Or you can also join the conversation in the [Memory Lane Facebook Group](#).

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

First published in the UK in 2026 by Zaffre

This ebook edition published in 2026 by

ZAFFRE

An imprint of Bonnier Books UK

5th Floor, HYLO, 103–105 Bunhill Row,

London, EC1Y 8LZ

Copyright © Jennifer Bibby, 2026

Jacket design by Jenny Richards

Jacket illustration © Joanna Kerr

The moral right of Jennifer Bibby to be identified as Author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, or used or reproduced for the training or development of artificial intelligence technologies or systems, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-80617-507-9

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-80617-506-2

This book was Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

This ebook was created by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

The authorised representative in the EEA is Bonnier Books UK (Ireland) Limited.

Registered office address:

Block B, The Crescent Building

Northwood, Santry

Dublin 9, D09 C6X8

Ireland

[compliance@bonnierbooks.ie](mailto:compliance@bonnierbooks.ie)

[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)